

Hegel's Concept of State

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Abstract

Western Political philosophers have spoken about the concept of state and society in large. From Plato to Noam Chomsky one can read thinkers' approach about state, its structure and Implications. Each interpreted the concept of state according to the time he lived in and surroundings of state and societal institutions. With all differences and similarities the thinkers agreed and disagreed with one another. Hegel is one of the famous political thinkers who living in the agof of transition and change in the wake of French Revolution. To him, state is an institution of highest social, political and ethical culmination and exists for promotion of human freedom.

Keywords: Ethical, culmination, human dignity, history, dialect

Introduction

The concept of state has been one of the focal discussions in the studies of the western political philosophy. From Plato to present, a large number of political philosophers have touched upon the different aspects of state and its existence. Similarly, Hegel who is one of the famous western political thinkers has largely focused upon the importance of state as an institution. Hegel whose philosophy is difficult and hard to expand was romantic and to some extend rationalist, and believed in state as an important and exalted entity without which human dignity and living cannot be achieved. He was fascinated with the idea of state as an important institution to glorify men and societies. He formulated the idea of statehood in 1821 in his book: *Philosophy of Rights* or better known as *Hegel's Philosophy of Rights* which is regarded as the sole original source on the subject and widely quoted. About any research piece of writing on the philosopher, the book will have maximum citations. Its English edition was first available in 1923 by Georg Lesson. His other major writings on which his major aspects of political thought are based (all translated into English) are *German Constitution (1802)*; *Phenomenology of Spirit (1807)*; *Philosophy of Right (1820)*; and *The Philosophy of History (written before death but published in 1832)*.

The article is an humble attempt to highlight the Hegel's views on state. The major purpose of the article is to make it an an easy and understandable piece of writing for the students of political science in particular and social sciences in general about Hegel's concept of state which for long has bred praise and criticism.

Birth of Hegel: Georg W. Friedrich Hegel was born in Stuttgart, the Duchy of Wurttemberg, the Kingdom of Prussia (Germany) in August 1770. He lived for 61 years and died in November 1831. Throughout his life he remained committed to

idealism with his heart full of Prussian nationalism with inklings that why his homeland, Germany which in those days was behind France, and England, the then two developed nation-states with good institutions and constitutionalism. For him even Spain and Poland were far ahead of Germany as state. The comparative analysis which Hegel developed about Germany with the other advanced European states can rightly be regarded as one of the leading biases of his political philosophy regarding state. He wanted the social and constitutional glorification of Prussian state at par with France and England. The English political institutions impressed Hegel and dissatisfied with the existing Prussian ones. To Hegel, political institutions play an important role in the ethical development of a stable and political life of state.¹ He was against elective monarchy as the “worst of institutions” but he supported constitutional monarchy which existed in England with the rising role of the parliament. He calls Constitutional Monarchy as “rational form of modern state and government”². A monarch in the situation must be symbolic than possessor (of power). Judd Harmon in his books describes Hegel’s lamentable state of affairs about German thus.

*Hegel, whose country was less advantageously situated than was Burke’s England, was not so enamored of the status quo as was Burke. Although he wanted the wisdom of the past to be a part of future German development, there was no doubt in Hegel’s mind that changes would have to occur in Germany before that country could assume its full responsibility as a carrier of the Idea. Germany, he was convinced, had to achieve the national form, consolidated and unified, which had already been attained by England, France and Spain.*³

Hegel was against absolute rulership. Although his critics believed that his support for a greater role of state paved the way for stronger role of rulers in Germany decades after, however, he never was in favor of unrestrained role of rulers.

French Revolution and Hegel Theda Stocpol in her book *States and Social Revolution: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* rightly says that effects and imprints of social or revolution from below are not limited to the boundaries of the country it happens but have beyond boundaries. And the French Revolution was the beginning of that with itself as role model revolution for workers, intellectuals and philosophers⁴. Hegel was similarly impressed by French Revolution as well as dismayed when revolutionaries were unable to achieve the kernel principles it was based on: equality, liberty and fraternity. This reflected in his writings at times. He was impressed by Napoleon Bonaparte whom he saw on horseback riding through

¹ Z. A. Pelczynski ed. Hegel’s Political Philosophy: Problems and Prospects, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1971, p. 29

² Ibid 231

³ Judd Harmon, Political Thought: From Plato to Present London: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1964 (reprinted edition) p. 349

⁴ Theda Stocpol, *States and Social Revolution: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979,

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Germany streets whom he described in his book: *The Phenomenology of Mind* that he saw the world soul on horseback. "I saw the Emperor – this soul of the world- go out from the city to survey his reign; it is a truly wonderful sensation to see such an individual, who, concentrating on one point while seated on a horse, stretches over the world and dominate it."⁵ Being dismayed at the failure of revolutionary principles Hegel had high appreciation for Napoleon due to his strong leadership role essential to elevation of state which to Hegel was essential for glorification of civilizations. He believed that after the outbreak of revolution in France a number of European countries entered "a new stage of development in their laws and institutions"⁶ The rulers and political elite became wary of individualism and emotionalism that could sway their legitimacy under the banner of "liberty, equality and fraternity or swayed by the slogans.

Hegel's political philosophy, being romantic and rationalist which is in large difficult and not easy to understand or hard to expand, nevertheless his views on state are less ambiguous and difficult to understand.

For Hegel state is an essential and divine institution which is based like his philosophy on three major considerations: ethical, social and political. In this sense it is important in both temporal and spiritual/divine sense. For him, state is not an ordinary entity but an important one. He was an idealist as I mentioned earlier. Sabine in his masterpiece endorses his being idealist as "The foundation for this speculative venture was Hegel's belief that in the dialectic he had discovered a law of synthesis inherent both in the nature of mind and in the nature of things. It was in this sense hat he was an idealist."⁷ His theory of dialect of history for which is widely known is related to the formation of state. In Hegel's analysis history is a threefold process of manifestation or expression of idea as thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis. In Sabine's words, The (three) stages, repeated in a thousand contexts, were rationally by Hegel in three stages of the dialectic: thesis, antithesis, and synthesis."⁸ Through dialect history moves. Individuals and states are instrumental through which the process of synthesis is successfully achieved and nations are glorified. He upholds the greatness of State to whom all are sub-ordinate. Hegel says that states are march of God on earth. In his words (translated into English).

*The march of God in the world that is what the state is. The basis of the state is power of reason actualizing itself as will. In considering the Idea of the state, we must not have our eyes on particular states, or on particular institutions. Instead we must consider the idea, this actual God by its self.*⁹

⁵ <https://www.napoleon.org/en/history-of-the-two-empires/articles/napoleon-hegelian-hero/>

⁶ Pelczynski, Z. A. ed. Hegel's Political Philosophy: Problems & Perspectives Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1971, p 21.

⁷ George H Sabine A History of Political Theory 3rd edition Ithaca, New York, 1937, p. 527

⁸ Georg W. Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of History Inc. New York, 1953 p. 531*

⁹ . Ibid, p. 42

The progress of the idea or dialect in history is a natural process and this process is carried by states which are “material manifestations of the ideas, the worldly evidences of the progress of the World Spirit through history”¹⁰.

Hegel was against rationalists and he opposed them by saying that “end and purpose of man is the realization of freedom”. He defined the concept of freedom as essential within state. Men can achieve freedom within state only. Hegel’s political philosophy is juxtaposed with his ideas of family, society and state. He states that “when men understand that there is an idea, that the state and its institutions constitute its temporal manifestation, and when they accept and subordinate themselves to the state and its institutions, and then they are free”¹¹ Hegel’s concept of citizenship is of social and divine importance. To Hegel man’s first manifestation is in a family where he/she opens eyes and undergoes early trainings of life. The second manifestation is in society where individuals learn collectively norms and principles of citizenship. Individuals’ final manifestation is within a state. It is the state which completes individuals’ status and recognition. To Hegel, society is very important as far as the fulfillment of the social and economic rights are concerned, nevertheless being a bigger entity it falls under the state and not subordinated to it. In easy words family level comes before societal, and societal before state. In contradiction to many sociologists and even political scientists that societal unit is bigger than state, in Hegelian analysis, a state is above society. Therefore, he cites it as the “highest embodiment of the individuals”. Hegel in his famous book *Philosophy of Rights* defines in detail the “Family, Civil Society and State triangle relationship” which though in many critics’ analysis is absurd and non-logical but Hegel stands on it and many of his followers support it. To him, family is an ethical root of state on which the strength of state lies. An individual has social, economic and political learning in a family which accounts for ethical on the whole. Here I like to mention that Hegel does bend on ethical as one ingredient but on the whole. In easy words if a person in family process does not achieve in economic, political and social learning his ethical side is not complete.

Family: Hegel’s family life’s major characteristic is characterized by "mind's feeling of its own unity," where one stands as a part of the family fabric. In Hegel’s viewpoint a good family life promotes ethical unity. Marriage plays an important role in family life. Hegel allows property as an essential ingredient to promote family life which in his analysis should be possessed by the family on the whole or by the family head who is of pivotal importance. Hegel was against the practice of divorce in society and believed it be restrictive and subject to approval by a competent body. Good education is really the one which makes children ethically free and physically resistive. The educating of children is very important which be given priority. Though in Hegel’s books there is no stress or highlighting of the importance of

¹⁰ Op. cit. 347

¹¹ Op. cit. p. 350

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universal education. Nevertheless, to him a state where education is excellent is prone to rise. He declares a married life most ethical where children are educated well.

Civil Society: From family one moves into civil society or in easier words families move into society. Hegel uses the term civil society which is 2nd ethical stage. He used the term “civil” may be of sociological connotation or to make it narrower in the sense that societies are usually larger terms than state, but in Hegel way of thought they are sub-ordinate to state. State is a bigger term than civil society. The concept of civil society as an embodiment of ethical values in large was not applicable to Hegel's political writings in early stages. It he absorbed during his teaching position at University of Jena and inclined towards the “Ethical Community” concept he applied later on. The process of political education, which in Hegelian sense includes debates, elections, freedom of the press and public opinion, rationalization of laws, begins at civil society. A society lacking ethical maturation and etiquettes may not rise to a politically stable state.

Hegel states that strengthening of civil society is the ultimate strength of state. To him, it is lamentable where ethical community deteriorates. He perceives three threats which can be posed to society and stands a priority of state power (rulers/administration/institutions) to repel it. The first is disintegration of society into different communities. The higher are division, the larger are threats. Hegel cites the Holy Roman Empire of German nation which was weakened due to various divisions in its communities. “It collapsed and dissolved because the bulk of politically conscious Germans had ceased in practice to treat themselves as belonging to one German nation, one German community, and the supreme public authority, despite an ancient and elaborate constitutional framework, was powerless to prevent it.”¹²

The second is loss of political independence which directly harms ethical individuality of nation. Hegel does not explain adequately that what did he meant by loss of political independence or dependence. But he explains that a state loses its political independence largely due to cession or conquered by another power. And it is ethically disastrous.¹³ He writes in case a country is conquered by a nation which shares a similarity of culture and after conquests maintains the integrity of values of the conquered country, the loss might not be bigger. But in case it does not happen, then the loss is enormous. Hegel stresses upon the government to dispel any such an action where a state is at threat by war from opposing side. The elements of war which will be discussed ahead in detail as the essential ingredient of statehood, are present in inter-states relationship. War is inevitable and can change the status quo of countries. Hegel has met a number of criticisms for miscalculating on the question of

¹² . op. cit. Z. A. Pelczynski 18

¹³ T. M. Knox Hegel's Political Writings Clarendon Press, Oxford, London 1964, p 238

war; however, war occupies an important place in his writings which will be discussed ahead.¹⁴

The third threat to ethical society is when ethical values and morality degenerate and “ossifies in customs, laws and institutions with demand for new ones. Hegel cites France as a leading example where revolution resulted largely due to disintegration of values and customs with loss of trust in government. Trust building as one can assume from Hegel’s writings is an essential factor. Hegel believes that values and customs are never static and continue to change from time to time with the replacement of new ones therefore; it should be the sole responsibility of state machinery or government in power to see their replacement with good ones.

State: State is culmination of maturity as political, social and ethical human form. In easy words state is the most important and glorified unit in international structure. It is a rational agency. Hegel said that what is actual is rational, and whatever is rational is actual. A modern state he believed is a “rational ethical community by being the highest form of association in coherence and cohesiveness. Interestingly, Hegel though lived in the age when different empires existed and were at the prime of imperialism, he least mentions them and rather focuses on state. State is over the subordinate life of family and civil society. To Hegel, a state is culmination of human organization and thus totality. Totality assumes an importance in Hegelian philosophy which he links with the concept of state too. For Hegel no truth is fully acclaimed until it assumes the place of whole. In life which is a process or phase nothing is complete until it reaches totality or whole truth. Totality is also grand idea and the product of that process which preserves all of its "moments" as elements in a structure, rather than as stages or phases. State is a totality and culmination of divine spirit. For Hegel nothing is true except whole. Every stage, process phase or moment is partial and neither can be true or total.¹⁵

Constitutionalism & Individualism: Hegel in his political writings was conscious of the role of constitution. He most probably was impressed by the role of constitution in Greek City States centuries ago he initiated. The document *The German Constitution* written between 1800-1802 though not published in his lifetime but recognized his versatility in constitutionalism. It provided a detailed analysis and critique of the constitutional arrangements of German empire with voice that days of empires were over and the future was of nation-states. He referred German empire in weakened position which could be strengthened by good laws constitutional embodiment. He referred Constitutional monarchies as better governments with reference to Austria and Prussia. One of this constitutional writings *The English Reform Bill* was written in 1831 in which highlighted the imperativeness of constitutionalism. He stressed upon that many ills and pitfalls of society can well be

¹⁴ Shlomo Avineri, Hegel’s Theory of the Modern State: London:Cambridge University Press 1972, p 205

¹⁵ . Allen Wood, Elements of the Philosophy of Life,

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addressed by good constitutional arrangements. He supported the process of constitutional reform against rational changes such as positivity of “customary law, traditionalism and privilege”.¹⁶

A state must be based on a written form of document which Hegel calls a constitution. Constitutionalism to him is essential to modern statehood where duties and rights can well be defined and preserved. Hegel says that firstly duties and rights are defined and then preserved. They both are tantamount for freedom which can also involve restrictions. Constitutions are not built in array and haste but developed over period of time and discussions. They not necessarily be designed to promote the freedom of people but to strengthen institutions and foundations of state. “Every nation has the constitution appropriate to it and suitable for it. If there is a tyranny, that is because a tyranny is the only system which will work at the time”.¹⁷ Power distribution in the constitution is very important. Hegel was not in favour of the independence of the exercise of powers of national institutions and described that isolation as “fatal” and liable for weakening of state. In his writings he mentions British political system as good but with the problems of the independence of powers between legislature and executive. I personally assume that Hegel was not in favor of checks and balances and strong opposition which though in embryo but was emerging in Europe. He divided the state machinery into legislative and Governmental (executive) besides Monarch. For legislature and executive he abhorred hereditary basis but rather advocated rational and charismatic. In his book he writes that “administrators should be selected on the basis of their ability, not on the basis of birth, and this profession ought to be open to all.”

Where Hegel supports constitutionalism there he supports elections, but makes his point clear that “elections are superfluous” and they fail to represent the interests of communities in general. People of a state are categorized into groups of those knowledgeable, less knowledgeable and no knowledgeable. They cannot be one. That is why public opinion where to be respected there is to be despised. Leaders for the greater interests of state are bound to ignore the public opinion. He writes “The great leaders of history are those who find and follow the truth in the face of public opposition. Hegel says that those who do not learn how to ignore public opinion will never achieve greatness.”¹⁸ His following viewpoints in many of his critics led to the rise of fascism. Hegel, nevertheless is not against public opinion and believes in it as property (may be intellectual) men being entitled to. Actually Hegel where supported freedom there he believed in its excess as anarchy. He was against the absolute freedom and termed it as injurious.

Men without states have no meaning in Hegelian terminology. Men's importance is gauged by the fact of his/her being a citizen of a state. The ideas in Hegel's analysis

¹⁶ . Hegel: Social and Political Thought C:\Users\Administrator\Desktop\My Library\Hegel in Cambridge.html

¹⁷ From Philosophy of Rights in op. cit. Judd Harmon, p. 353

¹⁸ From Philosophy of Rights in op. cit. Judd Harmon, p. 357

in history are manifested by states and not individuals though born through them. Citizens in large of no matter whatever of a state are passive and liable to accept what comes to them. Those who are active and generate changes and support ideas are limited in number but matter. The relationship between the two is matured by the fact how strong and dignified is the state system. A man's identity is summed up in statehood. Men may not use state, but state in return can and does using them. True freedom of an individual in a state lies in obedience and submission and not throwing away the yokes of the authority. But by obedience as many later on interpreted did not assume a totalitarian role of state. A state with good laws and values makes citizens well. Hegel in his book excerpts from Plato's *Republic* that when a father asked Pythagorean how he could he grew his son an ethical good person. Pythagorean replied that he should make his son a citizen of a state (city-state in those days) with good laws.

The major purpose of state in Hegel's analysis to forward the idea in history. To him, this process is not carried in tranquility or peace, therefore a war is an essential institution without which states cannot either progress. He has touched upon the concept of war in three of his writings: *Phenomenology of Mind*, *Spirit of Philosophy* and *German Constitution*. His ideas on war throughout his life have been unchanged. He claims in his writings that states' major purpose or function should not be to protect the lives and property of citizens but promote idea. Many leading scholars in their research works have criticized Hegel as "War Monger and Peace Killer". Three leading scholars Karl R. Popper, John Plamennatz and Shlomo Aveniri devoted to criticism of his account of war in particular.¹⁹

War in Hegelian sense has twofold relationship. One of individual to state and other of state with state. War defines relationship and citizenship entity of a person to state as well as political and sovereignty entity of state in world affairs. War forces citizens to experience state as an important entity. War makes him realize that he is bound up with larger whole.

*War is the security of the state in that it forces its citizens to experience the state as a particular entity. In order to defend his state the citizen must experience his state as something more than the general context in which he pursues his private goals and holds property. In order to defend his state the citizen must internationalize the general character of his state and see it as a particular state set off against other states. War also makes the individual experience in new way. War makes individuals feel the finitude of their own existence.*²⁰

¹⁹ . Karl R. Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies*, John Plamennatz's *Men and Society* Vol 2, 1963 and Shlomo Aveniri's "The Problems of War in Hegel's Thought" in *Journal of History and Ideas* Vol 25, 1964

²⁰ D. P. Verene "Hegel's Account of War" op. cit. Z. A. Pelczynski p. 169

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War largely determines status of inter-states relationship. Some states may be more war prone than others, but those avoiding war are not best. Strong defense and readiness for war are incumbent on states and those avoiding may perish. International law to him is essential and needed, but it is a weak law as there is no true enforcement behind it. Treaties are reality and serve as pillars of the international law. They are invoked to serve the particular and general interests of the states, but if they are not serving the interests of the states can be terminated or made stagnant. Many writers on his account of international law and treaties call him as “international anarchist”.²¹

²¹ Op. cit, Judd Harmon p. 361

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