

ALIENATED CITIZENS: HEGEL AND MARX ON CIVIL SOCIETY

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In my paper, I use Jon Stewart's recent analysis of the relationship between Hegel's and Marx's philosophy concerning the issues of alienation and recognition as a starting point for tackling the issue of alienation within civil society. I present key issues in Hegel's presentation of civil society in the *Philosophy of Right* and Marx's critique of this presentation. I argue that although both accounts are deficient, together they eloquently present the contradictory features of civil society once it attains political character. Ultimately, I concur with Stewart's thesis about the long-term Hegelian influence, and I argue that the rival explanations of civil society of Hegel and Marx are still revealing even today and can significantly contribute to self-understanding within contemporary liberal democracy.

Keywords: Hegel – Marx – Jon Stewart – Civil society – State – Philosophy of Right

In his recent book, Jon Stewart takes a long and detailed look at how nineteenth-century philosophers – and not necessarily only German philosophers – grappled with the problems left to them by Hegel, mainly with issues of alienation and recognition.¹ One of the key ambitions of this book is “to show that religion plays an absolutely central and constitutive role in the development of philosophy during” the nineteenth century (Stewart 2021, 10).

In pursuit of that tradition, Stewart looks at Marx's famous “Introduction to the Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.” Indeed, the “Introduction” contains arguably the best-known passages about religion written by Marx, who claims there that the complex criticism of religion would entail the criticism of material conditions which give rise to religious thought.

¹ This paper originated in workshop on Jon Stewart's book *Hegel's Century: Alienation and Recognition in a Time of Revolution* (2021), organized on January 19, 2023, at the Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts. I am thankful to the participants, and especially to Jon Stewart himself, for the comments on the early draft of this paper.

The “Introduction” is preceded by the text of Marx’s *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (1843). The “Introduction” was intended not as an introduction to this work, “but rather to a new work on Hegel’s political philosophy which Marx subsequently failed to write” (Leopold 2007, 22). The text of the *Critique* does not speak a lot about religion, although according to Leopold, one of the criticisms of Hegel by Marx “concerns the speculative identity of God and the world” (Leopold 2007, 54). However, the *Critique* addresses the central issue of alienation – central in Stewart’s book, too – in a quite detailed manner. The centerpiece of Marx’s critique is Hegel’s understanding of civil society. In my paper, I want to focus in more detail on this discussion about civil society. The question that both Marx and Hegel pose is how does civil society assume political character, and how does it become conscious of itself and its position in the world. This question is ultimately at the heart of the problem of recognition, as Stewart has pointed out in his earlier book:

Recognition must be mutual and granted by equal parties in order for its result to represent a true account. The ultimate account of subject and object can only take place in a just society with egalitarian institutions among citizens of free and equal status such that no coercion or power-claims enter into the relationship (Stewart 2000, 141).

And yet, despite the similar starting point, the quest for just society yields almost contradictory results for Hegel and Marx. My ultimate argument is that the different answers to the stated question are actually two facets of the proper answer, and that the tensions between these accounts still reflect the contradictory self-understanding of civil society even today.

In my paper, I will proceed with an exegesis of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* and Marx’s *Critique*. I will firstly succinctly explain the reasons for Marx’s engagement with Hegel, as well as Marx’s criticism of Hegel’s method. I will then disclose the differences between Marx’s and Hegel’s understanding of civil society and its relationship with the state, state bureaucracy and representative bodies. While both Marx and Hegel understand civil society as alienated, they differ in the cure for alienation that they offer – Hegel sees the bureaucracy, concerned with the universal, as a way in which the civil society overcomes alienation; for Marx, the cure is universal suffrage and the broadest democratic participation. I will then argue that both these solutions are co-present, in mutual insolvable tension, in current liberal democracy, while I will demonstrate this argument by means of the particular example of the politics of the European Union – the Hegelian aspect is in EU’s bureaucratic apparatus, and the Marxist aspect is present in EU’s constant search for solutions to its “democratic deficit,” which involve calls for an increase in participatory democracy.

I. The Practical Function of the Theoretical Criticism of Hegel

As Leopold and Raekstad note (Leopold 2007, 20; Raekstad 2022, 104ff.), Marx started the project of the *Critique* after he found himself, as editor of *Rheinische Zeitung*, “in the embarrassing position of having to discuss what is known as material interests” (Marx 1987, 261f.). Why did Marx’s confrontation with material issues lead him to a theoretical engagement with Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*? In the “Introduction,” Marx tries to justify his choice of topic. He claims that German politics lagged behind the politics of rest of Europe, mainly behind the French, but that, on the other hand, theoretical reflection of the most advanced politics was best conducted in Germany. “In politics, the Germans *thought* what other nations did. Germany was their *theoretical* conscience” (Marx 2010b, 181).² This theoretical thought – and this includes Hegel’s thought – came with apologetic intentions. However, Hegel’s apology was more complex. Although Germany did in fact play the role of the *ancien régime* to foreign revolutions, Hegel’s theoretical justification did not contend with some simple, moralistic criticism of revolutionary politics. Rather, it recognized, at least partially, some revolutionary demands as justified, and yet claimed to disclose the German politics as already including and meeting those demands. It was thus not about defending the pre-revolutionary *ancien régime* against revolution, but about disclosing German politics as *ancien régime* that already assimilated what is worthy in revolution. Despite Hegel’s explicit claim in the Preface to *Philosophy of Right* that philosophy will not perform function “of *issuing instructions* on how the world ought to be” (Hegel 1991, 23), the fact is that it does provide normative justifications of the existing institutions, while implicitly including a partial criticisms and suggestions.³

Marx thus believes that by attacking Hegel’s philosophy as the highest self-expression of the *ancien régime*, he is stripping the regime of a theoretical footing. Therefore, he can claim that there is a practical value in such theoretical undertaking. He is doing his part as a philosopher to change the world. The rest is to be done by

² The translation in the *Marx and Engels Collected Works* edition uses the term “theoretical consciousness.” I, however, read *Gewissen* as “conscience” rather than “consciousness,” which would be more suitable as translation of *Bewußtsein*.

³ Regarding Hegel’s defence of constitutional monarchy, Ilting notes, for example, that “it is perfectly clear that in Hegel’s model of the distribution of power the activity of the monarch consists exclusively of single acts of administration, whose execution is left to the government. However, we cannot overlook the fact that at this point Hegel’s republican conception of the state comes into conflict with the historical powers of his time” (Ilting 1984, 97 – 98). Thorough critique of the “Prussian reading” of Hegel, that is, of reading Hegel as providing philosophical backing to the existing Prussian state, can be found in Leopold (2007, 57 – 62). Like Pinkard, Leopold also sees Hegel as providing some support to von Stein’s and Hardenberg’s reforms, which were, however, not an orthodoxy of the existing Prussian state (Pinkard 2000, 424).

proletariat which would be so completely, artificially impoverished, that it would realize that it has nothing to lose but its chains and aim for an overthrow of the regime. Therefore, “the *emancipation of the German* is the *emancipation of the human being*. The *head* of this emancipation is *philosophy*, its *heart* is the *proletariat*. Philosophy cannot be made a reality without the abolition (*Aufhebung*) of the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot be abolished without philosophy being made a reality (*Verwirklichung*)” (Marx 2010b, 187).

We can now look more closely at the particular criticism Marx levels against Hegel. The criticism is quite detailed, but there are recurrent strains,⁴ and I mainly focus on two lines of criticism. The first line of criticism is that Hegel seeks to justify the particular existing institutions as necessary while, at the same time, twisting the analysis of the existing institutions so that it fits his conception of logic. The second line of criticism concerns Hegel’s treatment of civil society.

II. Logic and Body Politic

The first line of criticism is succinctly captured in Marx’s statement that Hegel “only takes the *one* category, and contents himself with finding a corresponding existent for it. Hegel gives a *political body to his logic*: he does not give the *logic of the body politic*” (Marx 2010a, 48). Marx identifies various situations in which the particular institutions, in Hegel’s analysis, respond to the demands of his logic, but the foremost such correspondence is to be seen in tripartite division of the *Stände*, or classes.⁵ As is well known, Hegel distinguishes between the substantial class, the formal class and the universal class. The former refers to the agricultural class and in part to the landed aristocracy (or, more precisely, the *Junkers*; cf. Peperzak 2001, 450 and also Lee 2008, 632 – 634). The formal class refers to civil society, which includes both

⁴ Summarizing, Leopold argues that overall, “Marx identifies five central criticisms of the speculative method. He accuses Hegel of failing to grasp that the speculative categories are derived from empirical experience, of maintaining an uncritical attitude towards the empirical world, of misdescribing the relation between the concept and its realisation as a necessary rather than allegorical relation, of failing to grasp the differentia, the distinctive character, of finite entities, and of having – despite himself – endorsed an ‘acosmic’ account of the identity of God and the world” (Leopold 2007, 98).

⁵ Lee points out that “a particular *Stand* [is] understood as an economic or occupational class. These *Stände*, in turn, were formally organized as *Korporationen* in which common concerns and interests were given definition and shape, giving rise to a communal and corporative (*gemainsame*) [sic!] consciousness. That Hegel has in mind here the medieval pattern of guilds is beyond doubt. But what must be emphasized here in Hegel’s use of medieval corporatism is that Hegel, unlike the Prussian *Junkers*, was not simply trying to reconstruct, in every possible detail, the medieval past and enable the reassertion of feudal privileges” (Lee 2008, 623). Despite the inspiration in medieval guilds, the interchangeable use of “estate” and “class” in the English language literature on Hegel is justified. The use of “class” brings Hegel, with the use of hindsight, into the Marxist theoretical scope, but this is justified since the problem that both Hegel and Marx address is very similar, namely, how does economic or occupational class become political class, how it becomes recognized and self-conscious.

capitalists and workers; it includes corporations, market and guilds (and, despite Hegel's silence on the matter, even trade unions; cf. Hardimon 1994, 197). The universal class refers mainly to the state bureaucracy and the executive power – but, as we will see, partially to the legislative power, too. This tripartite division seems to be explicitly demanded by the basic tripartite division of the *Science of Logic*, where Hegel distinguishes between the immediacy of being, the reflexivity of essence, which is ultimately sublated (*aufgehoben*) in the universality of the notion (*Begriff*). The distinction between classes roughly maps onto this basic distinction within *Logic*.

For Marx, this approach certainly does not amount to a demonstration that “what is actual (*wirklich*) is rational” (Hegel 1991, 20). Rather, he claims that for Hegel the schema of rationality comes in advance and is glued to particular institutions which then only appear as rational.

Moreover, even as far as the assignment of logical moments goes, Marx is skeptical about the notion of bureaucracy as a universal class. He claims that, rather, “Hegel gives us an empirical description of the bureaucracy, partly as it is in actual fact, and partly as it is on its own estimation” (Marx 2010a, 45). Marx finds the very idea that a particular class is to be called universal because it, allegedly, has the universal as its end, to be incorrect understanding of the notion of universality, and goes on:

In the genuine state it is not a question of the opportunity of every citizen to devote himself to the general class as one particular class, but the capacity of the general class to be really general – that is, to be the class of every citizen. But Hegel proceeds from the premise of the pseudo-general, illusory-general class – the premise of generality as a particular class (Marx 2010a, 50).⁶

As the “Introduction” suggests, Marx would consider the proletariat to be such a universal class, because once the proletariat gets rid of its “radical chains,” its emancipation would at the same time be emancipation of man as man (Marx 2010b, 186). It is, however, intriguing to consider the consequences of such a definition of universal class, as it appears in Hegel, for the understanding of civil society, which is Marx's second main line of criticism leveled against Hegel.

III. Hegel's Treatment of Civil Society

Civil society for Hegel is the “formal class,” which for him means the desubstantiated, unrooted class driven by particular interests. What unites civil society as a class is actually its disunity. Following Marx, Leopold convincingly attributes to Hegel the claim that civil society is “atomistic” (Leopold 2007, 70). In dialectical thought,

⁶ Here I read “class” instead of “estate,” see above, footnote 5, for justification.

however, the atomism, the particularity of the civil society, cannot be simply cancelled out by another particular class whose interest is the universal. Rather, this particular class must itself be universally sublated, incorporated in the universal. And this is where Hegel, according to Marx, runs into very undialectical contradictions.

On the one hand, Hegel does posit bureaucracy as the particular class that is universal. But civil society itself gets its share of universality, too, through participation in legislature. This happens in the following way: Hegel recognizes that even particular interests in practice coalesce. The coalescence is manifested in estates and corporations, and, we could say, even trade unions. He envisions these coalesced particular interests to be represented in the legislative body. However, the representatives that Hegel envisions are not actually some kinds of lobbyists, but people of particular character qualities, selected on merits, that are quite similar to bureaucrats. That is, once they get voted or nominated to the legislative body, they have the universal as their end: "Since deputies are elected to deliberate and decide on matters of *universal* concern, the aim of such elections is to appoint individuals who are credited by those who elect them with a better understanding of such matters than they themselves possess" (Hegel 1991, 348). For Marx, this is a pure factual error, a simple contradiction, in which the particularity of interests is supposed to evaporate, once it enters the legislative sphere, for no particular reason – that is, other than fulfilling the demands of Hegel's logic, which hence receives its political body. Therefore, "contradiction remains immanent in civil society" (Kortian 1984, 199). Rather than the sublation of the formal class, Marx sees this as its magical transubstantiation.

For civil society, the legislature itself is somehow expected to transform its particular interests into universal care. Where is the legislature supposed to have this transformative power from? There is a legal-theoretical core to the argument, concerning the relationship of the constitution and particular laws. The constitution, for Hegel, is embodied universality (Hegel 1991, 287), "rationality developed and actualized," or "the *organism* of the state" (Hegel 1991, 288). Now, it is also true that "the constitution of a specific nation will in general depend on the nature and development (*Bildung*) of its self-consciousness" and "each nation accordingly has the constitution appropriate and proper to it" (Hegel 1991, 312), but constitutions ultimately progress "to real rationality (*reelle Vernünftigkeit*)" (Hegel 1991, 317).

The particular laws must, obviously, conform to the constitution. Therefore, a representative in the legislature concerns himself, primarily, with the constitution. The institution of particular laws is not actually a response to this or that particular interest, but rather a discovery, a finding of the particular application of the constitution in the particular situation. The end of particular laws is therefore, ultimately, still universal – it is about the practical extension of the constitution into all spaces of particular life.

For Marx, this explanation is unacceptable. He claims that what Hegel does here is that he splits the life of civil society as a class into two. Civil society *eo ipso* is not a political class for Hegel. It is just a “chattering” confluence, a chaotic mishmash of particular interests. It only attains the function of political class when it is represented in legislature. But in attaining the status of political class, it immediately loses its peculiarity, which lies in the weighing of particular interests.⁷ As a result, Marx basically claims that Hegel has not analyzed civil society properly; he has not provided a philosophical conception of civil society – rather, he has used civil society as an abstract element to tell the story that was prepared by his logic in advance, with another goal being the justification of the existing Prussian state. His logic required that the moment of reflection, formality or particularity appears in his explanation, but such particularity is not supposed to play any real role in the end product, which is the state. As Ilting puts it,

in the context of his republican conception of the state, Hegel should have shown how the citizens are themselves entitled to provide for the actualization of this universal end of the state. Instead, he contents himself with deriving the doctrine of the organs of the state from the concept of the universal end of the state....An impression is thus created that the abstract concept of the end of the state leads a kind of independent existence in that it ‘is divided into the distinct spheres of its activity, which correspond to the moments of its concept’ in accordance with conceptual necessity (Ilting 1984, 103–104).

The most sinister effect that Marx sees in such an exposition is that Hegel tries to undermine the quest for universal suffrage. Ultimately, for Marx,

the question here is not whether civil society shall exercise the legislative power through representatives or by all individually; the question is rather one of the *extension* and greatest possible *generalisation* of *election*, both of the right to *vote* and the right to *be elected*. This is the real point of dispute concerning political *reform*, in France as in England (Marx 2010a, 120).

⁷ Brooks puts forward a claim, with regard to poor (subsumed by Hegel under the pejorative notion of the “rabble” (*Pöbel*)), that Hegel’s project of reconciliation presupposes the notion of stake holding. But civil society (which Brooks does not address in the cited paper) seems to precisely lose its character of stakeholders once it attains the status of a political class through representation in the legislature (Brooks 2020, 60).

When “looking at *elections* philosophically,” then

the *election* is the *actual relation of actual civil society to the civil society of the legislature, to the representative element*. Or, the *election* is the *immediate, direct relation of civil society to the political state* – a relation that is not *merely representative but actually exists*. It is therefore self-evident that *elections* are the chief political interest of actual civil society. Civil society has *really* raised itself to abstraction from itself, to *political* being as its true, general, essential mode of being only in *elections unlimited* both in respect of the franchise and the right to be elected. But the completion of this abstraction is at the same time the transcendence [*Aufhebung*] of the abstraction. In actually positing its *political existence* as its *true* existence, civil society has simultaneously posited its civil existence, in distinction from its political existence, as *inessential*; and the fall of one side of the division carries with it the fall of the other side, its opposite. *Electoral reform* within the *abstract political state* is therefore the demand for its *dissolution* [*Auflösung*], but also for the *dissolution of civil society* (Marx 2010a, 121).

That is, with universal suffrage, civil society, according to Marx, no longer lives a double life. Raekstad convincingly interprets Marx as claiming that

the extension of political participation will suffice to bring it about that the economy becomes subjected to democratic control, as a result of which the separation between state and civil society is dissolved by the fact that they now both become, where they previously were not, subjected to democratic control (Raekstad 2022, 98).

Therefore, “universal suffrage will suffice to bring it about that this separation is overcome by the democratic polity taking over control over the economy and subjecting it to democratic rule” (Raekstad 2022, 98). The call for universal suffrage is both the practical and the philosophical result of Marx’s criticism of Hegel.

Marx did not get to criticize Hegel’s later empirically laden doubts about universal suffrage:

As for mass elections, it may also be noted that, in large states in particular, the electorate inevitably becomes *indifferent* in view of the fact that a single vote has little effect when numbers are so large; and however highly they are urged to value the right to vote, those who enjoy this right will simply fail to make use of it. As a result, an institution of this kind achieves the opposite of its intended purpose [*Bestimmung*], and the election comes under the control

of a few people, of a faction, and hence of that particular and contingent interest which it was specifically designed to neutralize (Marx 1991, 351).

Marx's criticism in a way aligns with Honneth's assessment that passages such as these indicate that Hegel is not "in any way interested in truly realizing democracy" (Honneth 2014, 254).

For Marx in the *Critique*, therefore, civil society aspires to universal status through universal suffrage. Through universal suffrage, the alienation of civil society is overcome. In the "Introduction," Marx shifts from "a realisation-oriented to an agent-centred" approach (Raekstad 2022, 104). That is, Marx identifies one particular class as that which is positioned to bring about democracy. He identifies the proletariat as the universal class. The proletariat, with all the particular interests stacked against it, has truly universal aspirations in that through its emancipation man is emancipated as a man. But in both cases, the politicization of the class – of civil society, of the proletariat – leads to its dissolution, and to the sublation of the class as a class. The politicization of the class leads to its dissolution, since in recognizing its position and becoming conscious of it, the class also recognizes its civil existence as contingent. The notion of dissolution is relatively well known as Marx's treatment of the proletariat (most explicitly stated in Lukács; cf. 1971, 71), but its precursor is in civil society.

IV. Hegel's Shadow Beyond Hegel's Century: The Example of the European Union

I suggest, however, that writing off Hegel as not interested in democracy is too hasty. It is clear that Hegel's dislike of universal suffrage would not fly today, but at the same time his concern about democratic elections subsequently instilling apathy in the voters, and of elections in practice being overtaken by the few, appears relatively prescient, for example, with regard to certain recent appreciations of democracy in the United States – which some political scientists accuse of sliding into a sort of plutocracy.⁸ What is at stake, ultimately – and what is the result of Marx's critique,

⁸ In a much publicized study, Gilens and Page conclude that "when a majority of citizens disagrees with economic elites or with organized interests, they generally lose," and "that if policymaking is dominated by powerful business organizations and a small number of affluent Americans, then America's claims to being a democratic society are seriously threatened" (Gilens – Page 2014, 576 – 577). For a criticism of this study, see, for example, Bashir (2015) and Enns (2015), although the former still concludes that "it would be wrong for readers to conclude that the wealthiest Americans and business interests do not enjoy advantages in influencing the policy process" (Bashir 2015, 7). Enns concludes that "although money certainly matters in U.S. politics, it may be too early to completely dismiss standard theories of representation" (Enns 2015, 1060); but also warns that "it is equally important to not paint an overly sanguine portrait of contemporary America. Inequality is real and has negative consequences" (Enns 2015, 1060). For a continuation of the discussion, see also Gilens (2016).

too – is the question civil society becoming political; and more generally, the genesis of political being.

Hegel is aware that all politics require conflict, contest, and competition. Without contest, there would be no politics, only the mechanical organization of human life – but such a scenario would be incompatible with the idea of freedom, whose exposition is, after all, the purpose of the *Philosophy of Right* from the very beginning. However, the contest within civil society is not yet political – it is just a contest of chaotic competing interests. And when civil society achieves political being through representatives, the contest actually ceases. Competing interests translated onto the political level are no longer competing, but they are transcended by universal interest. The contest thus exists as, so to speak, abstract particularity – unrepresented civil society being presented as a mere index of particularity and strife, just in order to contrast and highlight the universality of the state.

Marx assigns political being to civil society itself, but at the end of the day he neutralizes the conflict in his own way. The strife within civil society is, for Marx, already a political strife, but the ultimate result of that strife should be the universalization of civil society, the emancipation of man as man, and thus ultimately its dissolution.

In other words, Hegel endows civil society with political significance only by eschewing what makes it peculiar – the particular competing interests. Marx, by contrast, considers this peculiarity itself already political – the contest within civil society is already political contest. He does not dissolve its peculiarity in politics. And yet, Marx cannot imagine “the truth” of the civil society to be anything other than its ultimate factual dissolution over the course of history.

Therefore, for both Hegel and Marx, strife is undesirable *per se*. Both seek a way to overcome it. Hegel sees the overcoming – and diminution – of strife in ascent towards the state, which focuses us on the universal already on the personal level of a representative. Marx sees the overcoming in intensification of strife and ultimately in the revolutionary victory of the proletariat, through which a common cause is identified already within civil society. The thesis about the undesirability of strife needs to be qualified, though. In Mouffe’s words, “in both Marx and Hegel antagonism can be overcome through a dialectical process” (Mouffe 2022, 94). Therefore, they cannot account for the possibility of a “conflictual consensus” (Mouffe 1999, 756). In contrast with Mouffe’s idea of agonistic democracy, Marx and Hegel would imagine a consensus that – while not completely free of accidental conflict – would be much less conflictual even in practice. In their view, strife within civil society ultimately leads it to find a cure for the conflict, to overcome civil society’s alienation, and therefore the remaining conflicts would not stem from an

inherent rupture within civil society, and they would be even in practice less dramatic. At the same time, Lukács correctly points out that neither the Hegelian nor the Marxist method should lead one to the conclusion that “*history has an end*” (Lukács 1971, 147). The possibility of overcoming the alienation of civil society, manifested in the strife of particular interests, does not necessarily lead to prophetic statements about the end of history, and to the idea that unpredictable fundamental ruptures cannot arise in the unforeseeable future.

Developing Lukács’ point would, however, go beyond the scope of this paper. What is important for my argument is that Marx’s call for an increase of democracy inherently comes with revolutionary demands attached, as we have seen above. Hegel, on other hand, *prima facie* appears to come up with institutions that are not thought of as a beacon of democracy – such as bureaucracy in the first place. And yet, I would argue that this may be read as thinking about the strengthening of democracy by allowing members of civil society to occupy themselves with universal concerns.

I argue that liberal democracy – and liberalism as its leading “ideology” – employs, without being aware of it, a kind of balancing act between Hegel and Marx. I will present this case by means of the example of European Union. On the one hand, it develops, in Hegel’s spirit, gigantic, opaque institutions of bureaucracy whose ostensible purpose is to promote the universally desirable. The oft-criticized “democratic deficit” of the European Union can thus be seen, through a Hegelian lens, as actually “democratic surplus.” Liberalism likewise interprets institutions as rational tools for the diminution of strife.⁹ On the other hand, Marx is always lurking behind, with his objections that this is all just abstraction from the reality of civil life. Therefore, grassroots participation and mass mobilization is regularly promoted.

To provide an example of the former, Moravcsik mounts a defense of technocratic institutions “insulated” from participatory democracy precisely by arguing that specialized bureaucrats work better for the benefit of all. In that sense, “the EU may be more ‘representative’ precisely because it is, in a narrow sense, less ‘democratic’” (Moravcsik 2002, 614). Moravcsik acknowledges that “there are few areas where the EU departs modestly from existing national practices with no compelling justification,” mainly in “the structure of the European Central Bank” (Moravcsik 2002, 621). But precisely in these most difficult areas the insulation of bureaucracy from popular political oversight is most justified, and it actually increases democracy. This line of argument is permeated by a Hegelian spirit.

The departure of the ECB turned out to be less than modest when the masses later metaphorically clashed with the ECB on Syntagma square during the crisis in Greece.

⁹ This is, for example, how Acemoğlu and Robinson introduce economic institutions in their game-theoretical explanation of the roots of democracy (Acemoğlu – Robinson 2006, 313 – 316).

However, the response, even from harsh critics of the ECB, often pointed to the need for a new, but equally insulated, technocratic solution. The point was to turn from “the folly of structuring an institution around the problem of the moment” (Stiglitz 2020, 65) – which happened to be inflation – towards a broader mandate focused on reaching full employment. The solution is “to change the ECB’s mandate away from a single-minded focus on price stability to giving equal weight to an employment objective” (Mody 2018, 456). The insulation of the EU institutions is still supposed to ensure democracy, but it just needs to be designed better.¹⁰

On the other hand, as Mavrouli and Van Waeyenberge point out, the EU was actively seeking to address the democratic deficit, seeking instruments that embolden participatory democracy, that “aim to ensure the actual cooperation of actors for real collective action” (Mavrouli – Van Waeyenberge 2023, 21). Mavrouli and Van Waeyenberge themselves request “improving the tools of participatory democracy,” while at the same time emphasizing that “a new European narrative is needed in order to generate enthusiasm and support among generations of Europeans who have not experienced war and for whom peace seems to be a given” (Mavrouli – Van Waeyenberge 2023, 28). This is surely still quite far from Marx’s call to “*bring about* democracy” (Raekstad 2022, 98), that is, to ensure maximum participation and representation. However, Marx’s appeal for the full institution of democracy, which he understood as overcoming the contradiction and alienation within civil society, can be understood as functioning as a conscience of the EU’s bureaucratic apparatus. The voice of conscience is more suppressed than not, though, and calls for an increase in mass participation are simultaneously counteracted by worries about “populism,” which “have rung out as soon as any political leader has called for the mobilization of their constituency” (Fieschi 2019, 11).

Mavrouli and Van Waeyenberge summarize that the recent EU strategy to combat the democratic deficit entailed “a combination of two processes: opening up the decision-making process to ‘civil society’ (increase input legitimacy), and offering answers which were more ‘efficient’ (increasing output legitimacy)” (Mavrouli – Van Waeyenberge 2023, 21). These two processes in a way map onto the different solutions of Hegel and Marx, and recast these solutions as an issue of the legitimacy of the EU’s institutions: legitimacy is increased when people feel they participate in decision-making, and legitimacy is increased when institutions are seen as ensuring the common good. What Marx and Hegel teach us here, however, is the futility of such recasting. Marx and Hegel present each solution as a fundamentally different solution to the

¹⁰ Even Varoufakis believed that there is a modest technocratic solution to the crisis which “suggests no new institutions and does not aim at redesigning the Eurozone” (Varoufakis – Holland – Galbraith 2013, 12).

problem of the alienation of civil society. The point is not to combine them – although neither Hegel, nor Marx denied that in practice, democracy is often combined with functioning bureaucracy – but ultimately to realize one of them thoroughly. The Hegelian understanding would therefore lead us to radically prioritize output above all, while the Marxist one would lead us to prioritize input. It would force us to commitment – and this is where the EU diverges from each of them by remaining non-committal. To return to the ECB example: extending the mandate to full employment would “improve output,” it would allow the ECB better to respond to universal concerns. But the obstacle to this is precisely the lack of democratic oversight of the ECB; its purely bureaucratic nature. Giving too broad a mandate to the ECB would be too much for voters in the Eurozone countries to swallow. However, an increase of democratic participation in ECB policies is unthinkable given the complexity of managing the imperfect monetary union. Therefore, the solution remains an imperfect balance in constant tension, with simultaneous clashes with masses in the streets and expert economists in academia. Hegel and Marx require one to commit oneself; the EU responds with balancing act.

However, there is ultimately a Hegelian spirit in European liberal democracy insofar that there is belief that strife is not end in itself, that even market competition is not an end in itself, that the course of history is progressive and there is a higher meaning to all of this. It may also be argued that, ultimately, liberal democracy even does not see itself as an end, but as mean to continuous emancipation, liberation and benefit for all. The balancing act is undertaken not in order to maintain the *status quo*, but rather in order to ensure a bright(er) future. Even the technical thing such as monetary policy, creation of an *ex definitione* “imperfect monetary union,” is undertaken with a vision of *une union sans cesse plus étroite* (cf. Mody 2018, 75), maybe even with a vision of achieving “perpetual peace” (McCormick 2010, 220). But this future is at the same time beyond history, eternally postponed; in practical politics, the EU bides its time forever. Its balancing act institutes a political limbo.

It is thus precisely the commitment that is intriguing when reading Marx and Hegel today. While they come up with logic that is operative in the contemporary political order – in the European Union specifically – they were at the same time unburdened by contemporary pretensions, and therefore they follow ideas to logical, but often disturbing, conclusions. Hegel may appear bizarre in his defense of constitutional monarchy or primogeniture (*Majorat*), but when one reads him with an open mind, one may realize that many aspects of European Union decision-making

and harmonization, such as the common agriculture policy,¹¹ may bear an uncanny resemblance to such archaic institutions – yet, the logic of liberal democracy may ultimately lead to their defense not despite their so-called “democratic deficit,” but even because of it. Marx appears even more disturbing with his calls for radical, revolutionary liberation – and yet, what is it other than consequential thinking about progressive liberation that liberal democracy sees as its own endeavor?

And if we reject the particular commitments of Hegel and Marx, how could such a commitment look today? From the Hegelian side, a sort of “bureaucratic accelerationism” can be proposed; a complete trust in European technocracy. The Marxist response could be, possibly, alongside the Eurofederalist lines once pursued by Eurocommunists, which pushed them to “the opposite pole to mainstream European policy, not from positions of rejection but from the most advanced positions for deepening European integration” (Balampanidis 2018, 217). This would entail the gradual dissolution of the particularities of nation states, and could be a stepping-stone towards “a socialist programme for Europe that would entail a complete redefinition of European cooperation and integration along socialist lines” (Andry 2022, 189). The deepest integration of the European Union that can be imagined is socialist integration which ultimately presupposes the dissolution of particularities of civil society – the dissolution of civil society itself – along the lines of Marx’s arguments in the *Critique*. And if we follow Marx towards the “Introduction,” too, and take proletariat to be the particular agent that shall bring about the dissolution, then in a symbolic sense, the battles of the immiserated Greek workers against the austerity politics of the ECB can be seen as clashes between the Hegelian and Marxist tendencies in the real world.

But the fact that either Hegel or Marx can be wrong may in practice, ultimately, increase the attractivity of remaining in limbo, of letting the “end of history” levitate above us solely as an abstract eschatological idea, of not letting history pass its judgment, of prospect of all the future clashes – stemming from the inherent

¹¹ The exhortation of “moral and social values” of the “rural class” *vis-à-vis* a Communist threat indeed takes a page from Hegel’s defence of the landed aristocracy (*Junkers*), knowingly or not: “Walter Hallstein, a German politician who became the first President of the European Commission on the passage of the Treaty of Rome, gave special emphasis [in 1958] to the ‘rural class’ as a key component of the European project: ‘The European rural class will count among the most trustworthy pillars of our unified European market. Because its fate is also at stake and is one of the first threatened. In this room there is no one whose family tree doesn’t reach back, sooner or later, to farming roots. We know what the rural class means to Europe, not only through its economic values, but also by its moral and social values’” (Adler and Wargan 2023, 301f.).

contradictions of civil society, from its necessary alienation – which we believe we can nonetheless sit out.¹²

I am not proposing a solution to these issues. My intention in this paper was to demonstrate that the discussions between Hegel and Marx can be intellectually stimulating for the problems we face today. Together, they provide us with a better understanding of the contradictions in contemporary liberal democracy.¹³ In a way, the contradictions are maintained also because liberal democracy does not, and cannot, follow either Marx or Hegel all the way. “The long shadow cast by Hegel,” which Stewart discloses so well, reaches much further than the nineteenth century; it reaches to our contemporary times (Stewart 2021, 282). To borrow a phrase from Marx: the reason to read Hegel and Marx today is that both Hegel and Marx are the theoretical conscience of contemporary liberal democracy.

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¹² Ultimately, even the Greeks have preferred the relative safety of limbo to drastic actions. The defiant “Oxi” of June 2015 referendum turned out to be more performative. In subsequent snap elections in September, the Greeks have overwhelmingly voted for the SYRIZA party purged of Grexiters such as Costas Lapavistas, or even “Plan B” proponent Yannis Varoufakis.

¹³ I thank the anonymous reviewer for this formulation.

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