

Hegel's Idea of Nation State and its Totalitarian Character: Focus on Karl Popper's Critique of Hegel

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ABSTRACT: *Hegel is one of the most influential thinkers of Western thought. Perfect social order is the main concern of his thought. Hegel believes that 'the nation state' has absolute social order that arises as the result of a dialectical process of history by the act of the Spirit (Geist). He views social change as a dialectical process which ultimately leads to absolute social order. According to him there is the Spirit in the history of the world by virtue of which ideas are gradually developed until finally arriving at 'the nation state'. Karl Popper, who is one of the most renowned critics of Hegel, critically examines Hegel's work. He is of the view that Hegel's idea of 'nation state' embraces the unscientific idea of evolution, historicism and holism which cannot be rationally justifiable. Popper points out that the Hegel's philosophy promotes totalitarianism. This paper attempts to highlight the historicist and holistic trends lying deep in Hegel's thought and then focuses on Popper's critique of such trends*

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Introduction

Philosophers have been in search of the perfect social order that can ensure a harmonious society. They have been pursuing such an ultimate principle, on the basis of which, a just and absolute social order can be constituted so that social conflicts and violence can be resolved permanently. We can see such a trend in the history of philosophy that Plato, for a harmonious and just society, offered the notion of ideal state based on his theory of absolute justice. Likewise Hegel's idea of Nation State based on his conception of absolute Spirit can also be seen as his efforts to construct the ideal and perfect social order. But unlike Plato, who thinks that the ideal state or society exists in the world of forms and true copy of which is just social order, Hegel believes that 'the nation state' has absolute social order that arises as the result of a dialectical process of history by the act of the Spirit (*Geist*). According to him there is the Spirit in the history of the world by virtue of which ideas are gradually developed until finally arriving at the absolute perfection. He believes that through the process of development, the absolute social order that is the 'nation state' will arise.

Karl Popper, who is one of the most influential philosopher of twenty century and supporter of reason, critically examines Hegel's position. He argues that Hegel's idea of 'nation state' is the idea of holism which entails that groups must not be regarded as mere aggregates of persons. Holists assert that groups have their own essence that has priority over individual. Popper refutes the holists claim. He argues that there is no rational justification of such essence. He inquires that the holism ultimately encourages totalitarian attitude.

In order to highlight the Hegel's idea of 'nation state' and its Karl Popper's critique I have divided this paper into two sections. In first section I discuss the Hegel's idea of 'nation state'. Here I focus on Hegel's dialectical method and his notion of the Spirit. I examine that how for Hegel the historical process is necessarily linked with the development of reason and that ultimately leads to the 'the nation state'. In second section I focus on Popper's critique of Hegel's thought. Here I discuss that for what reasons Popper dismisses Hegel dialectical method and his trend of holism. I also analyze Popper's position that Hegel's 'nation State' has a totalitarian character which ultimately opposes equality and brotherhood of man.

1. Hegel's idea of Nation State

However Hegel and Plato have different approaches about the origination of the absolute social order, Hegel has an indirect influence of Plato's

absolutism through Aristotelian thought. Aristotle accepts one of the aspects of Plato's absolutism; that different individuals are naturally fitted for different jobs. Like Plato, for Aristotle the best state can only be the state which is ruled by the best persons. The working class has to restrict itself to the jobs they are best fitted for (Wheelwright, 1978, p.279). But unlike Plato, who thinks that the absolute or perfect form exists in world of forms, Aristotle conceives that anything which has beginning in time can attain perfection over the passage of time; just as a child grows and becomes an adult. In other words it is not necessary to regard absolute or perfect as separated to changeable world. Absolute society or state can be regarded as a developed order that arrives as the result of growth. In Aristotelian philosophy it is known as aim or *telos*; or 'final cause' by virtue of which a particular thing gets its actuality or determinant form (Wheelwright, 1978, p.26 & pp.91-3).

Aristotelian notion of 'final cause' being an absolute aim has an influence upon Hegel. In his philosophy of history, Hegel borrows this idea and conceives that social change is the means for establishing absolute social order. It is executed by the act of the Spirit over the course of history. According to Hegel, in the process of social change the social entities develop by the act of the Spirit and finally attain perfection. For Hegel the development of social entities is accompanied by the parallel development of ideas or reasons which develop from imperfection to perfection and as the result of which absolute social order emerges as a manifestation of the absolute Spirit.

1.1 The Act of Spirit and Development of Reason

According to Hegel, the Spirit gradually manifests itself in world history through a dialectical process of development of reason. In other words what Hegel says is that we can only be able to know the act of absolute Spirit through the understanding of the dialectical process of development of reason. Hegel conceives the development of reason as a dialectical triad of abstract thought, its negation and concrete thought. In most of Hegelian studies this is interpreted as the process of 'thesis', 'anti-thesis' and 'synthesis'. That is the method of synthesis or unification of contradictory ideas through process of consciousness.

The Hegelian dialectical triad is better explained by Frederick Beiser who notices that it is analogous to 'Kant's antinomies' (Beiser, 2005, p.165). Kant believes that reason must fall into conflict if it transcends the limit of experience. For rational explanation, reason avoids infinite regress and

assumes that there is necessarily the uncaused cause in the beginning of all causes. But at the same time reason finds that whatever happens in this world has a prior cause. There is no cause without a cause. Similarly in order to avoid infinite regress, reason presumes that there are ultimate indivisible constituents of the world but reason also finds that whatever exists in the world is composite and infinitely divisible. In this way, reason contradicts itself. On the one hand reason wants to stop the process of explanation by presuming ultimate or absolute cause while on the other hand reason wants to continue the process of explanation by presuming a prior cause to every cause (Beiser, 2005, p.166). Hegel agrees with Kant that reason falls in contradiction. Reason negates its previous thought in the process of understanding. We can see it as anti thesis of some thesis. Kant resolves these antinomies by the demarcation between 'noumenal' and 'phenomenal' world while Hegel's solution to problems of antinomies is to consider contradictory thought as necessary parts of a single world. His solution is not to divide contradiction but to unite contradiction in a whole. He regards the whole process of understanding as the process of 'rational moment'. It is the process from 'abstraction' to its 'negation' and from its 'negation' to 'speculation' (Beiser, 2005, p.167).

Frederic Beiser explains that the process of 'rational moment' is basically unification of Kant's antinomies or the contradiction of reason. The first stage of moment is 'abstraction' in which reason assumes something independent or absolute. Here it regards something as ultimate just like the ultimate cause. We can take the 'abstraction' as the 'thesis'. In the 'abstraction' reason wants to make things clear and distinct. The second stage of 'rational moment' is 'negation' of the 'abstraction' that is because of examination of abstract thought. When reason examines the abstract thought, it finds that there is no such independent thing as ultimate cause and that staying at any given point in the process of understanding is merely artificial (Beiser, 2005, p.167). This is contradictory to abstract thought where we stop explanation by assuming something absolute. We can take this as the 'anti thesis' of the abstract thought. The third stage of 'rational moment' is 'speculation'. That is the Hegelian solution to the problem of contradictory ideas in the process of understanding. At this stage reason finds that the understanding falls in contradiction because it sees contradictories as entirely isolated. Here reason finds that the only way to resolve the contradiction is to assume that contradictions are parts of the whole. The whole can be called 'synthesis'. The synthesis will again be regarded as an independent and distinct idea but it can be that there is another idea, on this level of thought, upon which this synthesis depends.

That will be an 'antithesis' for the whole. In this way the process will continue until we reach the 'absolute whole' or absolutely independent idea. This absolute whole will include everything because of which it will be absolutely independent and complete, as Frederic Beiser invokes the Hegelian system (Beiser, 2005, pp.168-9).

In Hegel the synthesized idea, being 'absolute whole', will comprise the absolute knowledge of the system. This knowledge will be developed knowledge which arises through the reconciliation of opposite in true unity. We can say that every synthesis is a truer idea than the previous knowledge because it incorporates previous truth and exists as more real than the prior. We can better understand it by the Hegelian explanation of the notion of 'becoming'.

Hegel conceives that there is a process of change in which things turn into something other than themselves. What is other than something is obviously some sort of opposite of the former. But in another sense, what is other than something is not opposite to it. Hegel explicates it by elaborating the notion of 'becoming', which is the unity of 'being' and 'nothing'. According to him, 'being' is indeterminate immediate. In this way it is 'being' having no content at all. Thus it must be 'nothing'; the opposite of 'being'. However, 'being' and 'nothing' are opposites which are constantly moving in and apart from each other. So they require to be brought together as a 'synthesis' into becoming. In this regard Hegel says:

Pure being and pure nothing are, therefore, the same. What is the truth is neither being nor nothing, but that being - does not pass over but has passed over - into nothing, and nothing into being. But it is equally true that they are not undistinguished from each other, that, on the contrary, they are not the same, that they are absolutely distinct, and yet that they are unseparated and inseparable and that each immediately vanishes in its opposite. Their truth is, therefore, this movement of the immediate vanishing of the one in the other: becoming, a movement in which both are distinguished, but by a difference which has equally immediately resolved itself (Houlgate, 1998, pp.187-8).

What follows from the above is that truth is not either of the two opposites; truth is the movement of the disappearance of one opposite into the other by the process of 'becoming'. In this process both are distinguished, but by a difference which has equally immediately resolved itself. So in order to grasp reality in the true sense, the task of reason should be the reconciliation of opposites in a true unity. This true unity of opposites

reflects the truth of the whole reality. That is the theme which becomes explicit when Hegel says, "The truth is whole" (Yovel, 2005, para-20,p.102).

What can be inferred from Hegel's notion of 'becoming' is that the antagonism of reality is resolved in the process of 'becoming'. In other words, reality developed dialectically. But according to Hegel, as consciousness knows only what is within its experience (Yovel, 2005, para-36,p.134-5), therefore reasons or realization of the Spirit in individuals also develops along with the process of 'becoming' and thus development of reality and reason, are one. The truth of synthesized idea will necessarily be compatible to absolute reality. That is the point where Hegelian thought is interpreted as "what is real is rational and what is rational is real". The development is a holistic process. In Hegel's words,

[The] world confronting the [individual human] soul is not something external to it. On the contrary, the totality of relation in which the individual human soul finds itself constitutes its actual liveliness and subjectivity and accordingly has grown together with it just a family as, to use simile, the leaves grow with the tree; the leaves, though distinct from tree, belong to it so essentially that the tree dies if it repeatedly stripped of them (Westpal, 2009, p.268).

What follows from the above excerpt is that the world as objectivity and human soul as subjectivity grow together. The growth of the subject and object reflects the development of the 'whole reality'. In this respect the object and subject are reconciled and show the truth of the Spirit. The object and subject constitute the whole whose development may be understood as act of the Spirit, explained Beiser (Beiser, 2005, p.80). He elaborates that by the act of the Spirit opposites are reconciled and hence the antagonism of opposites is diminished. So the whole gradually attains perfection.

From the social point of view it can be said that by the act of the Spirit, social conflicts are reconciled and hence social antagonism is diminished. So society gradually reaches perfection. In this way society is directed towards perfect social order. The process is wholly manifested in world history. According to Hegel, it can be seen that world history is not merely a series of isolated events; it is a rational process (Speight, 2008, p.90). In other words history is the act of the Spirit in holistic sense. Hegel says, "World history belongs to realm of Spirit.....the Spirit and course of its development are the true substance of history" (Haulage, 1998, p.400). In

this way, it can be said that history reflects the progress and the historical process is destined towards perfect social order.

1.2 Hegel's idea of Nation State and Absolute Social Order

As Hegel contends that progress leads to the elimination of antagonism, therefore the most developed social order will be free from all kind of social conflicts. That will be the stage in the historical process where the "end" would be realized or known in true sense and conflicts would vanish as a result of the process of history or the act of the Spirit that is executed through struggles between conflicting forces. In other words the society having no antagonism is the absolute social order in perspective of the Hegelian system. As far as the question regarding the nature of absolute social order and process of history are concerned; we can better understand their responses by Hegelian analysis of freedom, the individual and the state.

According to Hegel the Spirit is self-determined. It is holistic and there is nothing external to it; it is self sufficient. Thus he implies that the essence of the Spirit is freedom. Moreover as Hegel believes that the Spirit gradually manifests itself through dialectical process and exhibits itself in due course of history, therefore he infers that the act of the Spirit means the act aimed at achieving absolute freedom by its own absolute knowledge. Hegel states that:

The history of the world . . . represents the successive stages in the development of the principle whose substantial content is the consciousness of freedom . . . during the first and immediate stage in the process, the spirit . . . is still immersed in nature, in which it exists in a state of unfree particularity (only One is free). But during the second stage it emerges into an awareness of its own freedom. The first departure from nature is, however, only imperfect and partial – only some are free – for it is derived indirectly from a state of nature, and is therefore related to it and still encumbered with it as one of its essential moments. The third stage witnesses the ascent of the spirit out of this as yet specific form of freedom into its purely universal form – man as such is free – in which the spiritual essence becomes conscious of itself and aware of its own nature (Speight, 2008, p.94).

What follows from this excerpt is that history is the process in which the knowledge of essence of the Spirit; freedom is realized by individuals. In

other words freedom is realized as the result of the process of history (Hegel, 1988, p.20-1).

Hegel explicates that the realization of freedom gradually develops in history. It develops from the idea of freedom of particular individuals to the idea of freedom of man as such. He analyzes the various stages of history. In the first stage of history the consciousness of Orientals is limited to conceive freedom as freedom of one. They do not know what freedom actually is. They do not know that men are themselves free. For this reason they do not think that they can be free. They merely see that one person, who rules them, is free. Then, according to Hegel, the Greeks are the first persons among whom consciousness of freedom arises. They conceive that men can be free. But their consciousness is not able to conceive that all men are free. They think that only some men are free. They have slaves, therefore their freedom is partial. Finally, the consciousness of German people is the first to gain awareness of the true concept of freedom, that all men themselves are free. They think of freedom as general, not particular. They become aware with the Spirit of the world. In short the development of the idea of absolute freedom by a rational process is the goal of the Spirit of the world which is manifested in world history. Realization of freedom is the self determination of the world Spirit (Hegel, 1988, p.21-3).

According to Hegel individuals realize freedom in the state or society. Since individuals live with others in the world, they have to limit their freedom for others. They require the moral law for realization of freedom in positive sense. Thus Hegel thinks that the realization of freedom can only be in the state or society where individual passions are merged in ethical totality (Hegel, 1988, p.41). In other words, the need for moral life comes into existence in the form of the state where freedom is realized in holistic or general sense. But, as Hegel believes that realization of freedom gradually develops, therefore he infers the nature of the state also changes gradually.

According to Hegel the primitive form of state in history is the authoritarian empire of the Orientals where will of the individual does not count. He points out that the consciousness of the Orientals is limited to the faith that only one, that is the highest authority, is free. Therefore, Hegel implies that the corresponding state is authoritarian where the ultimate interest is the interest of one despot and the state is despotic and violent. He goes on to highlight that in Greeks, through process of history, the idea of freedom is developed and the Greeks and Romans realize that

they are free, but not all man are free; some are slaves. Therefore he implies that the corresponding state is the political rule of some interest groups. This type of state begets number of conflicting groups having antagonism among them. In the final stage, Hegel mentions that by the act of history, the German nation is able to know that all are free but not as individuals. Rather all are free as a collective. That is the realization that the nation or state is the sole interest of men. The nation or the state reflects the will of the Spirit. It is supreme and hence free. The corresponding political form is the (German) monarchy that demands the obedience of will of the Spirit or the state (Hegel, 2001, pp.270-2).

In the perspective of development of consciousness of freedom as such and development of idea of the state, Hegel conceives the 'Nation State' as an absolutely sovereign body upon which the sovereignty of other states depends. According to Hegel the nation state is the manifestation of the Spirit in its rationality in the form of international laws (Haulage, 1998, p.393). We can say that in Hegel the state, which is evolved dialectically through process of history, would be the absolute social order. That would be the developed form of state; that is 'the Nation State'. It will have a collective mind and would be independent of individuals' mind. In this connection, the collective mind realizes the supremacy of the Spirit. It is the realization that 'the Nation State' exists itself and thus is an end in itself (Spieght, 2008, p.83). In this way, by development of knowledge of the Spirit, the freedom which is the essence of Spirit would be realized in the perfect sense. In the Hegelian system, it would be the end of history or the end of social conflicts.

Now it can be inferred from Hegel's conception of absolute Spirit and his conception of state that the process of history is the essence of the world that ultimately leads us to the idea of absolute social order that is the absolute right of the 'Nation State'. The individual mind has no right against the will of this collective. It shows that the absolute state that is the manifestation of absolute Spirit is a collectivity or whole and has significant importance over individuals. Therefore, like Plato, the Hegelian system also has absolutistic and holistic approach.

2. Popper's Criticism of Hegel

Popper's critique of Hegel is based on his rejection of Hegelian idea of evolution, historicism and holism. According to Popper, Hegel's philosophy rests upon presuppositions which cannot be defended rationally and promotes totalitarianism.

2.1 Popper's Criticism of Hegelian idea of Evolution

In order to develop his criticism of Hegel, Popper first raises an objection over Hegel's idea of evolution through the unity of contradiction. We have established that in Hegelian philosophy, contradictions are not only permissible and unavoidable but also highly desirable for progress. But Popper points out that progress of all sciences is not because of unity of contradiction but because of elimination of, or aversion from contradiction. In science, the contradictions are first identified and then removed. Popper argues that if contradictions are unavoidable and desirable, then there is no need to eliminate them, and so all progress must come to an end (Popper, 1966,p.39).

He interprets that the Hegelian dialectical triad ultimately leads to relativism. We have seen in the previous chapter that for Hegel, contradictions are a part of the whole. Popper regards this thought as propagation of relativism. It is relativism in a sense that what is believed today is true and what was true yesterday may be false tomorrow (Popper, 1966, p.60). Popper's position is that such kind of doctrine cannot be appreciated by those who believe in arguments and truth.

2.2 Popper's Critique of Hegel's Historicism and Holism

According to Popper, Hegel's philosophy rests upon his belief in the unchanging essence of social reality which is the idea of historicism. Popper's position is that historicism is not justifiable on rational ground. He argues that historicism takes things for granted which are logically impossible; 'holism' being one such example. Having influence of 'holism', historicists hold that social groups must not be regarded as mere aggregates of persons, instead asserting that they have their own essence. Popper refutes the historicists' claim that we must study history of a social group, its tradition and institutions, if we wish to understand its essence or origin. (Popper, 1966,p.18). According to Popper, this approach can also be seen in Hegel's historicism because he believes in an essence or fundamental nature of society. In order to examine historicism, Popper focuses on the problem of justification of the fundamental nature of a whole.

(i) Problem of Justification of the Fundamental Nature of a Whole

According to Popper the idea that wholes are more than parts is based on the presumption that a whole has a fundamental nature that belongs to the totality of all the properties as well as the relation to its constituent parts.

He argues that such kind of concrete depiction of a whole cannot be grasped because whenever we describe the whole, we must be selective. We can only see some aspects of a whole rather than all its relations. Popper further says that not one example of a scientific description of a whole has ever been cited which covers all aspects of a thing since in every case it would always be easy to point out aspects that have been neglected (Popper, 1966, p.79). In this connection, he holds that the term 'holism' is ambiguous. He writes that:

The word whole as used by holists is ambiguous. In one sense it is taken as a totality of all the properties or aspects of a thing, and especially of all the relations holding between its constituent parts. This cannot be studied scientifically. In another sense it denotes certain special properties or aspects of thing in question that makes it appears an organized structure rather than a mere heap. Scientific study of such wholes is possible (Popper, 1966, p.76).

What Popper wants to conclude is that all knowledge whether intuitive or discursive, comprises of abstract notions, so we can never grasp the concrete structure of whole.

(ii) Impossibility of Method of Holism

There is another reason due to which Popper dismisses 'holism'. He says that holists not only plan to study the whole, for example, a society, by an impossible method but also plan to control and reconstruct it as a whole. For Popper, this is an impossible task. His basic argument regarding this matter is that holists presume that control is too simple while because of the possibility of infinite relations between constituents of the whole, its control is logically impossible. For instance, when a sociological factor is controlled then in the result of this control other relations or factors emerge. If we control these new relations then they will cause the emergence of other new factors. Thus it may lead to infinite regress (Popper, 1966, p.77).

Both of the above criticisms regarding 'holism' lead Popper to strengthen the case against historicism of Hegel. He thinks that his social and political thoughts involve such problems. According to Popper Hegel is mistaken when he believes in essence or the fundamental nature of social reality. His historicism that there are hidden social laws which govern us is also unjustifiable. Moreover their plan to control or reconstruct the whole of society by knowledge of "fundamental nature" is also mistaken.

2.3 The implications of Hegel's Philosophy: The Totalitarian Character of Hegel's Nation State

Popper's main objection regarding Hegel's political philosophy is that it propagates holism. He is of the view that holism is not only unjustifiable on rational ground but also have worse consequences for harmonious society. Popper is always reluctant to accept any doctrine that teaches that the individual is nothing while the essence of society or collectives is everything. He argues that holism, when it is used in political theory, ultimately ends up in totalitarianism. Popper sees the same thing in Hegel when he quotes him thus:

Some men have recently begun to talk of the "sovereignty of people" in opposition to sovereignty of monarch. But when it is contrasted with sovereignty of monarch then the phrase "sovereignty of people" turns to be merely one of those confused notions which arise from a wild idea of the "people". Without its monarch... the people are just a formless multitude (Popper, 1966, p.56).

What Popper infers from this passage is that in Hegel's political theory, the state or monarch will not merely be absolute authority but also some kind of identity of its inhabitants without which individuals will be nothing. For Popper, such an absolute authority will strictly demand the inhabitants of state to obey the authority blindly. Such a totalitarian attitude, on the one hand, has no justification except historicist fate while on the other hand has no way to accept criticism even if found obvious. That is why it is not acceptable for Popper.

Another problem with totalitarianism, according to Popper, is its antagonism towards equality and liberty of human beings. Popper argues that absolute authority of monarch or state and blind obedience by the inhabitants of state diminishes the idea of equality of men. Consequently it demolishes the idea of brotherhood. That is why; Popper contends that, Hegel opposes brotherhood of man and humanitarianism (Popper, 1966, p.49).

Conclusion

We can conclude from foregoing discussion that Popper rejects Hegel's conception of 'nation state' for two main reasons. First, it is the idea of holism which is not rationally justifiable. Second, the consequences of holism are anti humanitarian. It ultimately propagates a totalitarian rule of monarch. The main objection of Popper against holism is that it promotes

such political theories those believe in 'ultimate end', whereas there is no scientific and objective criterion to determine ultimate end. Consequently, holism ultimately encourages a totalitarian rule that imposes a specific political end. Such a totalitarian rule demands blind obedience and ultimately opposes equality and brotherhood of man.

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