

## Summary Essay of Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*

Written in the year 1843, while the ideas were still fluid and without distinct and concrete form, Marx's critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* allows a small gleam into his early thoughts on the true origins of the state and the part the people play in creating its form. Ranging from the true foundation of the state to the role of democracy as the true form of government, Marx vigorously attempts to dispel the veil of mysticism that lurked behind governments both then and now.

Starting off with the idea of civil as state society, Marx rebukes the oft contended idea that it is the state that creates and sustains civil society. Contrary to what many philosophers and ruling classes have claimed and believed, it was the people and the social bonds they create which build and nourish the state. It is the interpersonal bonds at their simplest – the family unit – which give rise to the simplest form of state society. In other words, it is the human condition at its most basic and natural which allows the abstraction called the state to exist at all.

Rather than the top-bottom approach utilized by countless despots, Marx embraced the bottom-up perspective which saw the content as the giver of form instead of the other way around. Where politicians saw the form, the abstract, as the real, this common sense approach saw the content as the only real thing: it saw that “family and civil society are the premises of the state.” The state is incapable of operating under its own power and guidance for it is nothing but a soulless vehicle. Once the vehicle starts to operate without input from its passengers then disastrous results are bound to happen as it attempts to perform actions it was never designed or intended to do.

Cause and effect play a significant role in Marx's political beliefs, in ways that dare the common person to find a way to disagree with him. The history of human government provides plenty of examples of “speculative philosophy”; the philosophy which stands cause and effect on its head and posits that the cause – the masses – is actually the effect – the state. Just as with religion, it is not the political state that creates man but man that creates the state. Given that the state is nothing but a mere abstraction, an entity brought forth by the will and bonds of the people, it requires an effort of logic to see how this mystification took place.

This reversal of roles attempts to rob the people of their sovereignty by forcing them to believe in a foundation other than themselves. The natural flow of family to civil to state is disrupted when the creator succumbs to his creation instead of controlling it. Being an artificial creation the state must rest solely on the “people [which] alone is what is concrete.” Thus, any attribute which is given to the state, such as sovereignty, must first be given to the people; or else the state loses its abstraction and instead wraps the people in it. This constant tension between abstraction and reality leads to the constant battle between form and content, between those governments of the democratic vein and those of the monarchical vein.

Monarchies are the outward form of false content: they seek to create the content in their own image, to create a social character rather than flow from it. Rather than base itself on the living, monarchies choose to base themselves on dead ideas – ideas that do not reflect reality. This separation from its source is the ultimate example of political mystification, the ultimate example of the creation turning from its creator – the political version of the golem turning against its maker. This unnatural divorce of content from form leads to political constitutions which attempt to mold civil society in the image of the state.

Contrast this political philosophy with democratic constitutions and it becomes easily visible

how democracies are but an externalized character of their content. Rather than fight the social flow, which is attempting to create political form and life, democracies embrace their social foundations and inherently adapt their form to match their content. Government becomes nothing more than a facsimile of the people. While despotic governments, on the other hand, believe that sovereignty rests in themselves democracies ebb and flow with the lives of their basis; they understand on a fundamental level that the sovereignty of the monarch is not a precondition of the state, the state may very well exist if sovereignty rests solely in the hands of the people.

States at their very core have democracy as their truth and guiding light, and, as such, states such as monarchies are untrue and in darkness when they are not outwardly democratic. Democratic states – notwithstanding republics which are mere abstractions of actual democracies – are the “genus Constitution” and as such are the only true “free product of man.” Being the result of a free people who act within the natural power accorded to them, democratic states are inherently fluid and ever-changing. Democracies are the will of the people given form – form following function – while monarchies are the will of the idea attempting to create content. In other words, the “political state ... no longer passes for the whole.”