



Star Wars and Democracy: Three Recent Versions
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Introduction: Star Wars, Hegel, and Democracy

- From the very beginning, Star Wars films have focused on threats to democracy
- On the left, George Lucas has suggested Vietnam as a parallel
- In the original trilogy, the rebels fight to restore a democracy that has fallen “from within.” In the prequel trilogy, we see *how* this happened
- This talk will focus on how democracy is presented in recent Star Wars series
- Note: All images were created using “Dall-E 3”. I’d love to chat about this :).



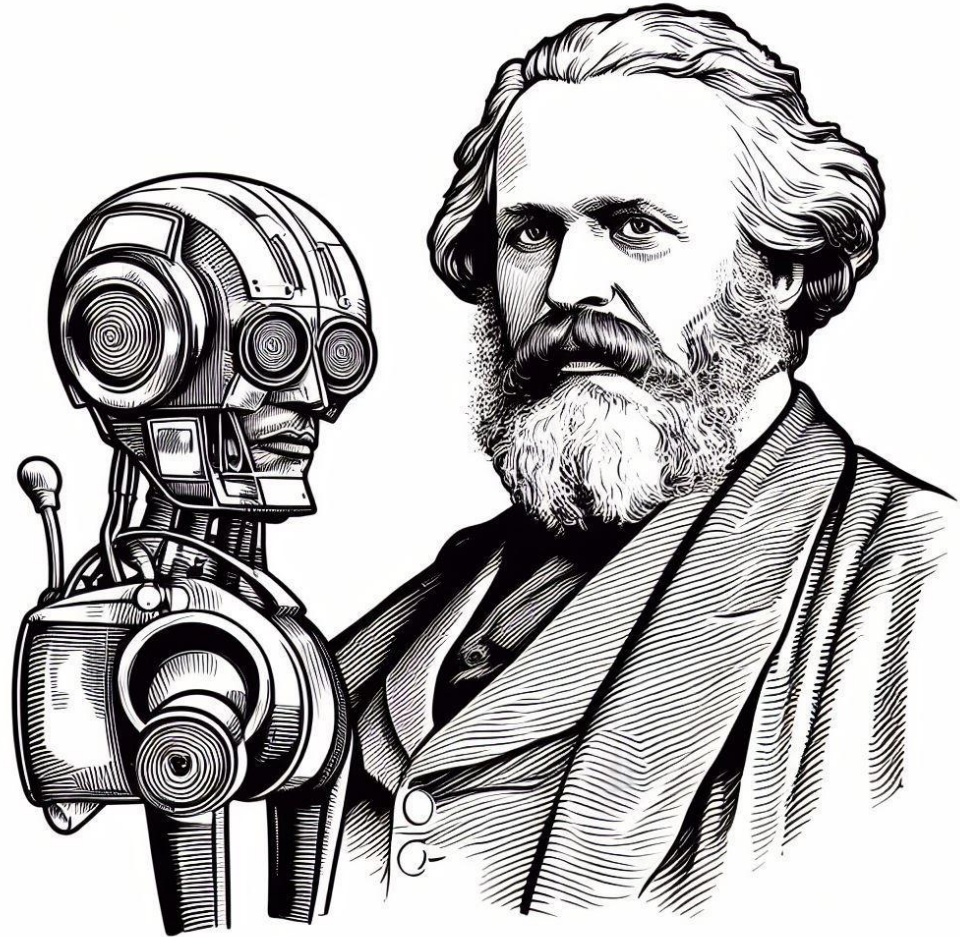
Historical Context: The 1970s and Challenges to Democracy

- The late 1960s and 1970s was an era of crisis for democracy
- In the US: MLK and RFK assassinations, Nixon, Vietnam , the Iran Crisis, etc
- Abroad: USSR in Prague and Afghanistan, Pinochet in Chile, the Indian "emergency", the UK in Northern Ireland, etc
- Fledgling democracies everywhere were under attack by powerful, established forces



Hegelianism: A Brief Overview

- Before jumping to the present, let's return to the past, and another crisis of democracy
- George Frederic Hegel offered a theory of political governance and change, just as American democracy struggled to come into being
- A huge influence on modern political thought, through people like Marx, Nietzsche, Fukuyama, etc
- He has a lot to say about Star Wars.



The Hegelian Dialectic: Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis

- Hegel argued for a teleological view of human history in which the World Spirit moves us toward greater freedom and knowledge
- Human ideas—political, moral, and scientific—are products of earlier ideas, and are the foundations for new ideas
- History involves a dialectic between the “thesis” , its “antithesis” , and their eventual synthesis
- For example, the Greek models of tyranny and simple democracy resolve into the synthesis



Star Wars and the Hegelian Dialectic: Old Republic to New Republic

- Thesis: The Old Republic
- Anti-thesis: The highly organized and centralized Empire, in which Darth Vader and Palpatine can quickly implement “radical” change
- Synthesis? The New Republic
- Other examples: The Jedi as a “synthetic” religion, which reconciles traditional religious ideals with a scientific understanding of the world
- The unresolved droid-human issue calls to mind Hegel’s master-slave dialectic



Hegel's Agents of History: Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader

- The “World Spirit” acts through individuals, helping to resolve contradictions
- In the real-world Napoleon
- In Star Wars, Anakin
- The original Star Wars trilogy suggests that a new “Synthesis” has been achieved



Ethical Life in Hegel: Governance in Star Wars

- For Hegel, human history aims to achieve the Ethical Life
- This life to individuals requires a well-structured family, civil society, and state
- The “Skywalker” ideal: a close family , a meaningful job that ties one to others , under the auspices of a well-governed, democratic state
- For Hegel, this is the “end” toward which history aims



Neo-Hegelianism: Fukuyama's End of History

- In the 1970s, many thought the Cold War would end with some sort of Hegelian synthesis akin to the New Republic
- Francis Fukuyama, a modern Hegelian, argued for an “end to history” after
- Modern liberal democracies, with free markets underpinned by government support for the poor, were the “end” of progress
- Liberal democracies provide the best combination of authority, accountability, and rule of law



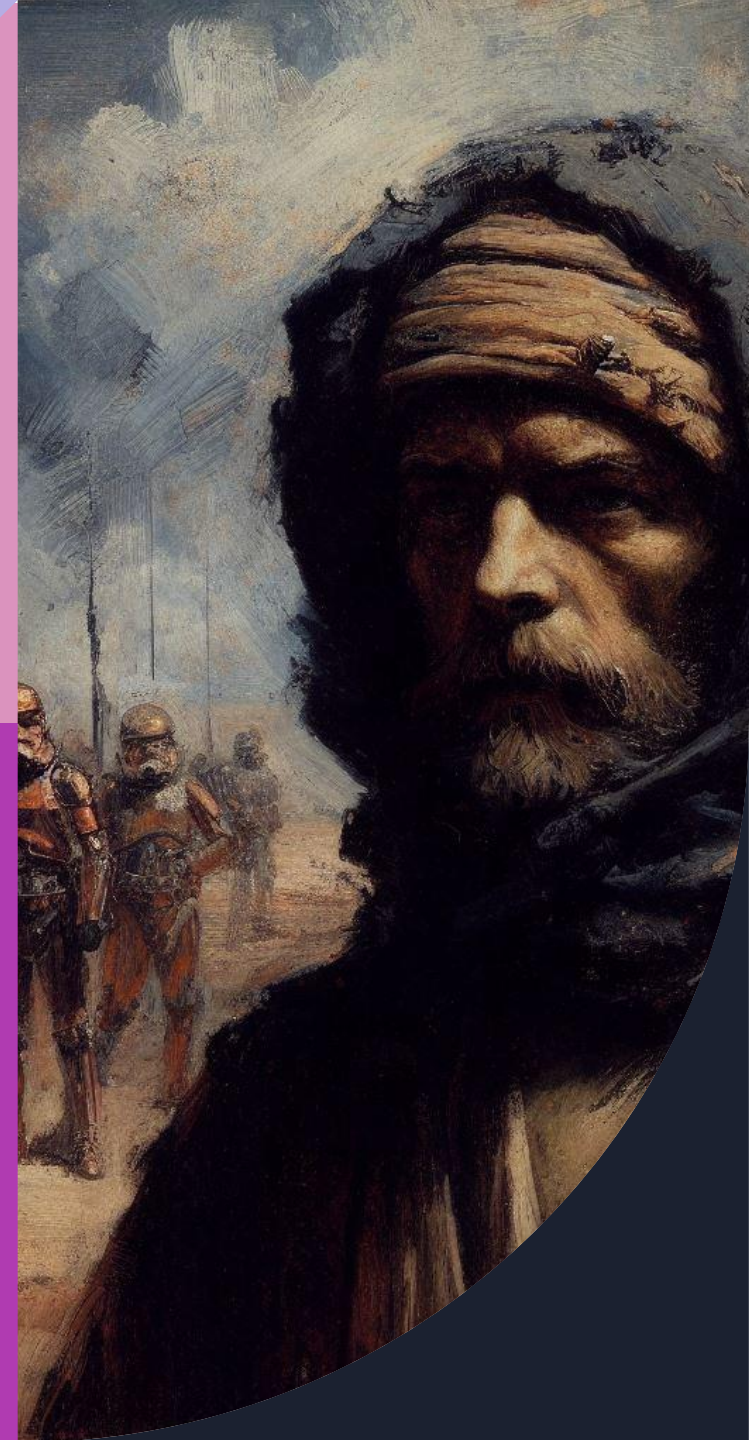
Threats to Liberal Democracy: Populists, Elites, and Domination

- The “end of history” (meaning: nothing better is coming) does NOT entail the “end of history” (meaning: it can't get worse)
- In the real world: democratic “backsliding” in Russia, Brazil, India, the US
- In Star Wars: The New Republic falls to the First Order
- Major threats to democracy include anti-liberal “populist” movements
- Out-of-control competition among “elites” can lead to government capture



"Andor" on the Challenges of Democracy

- Andor features no Jedi Knights
- Dual focus: On the "edges" of Empire and the rotten center
- Heroes lack the unifying "vision" of the New Hope heroes
- Their problems mirror those of real-world attempts to establish democracy in the last 20 years
- Problem: Is liberalism too "hollow" to ground change?



The Mandalorian: Good Patriotism vs. Bad Nationalism

- The Mandalorian, in contrast to Andor, is set in the late “New Republic” era
- Mando and company have a much clearer vision for the future
- Established elites , shared beliefs, and governance procedures play a much stronger role
- Alastair MacIntyre: Need for “good patriotism” to oppose “bad nationalism.”



Why Good Patriotism Isn't Enough: Challenges for the New Republic

- Mandalorian values and structures that predate liberal democracy
- This isn't just a Star Wars problem!
- Even if well-functioning liberal democracy is the "end of history," it doesn't mean there is a clear route to get there



Obi-Wan Kenobi: The Hegelian Good Life Across Eras

- Despite his death in the middle of the first movie, Obi-Wan has been a recurring character in every Star Wars era
- He appears as young Anakin's teacher in the Prequel trilogy, and as a protector of young Luke and Leia in his own show
- In these differing portrayals, we see changing ideas of the "good life", as it relates to family, civil society, and the state



The Original Trilogy: Obi-Wan as “New Hope”

- Here, Obi Wn Kenobi is presented as a paragon of “lost” Jedi virtues
- Even Anakin takes what he learns from Obi Wan to make the “right choice
- He also serves as an model for the society they aspire to create
- He is not a Hegelian “world-historical” figure in the traditional sense, though his charges are.
- Show how such figures are shaped by existing familial, social, and political institutions.



Prequels: Obi-Wan's Failure

- In the prequel trilogy, we see Obi-Wan in a different light.
- He struggles with the corruption and decadence of the Old Republic, which an unchallenged super-power (akin to 1990s America)
- We see the decay of important Hegelian institutions (family, civil society, state), and its effect on Anakin.
- Obi Wan here is presented as a failed reformed, who tries (and fails) to work within existing institutions to protect democracy.
- The failure of these institutions leads directly to Anakin's fall



"KENOBI": Family and Ethical Life

- In the most recent series, we Obi Wan hiding from a now-dominant empire and Darth Vader
- He has no clear vision for civil society or governance.
- Instead, his virtues are almost entirely focused on “familial” loyalty to Luke and Leia, and
- The series explores the way such loyalties can, in the right context, help cultivate democratic institutions at the “higher” levels of civil society and state.



Conclusion

- Star Wars presentation of democracy as an “ideal” and the main challenges to it have changed with the times, reflecting the challenges and aspirations of democratic governance.
- Hegel’s Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis model: Old Republic's inefficiency to the Empire's authoritarianism, culminating in the New Republic's quest for balance.
- Major characters are Hegelian “agents of history,” their actions shaping and being shaped by the political structures they inhabit.
- More recently, Star Wars has reached Fukuyama’s “end of history.” And yet, threats to democracy remain.
- Series like “Andor” and “The Mandalorian” delve into the complexities of establishing democracy, questioning whether liberalism alone can sustain societal change.

