

*Winter is Coming, and so is World Spirit: An Analysis of Hegel's
Philosophy of World History through Game of Thrones*

G.W.F. Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (LPWH) has been ripe for misinterpretation due to both its ambition and complexity. In this work, Hegel ultimately argues that the unfolding of historical events follows a rational, teleological path toward the actualization of world spirit. With this actualization comes the consciousness of each individual of their own freedom. This paper serves as a conversation on the advantages and disadvantages of Hegel's own philosophy of world history. Concepts and movements within Hegel's work will be explored through the popular television show *Game of Thrones*- inspired by the book series by George R.R. Martin. First, an exegesis of the first two sections of LPWH will be presented which will aid in elucidating concepts and understanding the terminology used. The strengths and limitations of LPWH will then be explored through miscellaneous characters, narrative arcs, and events from *Game of Thrones*. Some rejoinders will be discussed along with a brief reflection on the project as a whole. The content of Hegel's work is time transcendent, and analyzing within the context of a cultural touchstone will hopefully provide new and worthwhile insights.

For the sake of concision, this paper will only focus on sections A and B of Hegel's lectures- titled *The General Concept of World History* and *The Actualization of Spirit in History*, respectively. Section A begins after Hegel discusses the significance of his mode of inquiry which weds philosophical methodology with historical content. Before this discussion of world history occurs, Hegel encourages the reader to accept the presupposition that "reason governs the

world” and that *world history* can be tracked because it is a “natural process.”¹ Assuming the reader is familiar with rationality, Hegel moves on to explain that *world history* describes the course that the *world spirit* travels by.² In other words, world history is the footpath that the world spirit walks on toward its destination. It should be made clear that this journey of world spirit is rational, necessary, and inevitable. To support the idea that reason dictates the movements of the world, Hegel cites Anaxagoras’ notion of *nous* as a forerunner to his own concept of world history. Hegel’s second source of justification comes from religious notions of divine providence.³ *Nous* can be understood best through physical laws which describe how matter behaves. Hegel makes it clear that this is a valuable insight, though he argues it is insufficient because it does not account for the object reason is acting upon to be cognizant of and in tune with the process.⁴ This cognizance is essential because, for Hegel, “Reason is *thinking* that determines itself wholly free...”⁵ World history, then, is best understood as being grounded in the rationality one experiences as a subject and the rational trajectory they are placed on as an object. The agents involved in Hegel’s world history are not individuals but collectives such as states, nations, and tribes.⁶ In this world history, collectives partake in and accelerate reason and freedom (though it is later made clear that individual actors in this world history are not necessarily aware that they are advancing world spirit *qua* world spirit). Before moving on to the exegesis of section B., it is worth noting that Hegel claims this work is a

¹ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 79.

² *Ibid.*, 80.

³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴ *Ibid.* 82.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 84

theodicy which reconciles and makes intelligible events in the world from a rationalist perspective.⁷

Now that the concept of world history has been discussed, it is time to explore section B.: *The Actualization of Spirit in History*. In this section, Hegel provides an account of what world spirit *is* and what its actualization looks like.⁸ Furthermore, he explores the state and the constitution as material entities which are products of the manifestation of spirit. For Hegel, spirit can be defined as the consciousness of freedom.⁹ In this way, world history is the path that world spirit moves along toward increased consciousness of freedom. However, Hegel provides a contentious and problematic account of consciousness of freedom; in his eyes, Asian individuals had an insufficient notion of freedom, which was slowly improved upon by the Greeks and Romans and then perfected by his time of writing. Regarding actualization of world spirit, Hegel argues that it is driven by the needs, passions, interests, and ideals of humans, both as individuals and within collectives.¹⁰ He argues that individuals' motivations are not consciously geared towards world spirit, though their actions co-occur with the progression of world spirit. Rephrased in Hegel's own words: "[Great figures of history's] own particular ends contain the substantial end that is the will of the world spirit."¹¹

Hegel then argues that the material in which world spirit is actualized can be found within the state as well as constitutions. For Hegel, the state is the vehicle and the shape of world spirit.¹² Hegel's notion of state is not identical to contemporary notions- his notion encapsulates

⁷ Hegel, 85-86.

⁸ Ibid., 86.

⁹ Ibid., 87.

¹⁰ Ibid., 89

¹¹ Ibid., 96.

¹² Ibid., 100.

collectives of people, natural resources, immaterial objects and achievements, and most importantly, an essential integration of religion. The state is abstract while its citizens are concrete, and the constitution, according to Hegel, is a concrete framework for the state.¹³ The constitution also acts as a reflective entity that marks whether or not activity of the state is in or out of line with its intended purpose.

Now that a few concepts from Hegel's LPWH have been introduced, a more concrete framework can be established using material from *Game of Thrones*, a show that is already familiar with ideas of power, idealism, and critical reflection. One of the most compelling analogs of world history and world spirit formations can be seen in the story of Daenerys Targaryen, a protagonist who seeks to claim the Iron Throne since its semi-recent vacancy. Near the beginning of the show, Daenerys (Dany) was sold to the Dothraki, a tribal clan reminiscent (and problematically so) of Mongolian warriors who lived in the Asian steppes. Dany wins the respect of the peoples she was sold to, and after the death of their leader, she becomes the champion of the people. She then travels toward Westeros while simultaneously assembling an army. Through this process, Dany conquers and liberates cities in Slaver's Bay- beginning with Astapor, then moving on to Meereen and Yunkai thanks to her army of the Unsullied. Dany's campaign to assemble an army transformed into one which also liberates innumerable slaves. This can be interpreted as both a metaphor and a literal manifestation of the development of Hegel's world spirit through world history. However, Dany encounters problems as cities under her new rule are repeatedly attacked in her absence and residents have difficulties adjusting to their new lifestyles. The relative ease with which Dany conquered the cities in Slaver's Bay is

¹³ Hegel, 104-105.

eclipsed by struggles of being a good ruler, and through this she is forced to make tough decisions while acknowledging the opportunity cost of her actions.

Beyond Daenerys' story, *Game of Thrones* is ripe with material for interpolation. The rise and subsequent demise of the Cult of the High Sparrow provides an excellent example of a religious-ethical entity which undergoes a Hegelian unfolding. The simplicity and unorthodox nature of the religious group brings initial appeal and wins over individuals disenchanted with the corruption of King's Landing at the hands of the Lannisters. As the cult grows, however, it begins to forsake its own values and exacerbates the fear and terror it initially strived to combat. The mode of ruling brought about by the cult challenged Cersei Lannister, but through her cunning and desires as an individual agent, she was able to eradicate them at the Great Sept of Baelor and learn a lesson or two in the process. However, this chain of events eventually leads to the suicide of Tommen Baratheon, Cersei's son and king at the time. Tommen's suicide is indicative of an inability to cope with the pressures of ruling, the corruption under his reign, and the death of his queen. There are scores of characters, events, and themes that could be further explored through Hegel's world history narrative, but it is the hope that these few examples are adequate in establishing the conceptual bond needed for this paper.

In watching *Game of Thrones*, the viewer observes the fracturing of previous modes of ruling as individuals in the show kill and are killed in the hopes to rule Westeros. The hardships that face the Starks, the Lannisters, the Wildlings, (and perhaps even the Night Walkers? It all depends on one's perspective), are symptoms of the deterioration of a mode of life in which only *some* are free. World spirit appears to be colliding against itself through the actions of influential individuals and the houses which operate as macro-agents. As the show comes to a conclusion

this year, it will be interesting to see how neatly a Hegelian narrative can be mapped onto the world in which someone new rests on the Iron Throne (assuming it isn't dissolved in favor of a radical direct democracy [hopeful, I know]).

Despite the charm found in relating Hegel's philosophy to a cultural monolith, there are limitations on an overarching interpretation of the show. Both Hegel and *Game of Thrones* can be seen as romanticizing and glorifying dramatic politics, warfare, and violence. The difference here is that Hegel's world history narrative was not created for entertainment purposes.

Regarding the element of drama, the perceptions of highly influential individual actors within *Game of Thrones* could merely be attributed to an inverted epistemology- who is deemed influential seems contingent on the perspective of the narrator or evaluator. While Hegel aspires to transcend this perspectivism, it is unclear whether or not he does or can succeed. Support for this argument can be found in works that focus on history "from below" such as feminist and decolonial scholarship. Beyond content, the methodology of reading Hegel into a large source material may be perceived as cherry-picking in order to bolster one's argument. The notion of world history itself may also be seen as triumphalist in assuming a telos which Hegel sits conveniently close to. Lastly, Hegel's emphasis on the state and constitutions as material indicators of world history and world spirits' location and valence is not adequately supported.

These challenges need not go unaddressed, however. One could argue that the drama, conflict, and violence found in a Hegelian world history is indeed real even if it should not be celebrated. The critique of who is deemed an influential individual is well founded and can be resolved if one adopts a view that since world spirit encounters and collides with itself frequently, each perspective of who is or is not a legitimate influencer can be validated. It is then

possible to hold a pluralist model of world history and world spirit which is still teleological.

This also relinquishes the need to epistemologically reach over the top of historical narratives and assume a privileged knowledge position to analyze the machinations of world spirit. In response to concerns of cherry-picking, one can argue that a model used to provide insights into a concept or argument- such as that of world history- does not need to be exhaustive. Inherent in models is the acknowledgement that it cannot adequately capture the complexity of what it is modeling in its entirety. If a particular model or interpretation is challenged, then it is necessary to either expand upon or discard said model. However, most individuals would accept that for a relatively uncontentious claim (that Hegel's world history and world spirit can be understood via *Game of Thrones*), an exhaustive model is not necessary. The limitations of *Game of Thrones* as a model as well as the limited depth of the show can account for the silence regarding constitutions, though detailed conversations and actions indicate an intricate political sphere within the show.

How the writers and producers intend to end the *Game of Thrones* series will be a large indicator of whether or not it can properly track a Hegelian unfolding of world history and the movement of world spirit. Even if the conclusion does not perfectly satisfy the achievement of absolute spirit in which rational agents are in tune with and fully claim their own freedom, the show itself provides a unique and accessible insight into components of Hegel's own thinking in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. Ultimately, the adversities, achievements, and evolution of those who strive to sit upon the Iron Throne compliment and resonate with Hegel's own philosophy of how world history continues to unfold.

Bibliography

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