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STATES OF FAILURE

The state is not 'abolished': it withers away.

Engels, *Anti-Dühring*

The more the social bond is stretched the slacker it becomes.

Rousseau, *The Social Contract*

IN AN EARLIER article I argued that the contemporary crisis of political agency reflects the division between the aggregated outcomes of individual choice and the decisions of the collective will.¹ Yet the contraction of political possibility to the invisible hand of the market and populist reaction does not restrict individual actors to one or the other. It is precisely because different types of agency are not exclusive to particular actors that the cycle of unintended effect and ineffectual intent is so obvious. Appealing to the agency of the multitude serves only to reinforce the divide, for the multitude acts either as one or as many, and becomes a political agent either through the unity of the will or through the workings of the invisible hand. Starting with the multitude, as early modern political theory invariably did (and as Negri, Hardt, and Virno now propose to do once more), results in a dichotomy: general will or general intellect, the political or the social, state or society.

To these divisions, the Hegelian theory of the state offers a resolution. Hegel consciously worked with a double inheritance. On one hand, a conception of the state as the united will of the multitude, on the other, an account of civil society in which society is governed not by the will, but the rationality of the invisible hand. Though versions of the former were at least as old as Cicero, Hegel gave Rousseau the credit 'for adducing the will as the principle of the state'. However, he complained (somewhat unfairly) that Rousseau 'takes the will only in a determinate form as the individual will, and he regards the rational will not as the absolutely rational element in the will, but only as a "general" will which proceeds out of this individual will as out of a conscious will.' Rousseau

had undermined ‘the divine principle of the state’ by reducing ‘the union of individuals in the state to a contract and therefore to something based on their arbitrary wills’. The consequences could be seen in the French Revolution, which embodied only the arbitrary will and not the rational, and so ended in the ‘maximum of frightfulness and terror’.²

Hegel’s vision of civil society, and the role of the invisible hand of the market within it, is derived from Ferguson and Smith.³ In the course of achieving selfish ends, ‘there is formed a system of complete interdependence, wherein the livelihood, happiness, and legal status of one man is interwoven with the livelihood, happiness, and rights of all’.⁴ Although ‘each individual is his own end, and all else means nothing to him . . . he cannot accomplish the full extent of his ends without reference to others’. And so ‘through its reference to others, the particular end takes on the form of universality, and gains satisfaction by simultaneously satisfying the welfare of others’.⁵ However, for Hegel, civil society too has its limitations. Because its rationality relies upon the mechanism of the invisible hand, particularity (the individual agent) and universality (the product of the invisible hand) remain disjoined: ‘Unity is present here not as freedom but as necessity, since it is by compulsion that the particular rises to the form of universality’.⁶

In Hegel’s account, the limitation inherent in the rationality of the invisible hand is its unintended, unwilled emergence, while the problem with the unity of the will is its arbitrary nature and potentially destructive consequences. Both are overcome in the fusion of the two in the state. According to Hegel, it is through the invisible hand that individuals become aware of their own unity. When men are interdependent and ‘reciprocally related to one another in their work and the satisfaction of their needs, subjective self-seeking turns into a contribution to the satisfaction of the needs of everyone else’. In this way, ‘self-seeking turns into the mediation of the particular through the universal’.⁷ Thanks to the

invisible hand, ‘If I further my ends, I further the ends of the universal, and this in turn furthers my end’.⁸

Because ‘a particular end . . . is attained in the simultaneous attainment of the welfare of others’ it follows that ‘individuals can attain their ends only in so far as they themselves determine their knowing, willing, and acting in a universal way’.⁹ So when, through the invisible hand, particular self-consciousness is raised to consciousness of its universality, its knowing and willing becomes ‘formal freedom and formal universality’ insofar as its universality is no longer that of necessity but of a will conscious of its universality:

Particular interests not only achieve their complete development and gain explicit recognition for their right . . . they also pass over of their own accord into the interest of the universal . . . they know and will the universal; they even recognize it as their own substantive mind; they take it as their end and aim and are active in its pursuit . . . In the very act of willing these [their own private ends] they will the universal in the light of the universal.¹⁰

In practice, this involves the ‘consciousness that my interest, both substantive and particular, is contained and preserved in another’s (i.e. in the state’s) interest and end’.¹¹ This is the essence of patriotism, but it is also simultaneously the ground of the rationality of the state, for ‘The state is absolutely rational inasmuch as it is the actuality of the substantial will which it possesses in the particular self-consciousness once that consciousness has been raised to consciousness of its universality’.¹²

Hegel’s theory of the state acknowledges that there is frequently a disjunction between the aggregated outcomes of our individual actions, and the objectives for which we collectively strive. He describes the collective product of civil society, brought about through ‘the complex interdependence of each on all’ as a sort of general intellect which ‘presents itself to each as the universal permanent capital which gives each the opportunity, by the exercise of his education and skill, to draw a share from it’.¹³ However, he is clear that this is not the same as the general will, as expressed in a social contract. So, instead of wills being united by their own volition, the invisible hand creates a unity which is then consciously

¹ ‘The Limits of Multitude’, NLR 35, Sept–Oct 2005.

² G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, tr. T. M. Knox, Oxford 1952, §258; hereafter PR. I follow Knox’s 1952 translation throughout, apart from the citation referenced in footnote 5 below, where I use H. B. Nisbet’s.

³ See Norbert Waszek, *The Scottish Enlightenment and Hegel’s Account of Civil Society*, Dordrecht 1988.

⁴ PR, §183.

⁵ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, tr. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge 1991, §182.

⁶ PR, §186.

⁷ PR, §199.

⁸ PR, §184A.

⁹ PR, §182A, 187.

¹⁰ PR, §260.

¹¹ PR, §268.

¹² PR, §258.

¹³ PR, §199.

willed. In effect, the state is the 'general intellect' become conscious of itself as the general will. By this means, the arbitrariness of the general will is steadied by the rationality of the invisible hand, and the spontaneous order of society is infused with the patriotism of the state.

Spinoza had opened up the possibility that there might be a source of political unity distinct from that of the will. Hegel, aware that this potentially creates a problem of agency in complex societies, brings them back together again. In so doing, he offers the first theory of the modern state. Hegel's state is, as Bosanquet described it, 'society armed with force', the invisible hand clenched into an iron fist.

Shopping and bombing

If the significance of Hegel's theory of the state now appears largely forgotten, it is the result of the concerted campaign against it in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1917, L.T. Hobhouse, reading Hegel in his Highgate garden, was interrupted by the sounds of a German bombing raid. Picking up his book again, he realized that he had 'just witnessed the visible and tangible outcome of a false and wicked doctrine, the foundations of which lay, as I believe, in the book before me . . . The Hegelian theory of the god-state'.¹⁴

In fact, Hobhouse was responding not so much to Hegel himself as to Bosanquet, whose *Philosophical Theory of the State* recast the Hegelian theory in terms derived from only one of Hegel's sources, Rousseau. Insensible to the workings of the invisible hand, but conscious that Hegel had neglected Rousseau's distinction between the 'general will' and the 'will of all', Bosanquet offered an account of the state in which the 'real will' embodies rationality and so becomes the will for the common good, while the will of all remains the sum of private impulses and interests. So, in Bosanquet's perhaps unfortunate analogy, the 'will of all' is like the seemingly united action of a crowd streaming away from a military parade in search of refreshment, while the 'real will' is embodied by the precision of the army whose 'every unit moves with reference to the movements of a great whole'.¹⁵

¹⁴ L. T. Hobhouse, *The Metaphysical Theory of the State*, London 1918, p. 6.

¹⁵ Bernard Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, 4th ed., London 1965, pp. 151, 150.

Hobhouse protested that if 'our real will is the general will, and the general will is most fully embodied in the state', the result is total subservience to the government. Although an action may be both general and willed, it does not follow that there is any corresponding agent, in the form of a general will:

The life of society is not the product of coherent thinking by a single mind. On the contrary, many customs and institutions, which make up social life, have grown up in a detached, sporadic, unconscious, often unreasonable fashion.¹⁶

Even the rule of law is a process created from 'innumerable conflicts of innumerable wills . . . contrasting very clearly with the simple and crisp decisions of an individual mind'.¹⁷

In this exchange, the terms of the liberal critique of the state were established, later to be echoed by others for whom the embodiment of the Hegelian state was not Wilhelmine Germany but the Third Reich and the Soviet Union. But if the liberal rejection of the Hegelian theory of political agency sought to emphasize spontaneous order at the expense of the unified will, the conservative response to Hegel has been to try to preserve the integrity of the state from the contamination of civil society.¹⁸

According to Carl Schmitt, Hegel's legacy had been appropriated by liberalism, but the day Hitler came to power was the day the liberal Hegel died. Although the distinction had subsequently lost its clarity, Hegel had shown that 'the state is qualitatively distinct from society and higher than it'. The state presupposed not society, but 'the political', and since the 'political' is the capacity to decide between friend and enemy, the state is not an expression of society but 'an organized political entity that decides for itself the friend-enemy distinction'. As such it is inextricably linked to the ability to wage war, for 'The friend, enemy, and combat concepts receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing'.¹⁹

¹⁶ Hobhouse, *Metaphysical Theory*, pp. 43, 81.

¹⁷ *Metaphysical Theory*, p. 82.

¹⁸ See Domenico Losurdo, *La catastrofe della Germania e l'immagine di Hegel*, Milan 1987, pp. 105–49.

¹⁹ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, tr. G. Schwab, Chicago 1996, pp. 29–30, 33; see also Jean-François Kervégan, *Hegel, Carl Schmitt, le politique entre spéculation et positivité*, Paris 1992.

By providing an alternative ancestry for the state, Schmitt tried to cut away the ground from those who (quite correctly) invoked the positive role of civil society in the Hegelian theory. For Schmitt, the state was eroded by any confusion between the two: ‘The equation state = politics becomes erroneous and deceptive the moment when state and society penetrate each other.’ When this is allowed to happen, ‘the state turns into society . . . A politically united people becomes, on the one hand, a culturally interested public, and, on the other, partially an industrial concern and its employers, partially a mass of consumers’. Whereas political unity is founded on decisions about life and death, civil society only generates consumer interest groups—‘customers purchasing gas from the same utility company, or passengers travelling on the same bus’.²⁰

Associated, on the one hand, with the expansionist ambitions of the Second and Third Reichs, and, on the other, with the failings of the Weimar Republic, the Hegelian theory of the state never recovered. The double assault continues in the neo-liberal attack on the state and the neo-conservative attack on society, and is reflected in the polarization of the political and the social into the competing claims of either the general will or the general intellect—a dichotomy that is the direct result of the repudiation of the Hegelian attempt to work with both/and. This limits our ability to get a conceptual grasp of problems of agency, for separating the actions of the will from the workings of the invisible hand means that there is no framework within which to articulate problems derived from the complex interaction of both.

The enduring value of Hegel’s theory lies not, as its earlier proponents and critics both imagined, in its articulation of the totalizing power of the state, but in its innovative attempt to describe the state as a solution to the problems of political agency generated by social complexity. From this perspective, the contemporary crisis has a brutal clarity. The cycle of unintended effect and ineffectual intent is a coordination problem: a repeated failure fully to align the will with the workings of the invisible hand. There are clusters of shoppers unable to will the aggregated outcome of their own actions; and communities of bombers unable to acknowledge the arbitrariness of their own will. The fact that the same human agents are involved in both makes no difference. Instead

²⁰ Schmitt, *Concept*, pp. 22, 72, 57; see also Bull, ‘The Social and the Political’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 104, 2005, pp. 675–92.

of willing the rationality of the global market, the will is impeding its operation through reactive nationalisms. Improved co-ordination would instead infuse the global market with the will to violent enforcement and create a global market state. Or as Hegel’s critics might put it, target the bombing in alignment with the world’s shopping.

Put in these terms, the curious misalignments of contemporary global political agency become more explicable, and the limitations of their theoretical alternatives more apparent. If the logic of political agency can only be fully realized in a global market state, those wedded to the cosmopolitan idea of creating a global civil society short of a state are ignoring the decisive role of the will; but the prospect of a global state that ignores the invisible hand is equally unrealistic, for anyone who relies solely on the will is condemned to the unintended consequences of their own irrationality.

Is there then no alternative to the global market state which also allows for the agency of both the will and the invisible hand? Hegel does not describe one, but his account allows us to locate a route and a mechanism through which that alternative might be found, and to find the theoretical resources through which it might be articulated. It can be neither the general will nor the general intellect alone, nor any conjunction in which the general intellect becomes the general will; it can only be a process through which, as it were, the general will is transformed into the general intellect. For Hegel, the solution to the problem of political agency was to will the default; the alternative is to default on the will.

Entropic states

For Hegel, there is no anti-dialectic, and the State is ‘an absolute unmoved end in itself’.²¹ But, following Aristotle, he acknowledges that there is also a sense in which it is prior, and ‘reveals itself as the true ground’ of the family and civil society. He offers no account of this, though it is perhaps possible to locate a precedent in the dissolution of the family and passage to civil society. In the peaceful expansion of the family lies the origin of the particularity that inevitably destroys unity. For a family inevitably becomes a plurality of families each of which ‘conducts itself as a self-subsistent concrete person’ and so gives rise to the particularity

²¹ PR, §258.

that seeks its own satisfaction. Such particularity potentially dissolves not only the family, but any form of the state unable to accommodate it. So in antiquity, the development of particularity appeared as ‘an invasion of ethical corruption and as the ultimate cause of the world’s downfall’.²²

But can something analogous happen to a state that, unlike the states of antiquity, already to some degree unites universality and particularity? Can ‘the march of God in the world’ be reversed? In the Marxist tradition, at least, the answer to that question was always unambiguously, but obscurely positive. As Engels famously put it:

The state was the official representative of society as a whole, its concentration in a visible corporation. But it was this only insofar as it was the state of that class which alone in its epoch represented society as a whole . . . When the state finally becomes truly the representative of society as a whole, it makes itself superfluous . . . The government of the persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the direction of the processes of production. The state is not ‘abolished’. *It withers away*.²³

Commenting on this passage in *The State and Revolution*, Lenin noted that the phrase ‘wither away’ indicated ‘both the gradualness of the process and its spontaneous nature’, but emphasized that this could only mean that the state would wither away after the revolution.²⁴ A dictatorship of the proletariat would then take the place of the bourgeois state, and it would be this state, the proletarian state, that would gradually disappear in the higher phase of communism as the free exchange of services replaced bourgeois right.

As Lenin emphasizes, the withering away of the state takes place spontaneously, through the working of something like an invisible hand. But this is not the invisible hand of the market which ensures that when each seek their own satisfaction they supply the needs of others. Within civil society an invisible hand transforms particularity into universality; in the withering away of the state it transforms universality into particularity. The former co-ordinates desires, the latter disperses coercion. No invisible hand is required to satisfy needs in the higher phase of a communist society, for these are met by the free exchange of services; here

²² PR, §181, 185.

²³ Engels quoted in Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, tr. R. Service, London 1992, p. 16.

²⁴ *State and Revolution*, p. 80.

an invisible hand is needed to disarm the state and restore to individuals power over themselves and each other.

The logic of this process is simple. The state is ‘a special coercive force’, and since, as Marx had pointed out, the unity on which the Hegelian state depended represented the rationality of a particular class, the state was nothing but ‘a machine for the suppression of one class by another’. When, following the revolution, the dictatorship of the proletariat has suppressed all other classes, there is only one class, and so the need for the ‘special coercive force’ provided by the state simply disappears. In the case of the family, expansion had undermined the unity needed to sustain it; in the case of the state, the expansion of the universal class dissolves the difference needed for the state to maintain its identity.

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci describes this process in explicitly Hegelian terms as the state’s transformation into civil society:

It is possible to imagine the coercive element of the state withering away by degrees, as ever more conscious elements of regulated society (or ethical State or civil society) make their appearance . . . In the doctrine of the state becoming regulated society, between a phase in which ‘State’ will be equal to ‘government’, and one in which ‘State’ will be identified with ‘civil society’, we will have to pass through a phase of the night-watchman State—i.e. of a coercive organization which will safeguard the development of the continually proliferated elements of regulated society, and which will therefore progressively reduce its own authoritarian and forcible interventions.²⁵

However, Gramsci’s version of the withering away of the state no longer presupposes the revolution: the dictatorship of the proletariat is still the night-watchman state, but this is now expressed through the hegemony of the party, which ‘has “*de facto* power”, and exercises the hegemonic function . . . of holding the balance between the various interests on “civil society”’. On this basis, it may not be possible to recreate a traditional type of State and constitutional law, but it is possible to inculcate the will to conform and with it the transition from coercion to consent which ensures that ‘the State’s goal is its own end, its own disappearance, in other words the re-absorption of political society into civil society’.²⁶

²⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, tr. Q. Hoare, London 1971, p. 263.

²⁶ *Prison Notebooks*, p. 253.

For Hegel, civil society was an economic sphere created from the dissolution of the family; for Gramsci, it is also the state disarmed.

Pluralism

Gramsci's dream of the reabsorption of the state into civil society was not merely a gloss on the pronouncements of Engels and Lenin, it was an articulation of a fantasy widely shared in early twentieth-century Europe. To theorists of many political orientations it appeared that the state was an institution destined to disappear as the administrative capacities of civil society expanded. In England, Ernest Barker spoke of the 'discredited state', and in France Edouard Berth proclaimed the state to be dead or dying.²⁷

For Schmitt this prospect was a nightmare. The transition from state to society could not be expressed in the gentle imagery of etiolation and reabsorption; it was part massacre, part cannibal feast. The state is the mythical Leviathan, torn apart by the horns of Behemoth. As the flesh of Leviathan was devoured by the Jews, who 'eat the flesh of the slaughtered peoples and are sustained by it', so 'political parties slaughter the mighty Leviathan, and each cuts from its corpse a piece of flesh for itself'.²⁸ The organizations of civil society are 'used like knives . . . to cut up the Leviathan and divide his flesh amongst themselves'.²⁹

Schmitt's target, here bizarrely represented by the Jews, is French syndicalism and English pluralism. Syndicalist writers like Maxime Leroy imagined the transition from the government of persons to the administration of things taking place through civil contracts: 'If there is contract, public power is dissolved within the personality of civil society; if there is civil society, there is no longer obedience, nor hierarchy, but collaboration, management, commerce'.³⁰ In contrast, the English writer, J.N. Figgis emphasized that in pluralism the state is composed, not of

²⁷ See Cécile Laborde, *Pluralist Thought and the State in Britain and France, 1900–25*, Basingstoke 2000, and David Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State*, Cambridge 1997.

²⁸ Carl Schmitt, 'Ethic of State and Pluralist State' in Chantal Mouffe, *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, London 1999, pp. 195–6.

²⁹ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, tr. G. Schwab, Westport 1996, p. 74.

³⁰ Maxime Leroy quoted in Laborde, *Pluralist Thought*, p.32.

'a sand-heap of individuals, all equal and undifferentiated, unrelated except to the State, but an ascending hierarchy of groups, family, school, town, country, union, Church, etc.'³¹ Whereas the syndicalists thought primarily in terms of occupational groups, Figgis's model was always the church. But they too would have endorsed Figgis's claim that 'The battle of freedom in this century is the battle of small societies to maintain their inherent life as against the all-devouring Leviathan of the whole'.³²

If that battle were won, the state would be reabsorbed by the associations of which it was composed. These are stable social entities (as Figgis emphasized, the church was not 'a fortuitous concourse of ecclesiastical atoms'), and so their identity would reflect the pre-existing make-up of civil society. In Hegel's case this would have meant the reabsorption of the state by corporations (by which he chiefly meant guilds or professions), for it was through the corporation that the invisible hand works to ensure that 'a selfish purpose, directed towards its particular self-interest, apprehends and evinces itself at the same time as the universal', and it is through them that 'the sphere of civil society passes over into the state'.³³

In contrast, Gramsci, like Figgis, considered the church the archetype of civil society, and occupational groups only one amongst the host of entities that made it up. But in Gramsci's case, unlike that of the pluralists and syndicalists, the withering away of the state does not merely restore the autonomy of civil society, it also transforms it.

Serialization

For Hegel, the state was 'an organization each of whose members is itself a group . . . and hence no one of its moments should appear as an unorganized aggregate'.³⁴ But were the anti-dialectic to go through (or bypass) the corporation and return to the most basic level of civil society, it would arrive not at the state of nature, but at the Many. Without organization, Hegel saw the Many as 'nothing but a heap, an aggregate of atomic units', Figgis's 'sand-heap of individuals', all 'somewhat connected . . . but connected only as an aggregate, a formless mass'.³⁵

³¹ J. N. Figgis quoted in Laborde, *Pluralist Thought*, p. 47.

³² J. N. Figgis, *Antichrist, and other Sermons*, London 1913, p. 266.

³³ PR, §251, 256.

³⁴ PR, §303.

³⁵ PR, §290A and 303.

It is this possibility that Sartre systemizes in hallucinatory detail in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. For him, too, ‘the basic type of sociality’ is the collective, the ‘inert gathering with its structure of seriality’, which he equates with Hegel’s ‘atomized crowd’.³⁶ His most famous example is the bus queue where, despite having the appearance of a social group, everyone is isolated from everyone else and linked only through their alienation, which is what constitutes them in their mutual isolation.

But unlike Schmitt, who also used the example of bus passengers, Sartre emphasizes that an inert gathering like this can be transformed in an instant, ‘by the flash of a common *praxis*’, when it recognizes its common interest.³⁷ The origin of this ‘totalization’, as Sartre calls it, is ‘individual freedom conceived as the will of all’.³⁸ Individuals fleeing from a common enemy realize that ‘it is neither Others, nor a few individuals, who flee: instead, flight, conceived as a common *praxis* reacting to a common threat, *becomes flight* as an active totality’. Everyone reacts in a new way: ‘not as an individual, nor as an Other, but as an individual incarnation of the common person’.³⁹

However, this totalization is simultaneously the beginning of detotalization, a play of dialectic and anti-dialectic in which ‘groups are born of series and . . . end up serializing themselves in their turn’.⁴⁰ Seeking to preserve itself when there is no longer a common enemy and its spontaneous unity begins to dissolve, a group-in-fusion may take a sequence of measures designed to maintain its unity and so perpetuate its own existence. But these only constitute the route back to seriality. The actions taken at each stage to remedy dissolution are actually those that produce it, and ‘the group—whose origin and end reside in an effort by the individuals who are gathered together to dissolve seriality in themselves—will, in the course of its struggle, actually reproduce alterity in itself and freeze into the inorganic’.⁴¹ The entire process of

detotalization is an example of what Sartre calls ‘counterfinality’, or, as others have termed it, ‘the invisible backhand’, in which the unintended consequence of aggregated action is a state of affairs not only unforeseen, but undesired by its agents.⁴²

According to Sartre, this process can be traced in the course of the French Revolution, from the Storming of the Bastille (the *praxis* of a fused group) to the Convention (the institution). But although the *Critique* may be cast as a meditation on the failure of revolution, it also provides an algorithm for the entropy of the state. Indeed, Sartre explicitly equates the process with the communist vision of ‘the gradual withering-away of the State in favour of broader and broader re-groupments of other-directed serialities’, acknowledging that in this context the dictatorship of the proletariat is just a ‘compromise between the active, sovereign group and passive seriality’.⁴³ Although he rejected the Hegelian account of the formation of the state, and refused any easy equation of the group-in-fusion with it, Sartre offers another way of combining unity of the will and the invisible hand. In Hegel, an invisible hand creates the unity of the will; in Sartre it undoes it.

Dissipative structures

Gramsci’s talk of reabsorption, Schmitt’s febrile fantasies of associations gathering round to dismember the state, and Sartre’s account of serialization are all potentially descriptions of the transition from state to society. We use these strange metaphors partly because the transition itself remains largely within the imaginary, partly because the western tradition seems to lack an adequate vocabulary for ontological failure. The best way to co-ordinate them is perhaps to think of them as measures of the entropy of the state, for this allows the differences between them to be quantified more easily.

³⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, tr. A. Sheridan-Smith, London 2004, pp. 348, 284–5; hereafter CDR.

³⁷ CDR, p. 349.

³⁸ CDR, p. 634.

³⁹ CDR, pp. 370, 357.

⁴⁰ CDR, p. 65.

⁴¹ CDR, p. 591. The process can be tracked through the shifting role of what Sartre calls ‘the third’ (the third party, or object, whose presence unifies the group). When merely a gathering, like the bus queue, ‘the third party is submerged in seriality, being structured *a priori* as the Other, and therefore as Other than everyone and Other than us’, p. 366. In the group-in-fusion, the third party is interiorized within

the group as each becomes a third to the reciprocities of the others, but ‘the counterpart of the integration of each third party into the group is . . . reciprocal exile’ (p. 585), for in regulating the reciprocities of others each is constituted as a ‘quasi-sovereign’, an excluded third party. The entropy of the group is a function of the increasing alterity of ‘the third’.

⁴² See G. Brennan and P. Pettit, ‘Hands Invisible and Intangible’, *Synthese* 94, 1993, pp. 191–225.

⁴³ CDR, p. 662.

Statistical measures of entropy work off some variant of Boltzmann's elegant thought experiment which demonstrated that the relationship between order and disorder might be measured in terms of the number of different ways a given distribution could be achieved. Suppose that a box is divided into two compartments and eight particles are distributed between the two. An unequal distribution will have fewer possible arrangements (there is only one way to have all eight particles on one side, eight ways to have one particle on one side and seven in the other), whereas an equal distribution will have many more (seventy, in fact). An unequal distribution is therefore relatively speaking ordered (but improbable), while an equal distribution disordered (but probable). If the number of compartments and/or the number of particles were increased, the number of possible distributions would increase and the number of arrangements would grow still further.

The state might easily be viewed in the same terms, for it is easy to see how the traditional forms of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy represent an increasingly probable but disordered series. So too the relationship of state and society: the traditional state form has only one compartment; the pluralist state has several, and the atomized heap has as many as there are people. Putting the two together, the distribution with the highest degree of order is the monarchical state which has only one source of power and only allows one person to exercise it, while the maximum of disorder is a democratic serialization in which everyone is both different from everyone else and interchangeable with them; somewhere between the two would be an aristocratic pluralism.

Seen in these terms, the formation of the Hegelian state represents an increasing degree of order, while its reabsorption by civil society, whether conceived in terms of some form of pluralism or as total atomization, is an increasing degree of disorder (more so in the latter case). However, the progress of Hegel's dialectic is not unilinear, and an anti-dialectic would not be either. The particularity that breaks up the family is for Hegel also the source of the rational unity of civil society: increasing disorder (the emergence of particularity from the unity of the family) also produces new forms of order (the emergent properties of the market). The invisible backhand that destroys the family and the invisible hand that creates the market are actually one.

Translated into the language of complexity theory, this is an example of a 'dissipative structure'—a form of order that unexpectedly emerges as disorder increases.⁴⁴ Were the equivalent to happen in the entropy of the state, the resulting dissipative structures would appear as unintended forms of social order. Whereas serialization and pluralism imply that the state is either reduced to a heap, or else consumed by pre-existing social formations, this model opens up a third possibility between atomization and absorption. Atomization need not be simply entropic; it may also be the source of social forms generated by the process of entropy itself. In Sartre, detotalization returns the group to the point at which the dialectic can begin again; on this model, groups are formed through the process of detotalization. Or to put it another way, pluralism becomes an emergent property of serialization, and social groups (perhaps even churches) are formed through what Figgis called the 'fortuitous concourse of atoms'. What we have is nothing less than an alternative route to a fully developed civil society, in which civil society is an emergent property of increasing entropy rather than an emergent property of increasing order.

Is it necessary for that order to be the same as that of civil society prior to the formation state? No, for it is merely the mechanism that is the same, not the route, and there is no reason to assume that one set of emergent properties will be like another. In this case, it seems unlikely that the invisible hand that creates civil society and the invisible hand that recreates civil society from the remains of the state will produce similar results. Apart from anything else, they are working on different materials: one with the atomized crowd, the other with the unified state. In the former case, it is the decisions of countless individuals that produce unforeseen results, in the latter, the actions of the state itself. Even if, as Hegel argued, the state embodies the rationality of the market, the rationalization of the state will not necessarily generate the market in its place.

A global failed state

In these hypothetical dissolutions of the Hegelian state can be discerned the proto-narratives of contemporary geopolitical analysis. Schmitt,

⁴⁴ See I. Prigogine and I. Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos*, London 1984. The standard example is the Bénard cell—an hexagonal convection cell that appears at a certain point when a vertical temperature gradient is applied to a horizontal liquid layer.

whose early work responded to the pluralist discourse on the decline of the state, and whose later work prefigures the ‘clash of civilizations’, provides a bridge between the two. In *The Concept of the Political*, he argued that ‘A world state which embraces the entire globe and all of humanity cannot exist . . . What remains is neither politics nor state, but culture, civilization, economics, morality, law, art, entertainment, etc’.⁴⁵ Because a world state could not, by definition, be based on the political friend–enemy distinction, it would not be a state but a global civil society.

After the Second World War, Schmitt foresaw the possibility that the situation he had described might come into being. Supposing that one of the two sides in the Cold War might be victorious, there would then be ‘an ultimate complete unity of the world’ in which ‘the victor would be the world’s sole sovereign’.⁴⁶ Paradoxically, Schmitt, who had feared that Leviathan would be cut into pieces in a pluralist state, now invoked ‘the great antithesis of world politics, namely the antithesis of a centrally ruled world and a balanced spatial order, of universalism and particularism, monopoly and polypoly’.⁴⁷ But whereas in the former case the state was one and civil society multiple, in the latter society is one and states are many. The alternative to the ‘global spatial unity of one world order’ could only be ‘a plurality of *Großräume*’—spaces larger than a nation state, each dominated by an individual hegemon.

The thesis advanced in Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* is essentially the same. Given that a unipolar world cannot be sustained, the best way to avoid the anarchy of a global civil society is through division. Huntington therefore presents a picture of a world ‘divided between a Western one and a non-Western many’ moving from unipolar Western dominance to multipolarity. As the West’s primacy erodes, ‘much of its power will simply evaporate and the rest will be diffused on a regional basis among the several major civilizations’.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Schmitt, *Concept*, p. 53.

⁴⁶ Carl Schmitt, ‘The New Nomos of the Earth’ in *The Nomos of the Earth*, tr. G.L. Ulmen, New York, 2003, p. 354; see also the essays in the special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* 104:2 (2005).

⁴⁷ Schmitt, *The Nomos*, p. 247.

⁴⁸ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, London 1996, p. 82.

Though not articulated in terms of a relationship between state and civil society, Huntington’s model is conceived in terms that could be those of early-twentieth century pluralists, save that they now have a global dimension. A global state produced through the economic, military and territorial dominance of the West is now breaking up, leaving the West as one civilization amongst many—rather as the pluralists and syndicalists hoped the state might be reduced to one association amongst many. Schmitt maintained that any social conflict can become political, and in Huntington’s account it is—differences between civilizations that are heightened to the point at which they become conflictual.

Huntington’s thesis was directed against accounts of post-Cold War politics that saw ‘the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government’. In Fukuyama’s *The End of History*, for example, there are no more ideological conflicts, no more ‘barbarians at the gates’. The irresistible spread of democracy, economic liberalism and technological innovation ensures that in the resulting ‘universal and homogenous state’ post-historical human beings are free of all shared identities and struggle only with the vices of individualism.⁴⁹

However, as Kojève had acknowledged, the ‘universal and homogeneous state’ is an oxymoron. Recognizing the homology between Schmitt’s argument about a global state and the Leninist argument about the universal class, Kojève’s definition of a state incorporated both. For a state to exist, it must operate with both the external distinction between friend–enemy, and an internal division between governor and governed. A state that is universal lacks the first, while one that is homogeneous lacks the second: ‘The universal and homogeneous State . . . is therefore neither a State nor a particular entity in general’.⁵⁰ It is, in effect, civil society in atomized form. The ‘end of history’ is global serialization.

⁴⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, London 1992.

⁵⁰ Alexandre Kojève, *Outline of a Phenomenology of Right*, tr. B-P. Frost and R. Howse, Lanham, MD 2000, p. 324 and p. 141, n. 28. Like Sartre, Kojève expresses this in terms of a relationship of thirds. In the universal and homogeneous state the third, who decides disputes between two parties, can be anyone at all: he or she does not have to belong to one state as opposed to another, nor to an exclusive group. So each is both sovereign to all (like Sartre’s group-in-fusion) and impartial and disinterested, i.e. other to every other (like Sartre’s series).

The difference between the ‘end of history’ and the ‘clash of civilizations’ is therefore less fundamental than many imagine. They diverge not in the analysis itself—the shared premise is the inevitable collapse of a global state into global civil society—but in the evaluation of the outcome: one sees global civil society as a sustainable option, the latter looks to its sub-political social divisions to regenerate a multipolar states system based not on nations but on larger civilizational blocs.

Reading analyses of the post-1989 global order in light of the early twentieth-century literature on the demise of the state reveals the former to be global variations on the themes of the latter. The convergence of these theories suggests that the master narrative of contemporary geopolitics is not, as some imagine, the move towards global sovereignty or the progress of global civil society as a step toward it. Rather it is the development of global society in place of universal coercion: the reabsorption of a global state by civil society.

The obvious contemporary focus for the process is the decline of American hegemony, still in its relatively early stages. But it is possible to see this as the final part of a longer, more complex process, a single transition of world historical importance: a global decolonization, its constituent phases so geographically various, and its political ideologies so distinct as to disguise the underlying continuity. That narrative is the decline of Western dominance from its peak in the early twentieth century. It has three distinct phases: the end of European empires, the fall of the Soviet Union and the waning of American hegemony. Each empire sought legitimacy in the demise of its predecessor, emphasizing the differences between them and concealing the extent to which all were aspects of the same thing—the three-headed monster of Western imperialism, a global state in all but name.

This is a sequence perhaps rather more obvious to the colonized than the colonizers. In many places hegemony was contested, and in some cases the passage from the first to the third phase occurred without the decisive intervention of the second, for the soft power of the Soviet Union extended more widely than its armies. Nevertheless, for the centenarians of Eastern Europe, the Middle East, many countries in Africa, perhaps India, and certainly Afghanistan, this will be a very recognizable history. In each case the failure has been a failure of will, the transition often surprisingly peaceful (though none so gracious as the dissolution of the

Soviet bloc) and the result a diffusion of sovereignty, partly inherited by successor states, partly dispersed, and partly reconfigured within new non- or interstate social networks.⁵¹

The constituent elements in the emerging global civil society might include civilizations, intergovernmental networks, NGOs, churches, international corporations, academic networks, drug cartels, al-Qaeda.⁵² These are diverse groups, but this analysis permits a taxonomy more nuanced than most, for it is able to differentiate those elements of civil society produced by the withering away of the global state from those produced by the global market, dissipative structures from products of the arbitrary will, re-atomized heaps from those newly created from the breakdown of patriarchal societies.⁵³

From such an analysis the salient features of the contemporary landscape may emerge in an unaccustomed light. Rather than being the building blocks of global politics, civilizations are perhaps the dissipative structures of the entropic global state. (As Huntington admits, ‘The forces of integration in the world are real and are precisely what are generating counterforces of cultural assertion and civilizational consciousness.’) The European Union, often implicitly viewed in terms of the Hegelian dialectic as a civil society gradually creating the unity that will allow it to be willed into statehood, may also prove to be a dissipative structure of the entropy of the global state, its growing importance an unintended consequence of the decline of first colonial, then Soviet and now American power.

If so, its relations with the United States may become increasingly conflictual. Another corollary of this analysis is that the seemingly quixotic ‘war against terror’ is in fact just as central to the contemporary world as its advocates claim. Any ‘war against terror’ is by definition not a war

⁵¹ For an account of the demise of the Soviet Union through the unintended consequences of state action, see Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970–2000*, New York 2000.

⁵² Anne-Marie Slaughter’s account of the development of intergovernmental networks as part of a ‘disaggregated world order’ is particularly suggestive in this regard, see *A New World Order*, Princeton 2004.

⁵³ On global civil society see John Keane, *Global Civil Society?*, Cambridge 2003; Mary Kaldor, *Global Civil Society: an Answer to War*, Cambridge 2003; and Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani, eds, *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, Cambridge 2001.

between states, but a war of the state against civil society. But this is not a war against the pre-existing structures of civil society that underlie the global state. The ‘long war’ is being fought by the global state against the dissipative structures generated by its own entropy. In which case, it may not just last forever, it may also have been going on for a lot longer than anyone suspected.

In one respect, however, this analysis rehearses conventional wisdom, for it confirms the United States as the central actor in the drama of contemporary history. On a global stage, the declining hegemon performs the role that Gramsci assigned to the dictatorship of the proletariat: the self-annihilating night-watchman state.

Barbarism and Socialism

To the contemporary crisis of political agency, Hegel’s theory of the state offers both an explanation (in terms of the inadequacy of any one form of agency) and two possible resolutions: it excludes the non-dialectical options of a global market society or global non-market state, and reduces the viable options to a global market state and a global, potentially non-market society. A global civil society might be willed into a global market state, or else a global state might, through the workings of the invisible hand, collapse into some form of global civil society. The former is the natural expression of the Hegelian dialectic transposed to a global context; the latter has the form of Gramsci’s appropriation of the anti-dialectic.

This account relies on the workings of the invisible hand, but goes against the grain of liberal political theory. It does not start from the beginning; it insists on the need for a theory that is historically located, and it offers an account of the destruction rather than the creation of the state. Marxism acted as a corrective to liberalism in these respects, yet on this analysis, the disappearance of states founded on Marxism is an integral part of the failure of the global state. Invisible-hand explanations are usually preferred by those whom the tide of history appears to favour, while the defeated have to rely on the unity of the will. Here, the invisible hand invests the failure of utopia with the utopian promise of the failed state.

Glossing Engels, Rosa Luxemburg argued that: ‘society faces a dilemma, either an advance to socialism or a reversion to barbarism’; either ‘rebirth through social revolution’ or else ‘dissolution and decline into capitalist anarchy’.⁵⁴ The antithesis may be misleading. On this analysis, the latter may constitute the only route to the former, for the disorder of civil society is not merely statistical. In descriptions of this environment, there is a remarkable rhetorical convergence. For Hegel, it is ‘a formless mass whose commotion and activity could therefore only be elementary, irrational, barbarous, and frightful’; for Sartre a ‘place of violence, darkness, and witchcraft’; Luxemburg imagines it as ‘shamed, dishonoured, wading in blood . . . a roaring beast . . . an orgy of anarchy’.⁵⁵

The dissipative structures of the anti-dialectic appear as islands in this sea of disorder: oases of calm in places of violence: moments when the beast pauses for breath, periods of lassitude in the orgy.

⁵⁴ Rosa Luxemburg, ‘The Junius Pamphlet’ in M-A. Waters ed., *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, New York 1970, p. 269, and Rosa Luxemburg, *Selected Political Writings*, London 1972, p. 269.

⁵⁵ PR, §303; CDR, p. 319; Luxemburg, ‘Junius Pamphlet’, p. 262.