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Hegel's Civil Society

Books of Hegel: Philosophy of Right, Phenomenology of Spirit.

Civil society is the realm of economics and economic relationships, "the system of needs"; of the law and the "administration of justice"; and of the "police and the corporation."

According to Hegel civil society contains institutions that are essential for the full development of freedom by individuals. Man liberates himself from the domination of the natural especially in the "system of needs" of civil society: in work, it means the satisfaction of needs.

With the creation of a material culture man acquires the potential for superseding natural desires with new needs. By checking natural desire and creating a social world, work liberates man from his natural being.

In this system, the individual must produce for others in order that he may consume. Thus, he produces universally-for the "general stock" as Adam Smith would say the wealth of the nation. At the same time, he must also produce for his particular customers.

Producing for and consuming from the general stock in civil society result in the building up of culture; social organizations, machinery, indeed all aspects of the system of needs are the creation of working human beings, constructing their own world in interaction with each other, to develop and satisfy their needs.

The System of Needs

This dimension of civil society involves the pursuit of need satisfaction. Humans are different from animals in their ability to multiply needs which leads to their refinement and luxury.

Work is the mode of acquisition of the means for satisfying needs. Furthermore, labor undergoes a division according to the complexities of the system of production, which is reflected in social class divisions: the agricultural (substantial or immediate); the business (reflecting or formal); and the civil servants (universal). Membership in a class is important for gaining status and recognition in a civil society.

The “substantial” agricultural class is based upon family relationships whose capital is in the products of nature, such as the land. In contrast to this focus on “immediacy,” the business class is oriented toward work e.g., in transforming raw materials for use and exchange, which is a form of mediation of humans to one another. The main activities of the business class are craftsmanship, manufacture, and trade. The third class is the class of civil servants, which Hegel calls the “universal class” because it has the universal interests of society as its concern. Members of this class are relieved from having to labor to support themselves and maintain their livelihood either from private resources such as inheritance or are paid a salary by the state as members of the bureaucracy.

These individuals tend to be highly educated and must qualify for appointment to government positions on the basis of merit. They are not a caste nor able to buy or hold their offices like property, but are chosen according to talent and education. They are able to get information and ideas from an articulate and articulated civil society, and are able through the administration of justice and the public authority effectively to guide an active civil society to the ethical and universal.

(B) Administration of Justice

Through a rational legal system, private property and personality are given legal recognition and validity in civil society. In addition to detailing its objective workings, Hegel insists that the judicial system be understandable and understood by citizens so that they can consent to the laws and comprehend the universality of the laws. Thus, for instance, in court proceedings must be public and jury trials available.

Moreover, court proceedings and legal processes must take place according to rights and rules of evidence; judicial proceedings as well as the laws themselves must be made public; trial should be by jury; and punishment should fit the crime.

(C) The Police and the Corporation

The Police for Hegel is understood broadly as the public authorities in civil society. In addition to crime fighting organizations, it includes agencies that provide oversight over public utilities as well as regulation of and, when necessary, intervention into activities related to the production, distribution, and sale of goods and services, or with any of the contingencies that can affect the rights and welfare of individuals and society generally. Also, the public authority superintends education and organizes the relief of poverty. Poverty must be addressed both through private charity and public assistance since in civil society but poverty remains a problem with no apparent solution.

The corporation applies especially to the business class. This is not the same as our contemporary business corporation but rather is a voluntary association of persons based on occupational or various social interests (such as professional and trade guilds, educational clubs, religious societies, townships, etc.) Hegel says that a Corporation has the right, under the surveillance of the public authority, (a) to look after its own interests within its own sphere, (b) to co-opt members, qualified objectively by requisite skill (c) to provide the education requisite to fit other to become members.

Corporations minimize material insecurity by assuring livelihoods. They also provide psychological security, because recognition follows corporation membership. Hegel states that the reflection, intelligence, and consciousness of civil society are most highly developed in the "business class."

Hegel states that throughout the system of needs and in the corporations, as well as in class membership particular men find activities and institutions through which they become socially conscious and constructive, that encourage them to develop themselves in the full range of their activities. Recognition takes place throughout civil society. All the processes of individuation in work produce recognition. Especially the corporation extends and secures a recognition of the individual as a productive, valuable, and universal member of civil society. Through participation and individuation in civil society, man is recognized by others and by himself so that he has social respect and an idea of his own definition and value.

Conclusion

The right of satisfaction also requires that civil society be a rational order, that is, that it contain institutions that make possible the attaining of satisfaction. Hegel tries to secure the right of satisfaction in civil society by assuring that its institutions in them generally aid the development and satisfaction of needs and allow individuals to feel "at home" in the world. Hegel is concerned for the satisfaction of all, not just a few. As against liberalism, Hegel insists on the satisfaction of all as a right, not just a pursuit. Civil society provides one of the major means for the actualization of the right of satisfaction:

Through their activities in civil society, men develop and gain the characteristics that make them good citizens of a good state.

However the Hegelian civil society also has a number of difficulties beyond these costs. Day labourers, while having class membership, are not fully integrated into civil society since they can- not be corporation members. Mechanization generally also threatens the liberating and cultivating aspects of work.

Though Hegel states that mechanization not only threatens the ethical aspects of work of some but also helps towards the satisfaction of needs and the creation of new needs, as well as binding individuals together in a tight interdependence.

Civil society hence is the locus for much of "man's work," activity, and also conflict. But the conflict produces losers, and in modern civil society they are the proletariat.

Civil society hence is a necessary and essential contribution to freedom because of its role in the liberation, individuation, and satisfaction of the individual and its importance to the state and ethical life. And for Hegel civil society is the only possible way to attain that freedom on a society-wide scale because of the intimate relation he sees among freedom, property, and civil society.