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Hegel, America, and the Crisis of the *Sittlichkeit*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contemporary comprehensive crisis of legitimacy in the United States as a collapse of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), the historically constituted unity between individual will and the objective institutions that structure social existence. It begins by tracing Hegel's critique of Kant's moral formalism (*Moralität*), showing that freedom must be grounded not in abstract autonomy but in the rational institutions through which individuals recognize themselves in society. Following Hegel and scholars such as Terry Pinkard, Charles Taylor, Robert Pippin, Michael Lazarus, Karen Ng, and Slavoj Žižek, the paper argues that ethical life is *actual* when individuals experience their belief, purpose, and actions as continuous with the shared ideals and practices of the community. When this alignment fractures – when institutions are no longer experienced as rational or authoritative – a crisis of ethical life emerges. Drawing from Hegel's account of *Sittlichkeit* and a Marxist critique of capitalist political economy, the paper contends that the United States is in the midst of such a crisis. What persists is not an actual ethical life organically grounded and necessary, but a hollowed-out structure experienced as arbitrary and artificial, sustained through mutual misrecognition rather than genuine belief. The result is widespread alienation, distrust, and disunity between people and dominant institutions. The paper concludes by arguing that the only path forward lies in constructing new institutions – *dual power* formations – grounded in collective freedom, mutual recognition, and human flourishing, which can serve as the basis for a renewed ethical life.

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Introduction

G.W.F. Hegel develops his understanding of ethics in a critical dialogue with Immanuel Kant, sustaining the role of autonomy, but situating it in a social-historical ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) that overcomes the empty and individualist formalism of Kant's moral theory (*Moralität*). For Hegel, freedom and rational agency are socially constituted and take shape through the objective institutions of the form of life one is situated in. In Hegel, ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) can be said to be present when the wills of individuals are in unity with the objective spirit of society, that is, when the ideals, beliefs, and actions of individuals align with those of society. When individuals accept as authoritative the reasons society provides for why things are the way they are, there could be said to be ethical life. In this paper, the transition from Kant's moral theory to Hegel's theory of ethical life is recounted to help us understand what conditions constitute the dissolution of ethical life. This paper will argue that the dissolution of ethical life takes the form of a crisis, of a split and disuniting of individuals from the dominant ideas and institutions of the forms of life they operate in. The crisis of ethical life is a crisis of legitimacy, a distrust that arises in individuals concerning the institutions that mediate their social existence. This paper concludes by exploring the ways in which the United States of America is currently in the midst of the collapse of its *Sittlichkeit*, an existence that, while devoid of actuality and reason, is sustained through the mutual misrecognition of individuals who continue to act in accordance with dominant institutions, not because they actually believe, but because they think others do.

From Kant's Moralitat to Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*

Hegel's conception of Ethical Life (*Sittlichkeit*) is developed as a critique to Immanuel Kant's conception of morality (*Moralität*). This is a project he embarks on quite early in his life, years prior to its more known treatment in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, especially sections V and VI of the chapter on Reason. Already in *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate* (1798) and in the *System of Ethical Life* (1802/3), Hegel would begin to tease out the problem in Kant's moral theory. Following the vein in which Kant would be critiqued by Goethe and Schiller, Hegel "criticized Kant for neglecting the public content of morality and trying to derive moral requirements solely from the formal criteria of the concept of duty, with no mention of a constantly variable public whole" (Rumyantseva, 2023). For Hegel, Kant's moral theory lacked an engagement with the social and historical foundations of morality, reducing it to a pure, abstract individual enterprise. In this, Kant was merely reflecting the prejudices of the individualism in bourgeois civil society (*bürgerliche Gessellshcaft*). Georg Lukács makes this argument in *The Young Hegel*: Hegel's "objection to Kant are based on what Hegel thinks of as Kant's tendency to freeze the various moments of modern bourgeois fragmentation, to turn them into absolutes and thus to perpetuate the contradictions in a primitive, rudimentary state in which they can no longer be superseded or transcended… Kant leaves the social contents of

ethics uninvestigated, he takes them as they are given without any historical critique, and attempts to deduce moral laws from the internal coherence of the content of the imperative" (Lukács, 1975, 150). From some of his earliest theoretical enterprises, Hegel would develop his ideas against the backdrop of Kant. This is especially true of his ethical theory.

In the third antinomy of his *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPR), Kant would formulate the contradiction between freedom and the laws of nature. The thesis held that holding on to a conception of causality that is reducible to the laws of nature is insufficient, that it is "necessary to assume that there is another kind of causality, viz., that of *freedom*" (Kant, 1996, 476-477; Broad, 1978, 270). Freedom would be the "power of beginning entirely spontaneously" a series "as regards [not time but] causality" (Kant, 1996, 477). The antithesis would argue that the law of nature itself implies that nothing could occur outside of it, and that if such a conception of the "lawless power of freedom" is held, "nature can scarcely be thought any more… [it would] thereby be rendered confused and incoherent" (Kant, 1996, 478). His resolution in the CPR posits that "freedom is shown to be possible in a certain sense, notwithstanding the universal determination within the world of phenomena" (Broad, 1978, 270). As Terry Pinkard writes, "the solution to the antinomy, as Kant was to later argue, was that, from a practical point of view, we must conceive of ourselves as noumenally free, but, from a theoretical point of view, we must be either agnostic on the question of freedom or deny outright its very possibility" (Pinkard, 2002, 43). The practical point of view, however, presupposes, according to Kant, the transcendental. As he argues, "the practical concept of freedom is based on the transcendental idea of freedom… the denial of the transcendental idea of freedom must… involve the elimination of all practical freedom" (Kant, 1933, 465). Kant's argument, as Chris Naticchia (1994) will state, is that the condition of freedom for the transcendental subject is rooted in the fact that, "since we lack epistemic access to transcendental objects, we cannot know that they do not possess ontological freedom. So, we must allow them the possibility of possessing it" (p. 400). "We simply had to live," Pinkard writes, "with the beliefs that we were both free (regarded from a practical standpoint) and not free (regarded from a theoretical standpoint)" (Pinkard, 2002, 43).

For Kant, the "negative sense of freedom" is free will, the ability to make a "rational choice between alternatives… [without being] determined by foreign causes" (Broad, 1978, 287). In any instance, we have the capacity to judge our action in light of the possible alternatives we may have taken to it. We act in accordance with maxims we implicitly or explicitly hold. It is the way we self-determine purposive activity. This negative sense of freedom implied a positive sense – the capacity of self-determination, i.e., the ability of reason to provide laws for us. As Terry Pinkard notes, "we must conceive of the laws that govern our actions as self-imposed laws, not laws ordained for us by anything from outside our own activities" (Pinkard, 2002, 46-7). Therefore, it is not simply the case that we can choose amongst alternative actions we could have taken in any predicament, providing ourselves with the basis for thinking about whether

the one we took was right or wrong, but, in addition, those actions are deliberated on in accordance with maxims, with moral laws we set for ourselves. This necessarily shifts the discourse on freedom from merely free will and toward autonomy. As Kant writes, "what else can freedom of the will be but autonomy, i.e., the property of the will to be a law to itself" (Kant, 2005, 65-6)? This is the great insight upon which Kant's moral theory, from his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) to his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and his *Metaphysics of Ethics* (1797) rests, namely, that we must consider ourselves to be noumenally free, autonomous rational subjects capable of establishing moral laws for ourselves. While there is definitely a plethora of factors that situate how we come to think about maxims, it is, in the last instance, the subject who decides what maxim to adopt. This sort of immanent, self-determining power does not lie in the physical world, but in what Kant called "transcendental freedom… freedom, namely, in that absolute sense in which speculative reason required it in its use of the concept of causality in order to escape the antinomy into which it inevitably falls, when in the chain of cause and effect it tries to think the unconditioned" (Kant, 1889, 87). "Without this freedom," Kant argues, "no moral law and no moral imputation are possible" (Kant, 1889, 190). On this basis Kant formulates the following question: are there any such practical laws (or, in other words, imperatives) which would bind us unconditionally, that is, which "determine the will simply as will… without considering what is attained by its causality" (Kant, 1889, 106)? These are, of course, the categorical imperatives. He formulates it as follows in his *Metaphysics of Morals*: "act as though the maxim of your action were to become, through your will, a universal law of nature" (Kant, 2005, 38). Whatever maxims we operate through, they should be in conformity with this very general moral law; we ought not to operate on the basis of maxims that, when reflected on, violate this categorical imperative. This categorical imperative is simultaneously something we freely adopt as subjects with transcendental freedom, but also something that imposes itself on us in the form of a duty. It is how we freely come to determine ourselves. This is the essence of autonomy.

While Hegel would be critical of the ahistorical and asocial aspects of Kant's moral theory, he would nonetheless recognize it as an important and necessary moment in the development of Spirit. As Charles Taylor writes, "Hegel sees the affirmation of a self-defining subject as a necessary stage" that has its "necessary culmination in the radical Kantian notion of autonomy" (Taylor, 1975, 369). For Hegel, "autonomy expresses the demands of Spirit to deduce its whole content out of itself, not to accept as binding anything which is merely taken up from outside (Taylor, 1975, 369). But, while the development of the notion of autonomy was important, in Kant, "moral autonomy [was] purchased at the price of vacuity" (Taylor, 1975, 371). For Hegel, Kant's moral theory is ultimately rooted in "empty formalism" and therefore "cannot generate a new substantive vision of the polity in which it would be realized" (Hegel, 1978, 90; Taylor, 1975, 372). Kant's political theory, in Hegel's view, ends up just restating the same conclusions of utilitarianism. For Hegel, as for Kant, you can deduce duty from the idea of freedom, but the

freedom Hegel speaks of is not the transcendental freedom of the subject, but freedom as "the sole truth of Spirit," the engine of world-history that has as its final cause "the consciousness of its own freedom… the reality of that freedom" and which recognizes that "society and the State are the very conditions in which Freedom is realized" (Hegel, 1956, 17, 19, 41). As Hegel writes in the *Philosophy of Right*, "an immanent and consistent 'doctrine of ideas' can be nothing except the serial exposition of the relationships which are necessitated by the Idea of freedom, and are therefore realized across their whole extent, that is, in the state… The state as a completed reality is the ethical whole and the actualization of freedom" (Hegel, 1978, 106, 279; Taylor, 1975, 375). For Hegel, then, not only was Kant's moral theory an empty formalism lacking historical and social content, but, precisely because of this, it was unable to provide any fundamental rethinking of the society in which this theory would be actualized. As Robert Pippen has noted, for Hegel the "self-relation" central to Kant's understanding of autonomy "cannot be understood apart from social relations; my relation to myself is mediated by my relation to others" (Pippen, 2008, 149). This is why, for Hegel, the question of mutual recognition is central for self-consciousness, hence his dictum about the "'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I'" (Hegel, 1977, 110). Kant's moral theory is lacking a social dimension of ethics as ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), of the moral duties the individual has to the community they are situated in, such that there is "no gap between what ought to be and what is, between *Sollen* and *Sein*" (Taylor, 1975, 376). The "emptiness of [Kant's notion] of moral good," therefore, "requires a supplementation through a doctrine of modern ethical life, *Sittlichkeit*… the insufficiencies of the very *individualistic* standpoint of 'morality' are resolved only within the very *social* standpoint of ethical life and the common projects that it provides for its participants" (Pinkard, 1996, 289, 294). As Taylor writes:

> Hegel's critique of Kant can then be put in this way: Kant identifies ethical obligation with *Moralität*, and cannot get beyond this. For he presents an abstract, formal notion of moral obligation, which holds of man as an individual, and which being defined in contrast to nature is in endless opposition to what is… it remained an ethic of the individual (*Moralität*)… Because it shied away from that larger life of which we are a part, it saw the right as forever opposed to the real; morality and nature are always at loggerheads" (Taylor, 1975, 376-7).[1]

While accepting the development brought about by Kant's notion of autonomy as reason's ability to provide laws for itself, in Hegel this framework gets socialized and historicized. It is at a certain moment in the development of world-spirit that reason can come to know this capacity. It occurs through the stages of the unfolding of world-spirit. Spirit, for Hegel, "is not

[1] Taylor writes in a footnote that the usage of *Moralität* is "Hegel's term of art; Kant himself used the word '*Sittlichkeit'* in his work on ethics" (Taylor, 1975, 376).

a thing external to the world, but the normative rationality emerging immanently through the practices and institutions of social life that enable us to understand ourselves as self-conscious beings and to recognize others: who in and through this intersubjective relation, see ourselves as self-conscious beings" (Lazarus, 2025, 133). As Hegel writes in his *Philosophy of History*: "in the history of the World, the *Individuals* we have to do with are Peoples" (Hegel, 1956, 14). It is the community which situates moral duty, and its realization takes the form of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*):

> This essential being is *the union of the subjective with the rational Will*: it is the moral Whole, the State, which is that form of reality in which the individual has and enjoys his freedom; but on the condition of his recognizing, believing in, and willing that which is common to the Whole (Hegel, 1956, 38).

It is in the community that we find ethical life. "The community" Taylor writes, "which is the locus of our fullest moral life is a state which comes close to a true embodiment of the Idea" (Taylor, 1975, 377). In a certain sense, then, we can argue that Hegel sublates Kant's moral theory, accepting the character of freedom qua self-legislation, but providing for it the social and historical dimension absent in Kant's empty formalism. Robert Pippen describes this transition succinctly in *Hegel's Practical Philosophy*, where he writes that "at the philosophical level, the status of such values (the theory of normativity that underlies the claim that they are values), is a self-legislative one although, contrary to Kant, this legislation is regarded by Hegel as collective, ongoing over time, and subject to periodic, basic breakdowns, moments when a normative crisis occurs and basic values begin to lose their grip on participants, requiring a re-orientation in communal norms (Pippen, 2008, 121). Hegel's notion of ethics, then, is a turn away from the methodological individualism of modern bourgeois philosophy. Hegel "preserves but overcomes modern subjectivism (as in Kant's moral philosophy), in part, by mobilizing the notion of collective freedom, the ethical life of the ancient polis, while resisting any romanticism towards its ideal" (Lazarus, 2025, 137). For Hegel, as Michael Lazarus (2025) explores in *Absolute Ethical Life*, the framing of ethics as *Sittlichkeit* situates him in a tradition that concerns itself with the collectively, socially, and politically integrated character of ethics – from Aristotle to Hegel to Marx, this tradition conceives of freedom, ethics, and the good life as "historically and socially embedded rational practice" (p. 13).[1] As Lazarus writes,

> Together Aristotle and Hegel locate ethical life in the socially recognizable forms of action related to the polity and chart the realization of human rationality, as a teleologically informed process, in political terms. What conceptually constitutes the good life in Aristotle's Athens bears a striking

[1] A similar argument is made in (Taylor, 1975, 378).

> resemblance to the social substance of Hegel's rational state. Both construe human flourishing in terms of practices that are socially validated and collectively shared (Lazarus, 2025, 29).

For Hegel, then, any discourse on moral theory and autonomy must be fundamentally located within a social and historical context. You cannot be free as an individual disconnected from community. Hegel would certainly share the sentiment expressed in Aristotle's *Politics*, that "anyone who cannot form a community with others, or who does not need to because he is self-sufficient, is no part of a city-state – he is either a beast or a god" (Aristotle, 1998, 1253a28). As Pippen writes, "a subject cannot be free alone… subjects cannot be free unless recognized by others in a certain way" (Pippen, 2008, 186). Freedom is always in community, not freedom from others. Freedom is achieved when we recognize the indispensability of the other for the constitution of the "I". Hegel writes that "personal individuality [*Einzelheit*] and its particular interests should reach their full development and the recognition [*Anerkennung*] of their right for itself (within the system of the family and civil society) and also that they should, on the one hand, pass over of their own accord into the interests of the universal, and on the other knowingly and willingly recognize [*annerkennen*] this universal interest even as their own substantial spirit, and actively pursue it as their ultimate end" (Hegel, 1991, 282). It is through mutual recognition and the institutions of ethical life that it occurs within that universality is possessed by individuals. As he writes, "universality, the quality of being recognized [*Anerkannstein*], is the moment which makes isolated and abstract needs, means, and modes of satisfaction into concrete, i.e., social ones" (Hegel, 1991, 229). "I do not suffer," Hegel writes, "when I recognize others, but rather I come to count as free… it is only when the "I" communes with itself in its otherness that the content is *comprehended*." (Hegel, 1981, 78-9; Hegel, 1977, 486).

The full realization of this process of recognition, and hence, the full realization of freedom and the Spirit, must occur through rational institutions. These institutions are the building blocks of ethical life. The institutions of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) are objective spirit, and, as Hegel writes, "it is only through being a member of the state that the individual himself has objectivity, truth, and ethical life" (Hegel, 1991, 276). Actuality or reason is this unity of the subjective and the objective (or rational) will. As Karen Ng writes in *Hegel's Concept of Life*, "self-determination… can only take place by reflecting the power of an objective universality or genus… rational, ethical institution[s]… which itself exist within the more encompassing objective universality of ethical life" (Ng, 2020, 240). It is through participation in institutions like the family, civil society, and, ultimately, the state, that recognition occurs. Not only are we participating in mutual recognition with others through these institutions, but, in conjunction with this, there is also a fundamental recognition of the demands of objective spirit. Through these institutions we obtain our binding duties to society, which in ethical life is fundamentally

united with how we understand ourselves, our aspirations, desires, ideals, etc. In ethical life the individual's will is aligned with the will of society, and this unity is actualized through the institutions of the state. It is through these institutions of ethical life that we obtain authoritative reasons for belief and action. This introduces, of course, a dialectical-historical conception of logos – the reasons we come to consider authoritative for believing or acting in some ways and not in others are rooted in the social-historical context we are embedded in. At the level of the subject, of course, this is experienced not as being handed down by the historical-social, but as a product of their own reflection. Today, for instance, many of the individuals who consider capitalism to be rooted in "human nature," take it to be an insight that they have achieved through their own process of rational cognition, not one that is rooted in the authoritative reasons the ethical life of society has provided to justify the existence of some things, and the non-existence of others. Nonetheless, for Hegel, how individuals provide authoritative reasons for their belief and actions is fundamentally rooted in how society performs that operation through its institutions. As Pinkard writes in *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*, for Hegel,

> the standards for what counts as authoritative reasons should be seen as the outcome of a process of a community's collectively coming to take certain types of claims as counting *for them* as authoritative, a process best understood in historical and institutional terms - that is, in terms of participation in social practices, not in terms of its being anchored in any kind of metaphysical relation between "subjects" and "objects" at all (Pinkard, 1996, 53).

A society with a strong ethical life is one in which individuals feel that their sense of purpose, desires, and ideals align with the objective institutions of the society they are a part of. [1] To translate Hegel's notion of ethical life to Marxist terms, *Sittlichkeit* is hegemony without the class character of hegemony. It is the alignment of all individuals in society – irrespective of class and other forms of social fragmentation – with the dominant ideals of society, sustained through a historical logos that provides authoritative reasons for such beliefs, practices, and institutions. As Hegel writes, "the person, as thinking intelligence, is aware of that substance as his own essence… his absolute final end in actuality… fulfils his duty as *his own* and as

[1] Andreja Novakovic writes, "The English translation of *Sittlichkeit* is especially apt because it captures Hegel's concern with the *vitality* of ethical life. So a question worth raising is what kinds of relations to ethical life sustain its vitality and ensure its longevity. Part of the answer is habit, for Hegel thinks that a form of life comes to life, so to speak, precisely when its ethical laws have 'struck root' in us, when they are incorporated into our second nature. But what we find is that habit can also usher in the death of ethical life. Hegel frequently characterizes a dead society in terms of 'positivity,' which suggests that its ethical laws have ossified and their adherents have grown indifferent to them, both of which seem to be potential side effects of successful habituation" (Novakovic, 2017, 16).

something that *is* and, in this necessity, he has himself and his actual freedom" (Hegel, 2010, 228). As in the notion of justice found in Plato's *Republic*, ethical life for Hegel consists in "a specifically modern sense of 'the way things are done'… the social practices and institutions of 'ethical life' are thus necessary for the realization of freedom, for agents to be able to know what they are doing, why they are doing it and to be able to rationally identify with the activities involved in those practices" (Pinkard, 1996, 294). It is the rational alignment of individual purpose with the roles we occupy in modern social life, with the collective purpose of society in general. As Taylor (1975) notes, the dialectical relationship of the individual and society under ethical life is like that of a "living being… The state or the community has a higher life; its parts are related as the parts of an organism. Thus, the individual is not serving an end separate from him, rather he is serving a larger goal which is the ground of his identity, for he only is the individual he is in this larger life. We have gone beyond the opposition of self-goal/other-goal" (p. 380). The norms and practices of the objective institutions of ethical life "are maintained only by ongoing human activity in conformity to them" (Taylor, 1975, 382). When such alignment between individuals and the social exists, when any sense of opposition between social determination/necessity and individual freedom is overcome, the ethical life of the state is intact – it is rational and actual, and doesn't just merely exist. As Ng (2020) writes, "whereas what merely exists has the essential form of contingency and exhibits, at best, an external relation between form and content, what is actual displays a necessary connection between form and content that makes it grounded and rational" (pp. 128-9). A state loses its actuality, its claim to reason – although, not necessarily its *existence*, when there exists this gap between the form and content, such that the relation is merely external. When individuals, for instance, continue to perform the practices of the institution, but no longer actually believe in them, then a state can be said to exist, but to not have actuality, to have lost its claim to rational ethical life.

America and the Crisis of *Sittlichkeit*

If ethical life is premised on the unity of the individual and collective will, on individuals in society accepting as authoritative the reasons society prescribes for belief and action, and finding these binding for themselves,[1] the dissolution of the *Sittlichkeit* implies a rupture of this unity, the inability for individuals to identify any longer with the reasons society prescribes for why things are the way they are. In Hegel's writings on ethics and politics he always explores how this dissolution occurred within the Greek *Sittlichkeit*, and how the transition from Greek tragedy to comedy depicted "the internal conflicts within a form of life itself" (as opposed, for instance, to the external conflict depicted in the epics) (Pinkard, 1996, 244). In Greek tragedy, "the characters who embody some basic aspect of the self-identity of a form of life, given who

[1] "The state which is fully rational will be one which expresses in its institutions and practices the most important ideas and norms which its citizens recognize, and by which they define their identity" (Taylor, 1975, 388).

they are, do what they have to do, and this action on their part necessarily leads them to some terrible end" (Pinkard, 1996, 245). It is here where we begin to see the crisis of sincere role enactment, where an individual ends up, because of the various social positions they occupy, having "incompatible demands" of duty, each contradicting the other (Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2021, 147). The classical form of the contradiction in Greek tragedy can be found in Sophocles' *Antigone*, where Antigone is torn between the duty she has as a sister to bury her brother, and the duty she has, as a subject of King Creon, to not give her brother – a traitor – a formal burial. Hegel teases out the objective character of this contradiction in Greek ethical life when he says that "both are in the wrong because they are one-sided, but both are also in the right" (Hegel, 1984, 665). In Greek tragedy, the contradictions and clashes between the characters are not external and accidental to the form of life – it is a manifestation of the tension within the form of life itself. It reflects the beginning rupture, or crisis, in the Greek *Sittlichkeit*.

In Greek comedy, which is the artistic moment in the dissolution of the Greek form of life following tragedy, the contradictions of ethical life become more manifest, there is no longer the hope of reconciliation on the horizon. Greek comedy finds its comfort zone in the depiction of the gap between the values and pretensions of the form of life and its reality. Greek comedy is the artistic product of a society in the full throes of a crisis of *Sittlichkeit*. As Pinkard writes, "the fundamental core of comedy is thus the gap between people's *pretensions* about who they are and who they *really* are, between what people *say* they are doing and what they *really* are doing" (Pinkard, 1996, 248). The crisis of ethical life is the moment in a society's trajectory where the citizens no longer feel at home in the dominant or ruling institutions. There is a sense of alienation and unhomeliness (*Unheimlichkeit*) that pervades the relationship of individuals to society.[1] Crisis is an important term to describe the dissolution of the *Sittlichkeit*.

Crisis, from its original Greek, *krísis*, refers to a turning point. Its root is *krinō*, which refers to a separation. A separation is a tearing apart of what was together. To speak of crisis, then, is to speak about a lost connection. It is to speak about disconnection, about alienation. A crisis is the making foreign of something that is integral to its other (Garrido, 2025, 1).

[1] There is already a sense in which Hegel understood that, in bourgeois society (*bürgerliche Gessellshcaft*) you cannot have absolute ethical life, but merely a relative ethical life – a distinction he makes in his earliest writings on politics and ethics. The work of Gillain Rose (2009) and Michael Lazarus (2025) teases out the ways in which, for Hegel, the private sphere of civil society and the bourgeois market is in contradiction with the aims of absolute ethical life. As Lazarus writes: "The concept of civil society is especially important for Hegel's social theory, namely that 'property itself is directly opposed to universality.' Civil society is the sphere of particularity and competition, whereas ethical life meditates the conflicts of the market and demands a universality that is concretely free…Hegel considers this [a society dominated by civil society, by economic relations] to be 'relative ethical life,' since experience is oppositional. Relative ethical life is inorganic since it relates to the life dominated by the economic realm. Hegel's claim is that relative ethical life bases itself on particularity which reflects self-interested subjectivity. Absolute ethical life, however, is 'organic' and relates to the immanent essence of individuals… As Hegel understands it, the relation between individuals as mediated by economic relations is *abstractly* universal" (Lazarus, 2025, 146).

For Hegel as for Aristotle, ethical life aims at the "realization of the human good and the well-lived life," it seeks to create the conditions for the possibility of human flourishing and rational agency (Lazarus, 2025, 137). This "rational agency," as Lazarus writes, is human action directed toward the good, which must be embodied as ethical life" (Lazarus, 2025, 137-8). In a crisis of ethical life, the actions of individuals no longer feel as if they are aimed at the good, at flourishing. In a crisis of ethical life, the actions individuals partake in are experienced as arbitrary and meaningless, not as teleological, as directed toward their highest good. The institutions embedding these actions appear less as organic structures for actualizing reason and mutual recognition of socially constituted individuals, and more as irrational entities artificially sustained. They lose their necessity, and while they might still exist, it is an existence that is not united with essence. Hence, in a crisis of *Sittlichkeit*, the institutions which came to embody the objective spirit lose their claim to actuality, and hence, their reason. These institutions continue to prescribe reasons for why things are the way they are – but these progressively become less authoritative for the citizens. The explanations which for previous generations were sufficient to explain the ruling structure, and to justify the beliefs we hold and the actions we perform, are no longer sufficient for the younger generations. There is no longer "a spirit of trust," as Robert Brandom would say, holding everyone responsible in a forgiving and progressive manner (Brandom, 2019, 753).

It is this condition which precisely pervades the current conjuncture in the United States of America. In a recent viral interview between Tucker Carlson and Ted Cruz, they lamented how, in 1991, after the overthrow of the Soviet Union, everyone felt at home in America, there was deep hope in the people about the future, having the so-called Cold War behind them (Carlson, 2025). While, of course, this romanticized narrative of the past doesn't fully encapsulate the objective conditions that existed in 1991 America, where the crisis of neoliberalism was already being felt, and individuals were starting to feel the weight of debt and not being able to make ends meet, the transition from 1990s to 2020s America is one which neatly depicts the process of the dissolution of the ethical life of the state. The destruction of the material conditions of the American working-class was also exported during the 1990s, forming the basis for the actions the United States took in the former Soviet Union and socialist bloc countries, destroying their welfare states by liquidating and privatizing state industries, mechanisms, and assets.[1] In 1990, while material conditions were already well on the way of deterioration for

[1] Following the dissolution and liquidation of the USSR, "the United States and other European powers with the backing of their local oligarchs, started to dismantle the Soviet economy. Millions were plunged into poverty and millions more would die early due to the collapsing social safety net and liquidation of their state infrastructure. This period of time was dubbed by some as *catastroika* (a catchy phrase combining catastrophe and *perestroika*). Historian Stephen Kotkin notes the 'chutzpah' and 'arrogance' of the outsiders, most especially the Americans, presiding over the collapse of the Soviet Union and the so-called 'transition' of the Russian Federation. After the Berlin wall came down, DDR authorities with the collusion of the West established the *Treuhandanstalt* which began the process of privatizing and liquidating the East German economy and industrial base, which at the time

common, working-class Americans, there was still a general alignment of the individual wills with the collective will, the objective spirit of society. The reasons society prescribed for why things were the way they were still held authority. It is because of the fact that the ethical life of America was still able to provide authoritative reasons for narratives and actions that its citizens were overwhelmingly able to accept the justifications provided for epoch making events like the invasion of Iraq. In the early 2000s America, the state's narrative of invading a country and carrying out regime change to successfully wage the so-called "War on Terror" and prevent the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction by a hostile government was still accepted as a sufficient reason for taking those actions. There was still legitimacy in the ruling institutions, a sense of faith and belief in their authority that made accepting such narratives easy. The state knew best, and I – the individual – ought to align my desires, thoughts, ideals, beliefs, and actions with this objective spirit.

Since at least the 2008 financial crash of global capitalism, regular, working-class Americans have progressively lost that spirit of trust they held for their government and its institutions. Speculation and the rule of finance capital have continued to intensify, with the life of individuals being dominated by unpayable debts, rents, and desperation. This has produced an unprecedented comprehensive crisis of legitimacy in the country (Garrido, 2023, 66, 75). Americans no longer accept as authoritative the reasons the state provides for its actions. The reasons they are given for why things are the way they are no longer accepted. The historical logos is no longer sufficient for explaining their everyday experience of social life. One has only to look at the contrast in the public's reaction to the escalation of war against Iran (under the same pretext of Weapons of Mass Destruction they used with Iraq) with that of the early 2000s. Most Americans are not falling for the tired narratives still spun today to justify war in foreign countries. Skepticism has dominated the attitude Americans have of both ideological and repressive institutions of the state, from the military industrial complex to the mainstream media, from the police to the schools, from agricultural practices to the pharmaceutical industrial complex. Americans no longer trust, believe in, the objective institutions of the American *Sittlichkeit*. Even the family, the basic nucleus of society and ethical life, is itself in the most profound crisis in the country's history, with nearly half of marriages ending in divorce and a birth rate crisis affecting the younger generations, who no longer find it viable or even possible to have children (Calfas & DeBarros, 2025). Civil society has merely become a "theatre of consumption," debt-driven consumerism where no mutual recognition is possible between people (Mbembe, 2008, 55). Politically, as of last year less than 20% of Americans considered that their representatives are actually representing them (Gallup). This means that,

rivaled and even surpassed West Germany in some sectors. These economic (neoliberal) reforms, or what Naomi Klein calls 'shock therapy,' immiserated the working class, creating widespread poverty. This economic warfare was only part of a much larger project to solidify US unipolar hegemony following the collapse of the Soviet Union" (Helali, 2022, 192-193).

eight out of every ten Americans considers there to be no alignment between their individual wills, ideals, desires, etc., and the policy of the state and its representatives. The ethical life is no longer experienced as a common organic reality shared by the whole society, it is now experienced as hegemony, as the impositions of the interests of one dominant class over everyone else. And while that might have still been the case before the crisis, for Americans it wasn't experienced as hegemony, but as ethical life. The starkest proof of this crisis is in the fact that the mainstream media, perhaps the most important institution of discourse and narrative framing for the American *Sittlichkeit*, is only trusted by 11% of the population (Gallup, 2022). Almost 90% of Americans, therefore, explicitly consider the narratives, discourse, and the authoritative reasons behind these to be baseless, or, better yet, to be rooted in the need to "invent reality" and "manufacture consent" for the agenda of the ruling elite (Parenti, 1986; Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

The materialist supplement to Hegel provided by Marxism helps us to see that this crisis in the American *Sittlichkeit* is not arbitrary or accidental. It is rooted in a political economy that has as its sole telos capital accumulation, not creating the conditions for human flourishing and the good life (absolute ethical life). As Hegel had already predicted, there could be no absolute ethical life in a form of life still dominated by bourgeois private property, since, as he wrote, "property itself is directly opposed to universality" (Hegel, 1999, 127). At best there could be abstract universality, not concrete universality. It is the needs of capital accumulation which have made it seek more and more speculative forms, where the formula of accumulation – as Marx had already predicted in Volume III of *Capital* – transitions from M-C-M' to M-M', that is, from productive capital to capital accumulation rooted in parasitic interest-bearing capital. As Marx writes, "the relations of capital assume their most externalized and most fetish-like form in interest-bearing capital. We have here M-M', money creating more money, self-expanding value, without the process that effectuates these two extremes… it is the capacity of money… to expand its own value independently of reproduction" (Marx, 1959, 383-384). This development of the logic of capital to greater and greater levels of abstraction and parasitism have consequences for society, central of which is the growing polarization between those who control finance capital and global financial institutions, making them unprecedently rich from making money out of money itself, and everyone else, which is forced to exist under the tyranny of finance and debt. What has changed in the American *Sittlichkeit* from the 1990s romanticized existence described by Carlson and Cruz to today is precisely a result of the lives of individuals coming to be increasingly dictated by the needs of finance, which at the level of subjective will decomposes the necessity of objective spirit, which is now experienced as merely arbitrary. The

crisis of the American *Sittlichkeit*, therefore, is a manifestation of the general crisis of the capitalist form of life in America.[1]

The question still stands: how is it that after more than a decade of the dissolution of the American *Sittlichkeit*, does it still remain in existence? How can an entity so devoid of essence, actuality, and reason still exist? Here is where critique of ideology becomes necessary. Today, as Slavoj Žižek has argued, belief is no longer something that is within us, it is simply embodied through our actions, rituals, and institutions, not because we believe, but because we assume others do (Žižek, 2002, 48). We come to act and participate in the institutions of ethical life not because we identify a unity of our subjective will with objective spirit, but because we assume that others do. Today, for instance, no one actually believes in America that their country is a democracy. However, every two to four years, everyone still acts as if it is because they assume others still think that it is. We read in the actions of the other a belief that is not necessarily there, but which, through precisely this *misrecognition*, we come to act as if we, too, believed. What our decayed form of ethical life produces, then, is not mutual recognition, but *mutual misrecognition*. It is through misrecognizing that we act in a manner aligned with the ruling order *despite the absence of personal belief*.

For the crisis of the *Sittlichkeit* in today's America to lead to a full disintegration, therefore, it is not enough for there to be a crisis between the individual's belief and objective spirit, the individual needs to also feel the social dimension of this crisis, that is, the fact that it is not just their individual will which doesn't align with objective spirit, but those of most of the rest of the community. It is upon recognizing the role that misrecognition has played in sustaining a decrepit ethical life in existence that we can begin to build the alternative objective institutions which can structure a new set of practices, rituals, and beliefs capable of helping us fight for a new form of life, and of providing us with the authoritative reasons for doing so. This is what, in the Marxist tradition, "dual power" consists of – establishing an alternative hegemony

[1] A critique of a communist framing of *Sittlichkeit* is offered by Vanessa Christina Wills who writes, "Communism as *Sittlichkeit* has significant immediate plausibility, especially given Marx's philosophical indebtedness to Hegel. The rub is that a Marxist conception of fully developed communism simply cannot incorporate Hegel's conception of stable social roles as part of unalienated human life; and yet the notion of such social role's grounds the very concept of *Sittlichkeit*. The notion that one would embrace a particular defined role (or even multiple roles) within a well-ordered society, inhabit it, and joyfully organize one's activity in accordance with the remit associated with that role, is too much akin to what Marx seeks to reject in capitalism's system of divided labor, which he believes artificially limits and stultifes humans' capacity to relate to the world directly, immediately, creatively, and expansively." (Wills, 2024, 227-228). Another notable debate comes from Rodney Peffer who critiques Allen Wood, a Marxist who according to Peffer holds "quasi-Hegelian views" vis-à-vis *Sittlichkeit*. Peffer notes that Allen Wood "claims that in order to be valid *Moralitat* must be in agreement with *Sittlichkeit*. But he gives this position a Marxist twist when he asserts that the *Sittlichkeit* of a society is determined by the objective, material needs of the socioeconomic system in question. Thus, he concludes that the moral values or principles one holds are only valid if they conform to the needs of the present socioeconomic system. So, for example, if economic exploitation is an objective need of capitalism, then it is not possible to claim that it is morally wrong" (Peffer, 1990, 278).

fighting to rise to the level of a new *Sittlichkeit* for a new form of life – one where the telos of society is actually universal freedom, not the abstract freedom of bourgeois society.[1] A society that creates the conditions for the possibility of human flourishing, mutual recognition through rational, socially constituted objective institutions, and rational, individual and collective agency.

Conclusion

No form of life in human history has been able to exist for long on the basis of sheer domination and coercion. Even the most repressive of states have necessitated that the people under their command 'buy into' the ideals, narratives, and goals of the state. Contemporary America is in the midst of the sort of crisis which, in past state formations, have led to the dissolution of the form of life and the reconstitution of another in its place. In other words, it is in the midst of a profound crisis of *Sittlichkeit*, held together simply through individual interactions of mutual misrecognition of the motives for which the rest of society continues to act in accordance with and through the dominant institutions. Such a predicament presents a fertile ground for fighting to establish a new *Sittlichkeit*, one based on what Hegel called absolute ethical life, that is, a form of life aligned with the Aristotelean conception of the telos of society – human flourishing and rational agency.

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[1] Frederic Jameson notes that "dual power" is "associated with Lenin and his description of the coexistence of the provisional government and the network of soviets, or workers' and soldiers' councils, in 1917-a genuine transitional period if there ever was one-but it has also existed in numerous other forms of interest to us today. I would most notably single out the way organizations like the Black Panthers yesterday or Hamas today function to provide daily services-food kitchens, garbage collection, health care, water inspection, and the like-in areas neglected by some official central government" (Jameson, 2016, 4).

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