

# Against Leviathan: Hegel's, Fichte's, and Schiller's Critique of Modernity, Alienation, and the State

*Árpád-Andreas Sölter*

As Adorno once put it in one of his *bon mots*, it does not matter what *we* think of the classics (Adorno 1963, p. 13). Contrary to us, they withstood the great test of time. Therefore, it would be much more auspicious to consider what the classics would think of *us* (Žižek 2015). In order to engage in this counterfactual experiment of thought, I will first present Hegel's, Fichte's, and Schiller's spectacular radicalism and political imagery. They express an outspoken desire for fundamental political change and urge a radical rethinking of the state and our entire modern age. This will be discussed as a cultural diagnosis of art, machinery, and the state at the dawn of modernity. I will then argue that the underlying terms of cultural criticism deserve to be questioned, but nevertheless conclude with a brief outline of how their critique remains significant for contemporary social and political theory, even for global present-day problems, in times that are widely perceived by many as a new crossroads in history.

Every turning point, every beginning of a new era triggers its own new reactions in thought. The radical upheaval of the French Revolution triggered a boost of the imagination and intellectual innovation. In the early 1790s, many political visionaries, philosophers, and poets saw an opportunity to rethink all concepts in terms of social theory. They addressed key questions, such as: What would a rationally organized society look like? What is a

truly rational state? Which state do we want? And do we really need one at all? These questions are far from being outdated (Singer 1983, p. 22; Habermas, 1984; Jaeggi 2018; Sölter 2021a). With an “explosion of the political,” the *Zeitgeist* prompted an anarchistic “impulse” (Safranski 2010, pp. 155, 35). With their impetus, they wished to balance out the relationships between the individual and freedom, culture and art, state and society, so that humanity would finally find its way onto the right track leading to an enlightened modernity. Since then, autonomy has had a critical function in any given society. Massive criticism of alienation, the state, and modernity was emphatically proclaimed and inspired by autonomous thinking [*Autonomiedenken*] around the year 1800. Long before the German nation-state was actually founded in 1871, a radical counterpoint within the criticism of the state arose in the context of the absolutism of the princely territorial lordship in Germany.

Let us turn to the brief manifesto presented in the “Oldest Systematic Programme of German Idealism” [*Systemprogramm*] by the young Hegel,<sup>1</sup> before we move on to Fichte and Schiller, so that we may consult with them on the present. At this historical juncture, their common denominators are the fundamental rejection of a coercive state, anti-statism, and a tendency towards radical anarchism.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1917, this fragment was first published by Franz Rosenzweig, with a misleading title. He assumed that the author was Schelling. But the handwriting on both sides of the folio can be ascribed to Hegel. Some controversy centered around the proper attribution of the paper’s authorship ensued. According to Dolar (2020, p. 487) and Habermas, the text expresses the “common belief” of Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin (1988, p. 43). After being attributed to various authors, the discussion seems to currently focus on Hegel as the original author (Düsing 2013 and 1973, p. 89, Kaube 2020, p. 119). This view, however, is shared neither by Vieweg (2020a, 2012) nor Förster (2004). As a result, there is no real consensus. See also Bubner (1973), Jamme and Schneider (1984), p. 190f., and Hansen (1989) for the history and reception of this fragment. I am referring to Dolar’s (2015) English translation and the versions available online.

## *The State "Must Cease To Exist" (Hegel)*

The *Systemprogramm* (1796/97) was written in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution. The consequence drawn from the events was that this was a great historical break that opened, for the first time in history, the perspective of humanity as an ideal, in which the state as such must be overcome and abolished — not that a better or ideal state should be proposed. In essence, the state is seen as something deeply mechanical, and as such inhuman. From this point of view, it is only a means on humanity's ultimate path towards establishing a truly human society as an association of free, self-determining, autonomous human beings. It is an "immodest proposal" in order to "define precisely the nature of the state and the nature of art" (Dolar 2015):

Given the idea of humankind, I want to show that there is no idea of the *state* because the state is something *mechanical*, just as little as there is an idea of a *machine*. Only that which is the object of *freedom* is called *idea*. We must therefore go beyond the state [über *den Staat hinaus*]! — For every state must treat free human beings like mechanical cogwheels [*Räderwerk*]; and it should not do that; therefore it must *cease* to exist [*also soll er aufhören*]. (Hegel 1986a, pp. 234–35)

One must realize what this radicality broke away from and what it is in contrast to. Clearly, the state discussed here is not (yet) "the actuality of the ethical idea" (Hegel 1986b, p. 398). The actually existing absolutist state is rejected, i.e., the authority in power connected with it, but not because it is a dominion with a monopoly on violence. According to this thinking, the state neither can nor should be improved on its evolutionary path, because it is absolutely not worth subjecting it to an optimization program. No reformism, no *piecemeal engineering* of taking small steps towards better conditions is proclaimed here. We should not even try to transform the state into a new social democracy

that would replace the old authoritarian system. In this view, the state is not considered to be a guarantor of freedom, but rather its adversary. Furthermore, the state should not abandon this or that practice. None of it would be sufficient. Rather, we should dismantle the state as such. In this radical perception driven by a romantic thrust in terms of the criticism of the state, something is in opposition to the state that, in principle, overcomes and abolishes its shortcomings as a destructive force. Basically, according to this understanding, the state causes a single massive deficit of the individual. As a result, the crucial question is not how an ideal state could be achieved or formed. The author's approach is more fundamental, it is about whether a state can even exist in an ideal situation. No, it cannot, not at all.

How does Hegel justify his thesis that one should dismantle the state? Should the state only "cease" and wither away entirely because it is superfluous in a society of free beings? Hegel uses a strong political metaphor to make his point: he sees the state as a machine. He indicates implicitly that the current state is not built like a body or a living organism. Rather, it operates like a machine because it is mechanical by its substance. The underlying assumption is that every state has something machine-like at its very core. Machines, mechanical wheelworks as devices with an artificial, mechanical intelligence based on algorithms are unable to determine themselves. They are unable to operate autonomously. "Only that which is an object of freedom is called an Idea." The completely autonomous self-determination of people represents the complete essence of the idea only. "The first idea is naturally the representation of myself as an absolutely free being," argues Hegel. The machine metaphor serves as an argument which suggests that the individual should function obligingly, without protest. As Dolar says in conversation with Hamza and Ruda, "there can be no idea of the state since it contradicts the very idea of an idea, it contradicts freedom, it treats human beings mechanically as cogwheels" (Dolar 2020, p. 487). Therefore, it must cease,

because the individual cannot carry the superior idea of the whole, the element of freedom. “The state as such is a machine to stifle freedom, there can only be an idea of freedom, but there can be no idea of a machine” (Dolar 2015). With art, literature, especially poetry, which is regarded as the most dignified art, Hölderlin’s influence becomes visible in the following paragraph:

Finally the idea which unites all, the idea of *beauty*, the word taken in the higher Platonic sense. I am convinced that the highest act of reason, which, in that it comprises all ideas, is an aesthetic act. [...] The philosopher must possess just as much aesthetic power as the poet. [...] The philosophy of the spirit is an aesthetic philosophy. One cannot be clever in anything, one cannot even reason cleverly in history—without aesthetic sense. [...] Poetry thereby obtains a higher dignity; it becomes again in the end what it was in the beginning—*teacher of the humankind* [*Lehrerin der Menschheit*]; for there is no longer any philosophy, any history, the poetic art alone will outlive all other sciences and arts. (Ibid.)

Art is “the universal unifying idea, subsuming all others, and an idea can exert power only insofar as it is aesthetically embodied, and hence addressed and available to everyone. Art stands for the universality of humankind, whereas the state is its mechanical limitation. The goal would be that art should” take “the place previously occupied” by the state (Dolar 2015). From this point of view “art is itself a utopian state without boundaries”, which “can supplant the mechanical state”, and there is “universal citizenship only in art” (Dolar 2015). Art “should also come to supplant religion, for the continuation of the fragment calls for a new ‘mythology of reason’—reason by itself is powerless unless it employs mythological, sensuous, and sensual means, hence the call for the philosopher endowed with aesthetic powers. Reason by itself is empty, and mythology divorced from reason is blind, so one should strive for the happy unification of the two. Instead of philosopher kings,” as is the case in Plato,

“the poets are leaders. The fragment invokes the Platonic idea of beauty, but as completely divorced from the Platonic idea of the state: art is the anti-state *par excellence*. If in Plato state art makes all other art redundant, then here art is what should make the state redundant” (Dolar 2015). “At the same time I want here to establish the principles for a History of Mankind and to completely expose the whole miserable human creation of state, constitution, government, legislature” (Hegel 1986a). Ideas of government and legislation, as well as ideas of “a moral world” with its own legislation, fall under the rubric human creation [*Menschenwerk*], and are as such declared to be subsumed under a higher idea that unites them all (Förster 2004, p. 474). The fragment concludes with a promise. The author will present the public with something that can establish “universal freedom and equality” of spirits and provide a key to “the last, the greatest work of mankind.” This shows contemporary parallels to Schiller’s letters, which I will discuss below. The *Systemprogramm* offers a program of the education of mankind with the goal of “universal freedom and equality” of all spirits: “Until we render the ideas aesthetic, that is, mythological, they are of no interest to the *people*, and conversely until mythology is rational, the philosopher must be ashamed of it.” In its concluding passage, the author demands a new mythology, a mythology of reason, as the greatest work of mankind to reach its crucial target group, the people.

When are people free? People are free when they do not depend on anything other than themselves. Therefore, not even God and immortality can be sought outside of self-consciousness. The intellectual force of this argument originates from Kant’s initial view of the autonomous and completely self-determining subject of reason, which theoretically and methodically achieves cognition and has, in a practical and moral sense, self-determining qualities, i.e., it acts as its own lawgiver. “In this precise sense, at truly enlightened ‘mature’ human being is a subject who no longer needs a master, who can fully assume the heavy burden of defin-

ing his own limitations” (Žižek 2013, p. 340). In this respect, the political thought of German idealism is based on the intellectual architecture instituted by Kant. The idea of absolutely autonomous self-determination, however, is confronted with the stark reality of the feudal system. As early as in 1800, Hegel noticed signs of a development in which men end up like “cogwheels,” a trend that would ultimately lead them into modernity’s “iron cage,” a shell as hard as steel [*stahlhartes Gehäuse*] in a system based purely on teleological efficiency, utility, rational calculation, and control (Weber 2002, p. xxiv). Humanity’s fate as described in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is caught in “the polar night of icy darkness” (Weber 1994, p. xvi), in a totally “administered world” based on the “automation of society and of human behavior” (Horkheimer 1985, p. 340; Horkheimer and Adorno 1978, p. IX; Horkheimer 1986, p. 9). According to such political perception, the mighty state apparatus, its Kafkaesque bureaucracy and administrative forces on the one hand and the individual claiming its autonomy on the other are antagonists. This means that the self-determining person, on the one hand, is opposed to the far-reaching state as “something mechanical” on the other. This antagonism is not only incompatible, but also remains incommensurable. The two continue to be each other’s opponents. The opposition is and remains, in principle, irreconcilable. What is even worse, the free, conscious being is treated extremely badly. This is a relationship that is detrimental to the individual, exceedingly damaging and downright toxic even. A “mechanical wheelwork,” which is completely alien to the individual and even contradicts its very purpose, is imposed on the autonomous, self-determining person. The state uses people as mechanical wheels in the gear mechanism of the whole. As such, individuals are treated merely as instruments or objects in the functional structure of the society and the state. “The legal and political forms which have been solidified for positivity have turned into an alien force” (Habermas 1988, p. 38). Around 1800,

Hegel found that the state had “been reduced to something that was merely mechanical, a wheelwork, a machine” (Habermas 1988, p. 38). Today, one could say that the individual has succumbed to the “pull of technocracy” (Habermas 2013). However, according to Hegel (and early Critical Theory would agree), this completely misses the essential determination of human existence. Man should not be a passive object or a mere function within the structure of the social order. Instead, the cultivation of a pure, self-determined person into a whole person is required.

The author of the fragment ranks beauty, the highest act of reason, which comprises all ideas, even higher than truth and goodness. For Hegel, the practice of the state is nothing less than a violation. The consequence that can be drawn from this articulates his imperative with full clarity, without any alternative. The state should “cease,” it must completely disappear so that subjugation can finally end. “We must [...] transcend the state!” This urgent wish to “expose the whole miserable human work of state, constitution, government, legislature—down to the skin” in order to ultimately overcome it boils down to a *tabula rasa* approach. How can this process actually take place? What would this transcendence, that which is new and beyond the current state, look like? In order to answer these questions, we turn to two of Hegel’s contemporaries. Fichte answers the first question, while Schiller also answers the second. Just like the “Oldest Systematic Programme,” his philosophical writings elevate art to a future-oriented force of aesthetic reconciliation in “disunited modernity” (Habermas, 1988, p. 45).

### *Living in the “Age of Absolute Sinfulness” (Fichte)*

Fichte’s *Foundations of the Science of Knowledge* (1794) was published at the height of the Reign of Terror. Without the French Revolution, this work would have been inconceivable, as it drew

theoretically from what had happened in Paris. It was about self-determination and emancipation. Nothing should prevail any longer that cannot endure before the high court of human reason. Institutions and relationships were no longer divinely given, but were considered a result of human actions and history, and were therefore changeable. Fichte was a philosopher of deeds even more so than Kant and others. Everything that there is, in the sphere of knowledge as well as in practical life, is the result of human actions. The Self is sovereign, creative. Fichte actually ascribes to it the traits of an old God, which the Self dethrones, just like princes. Friedrich Schlegel and the early romanticists immediately recognized the most prominent tendencies of the modern age: the French Revolution, Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. Fichte welcomed the major changes happening in the world with enthusiasm. However, he did not have any illusions about them. He considered the time in which he lived to be a time of decline, depravity, unrest, and disarray. For him, it was the "age of absolute sinfulness," entangled in self-interest and institutionalized egoism, which would ultimately lead to Hobbes's *bellum omnium contra omnes*. Fichte did not lose sight of the ultimate purpose: Total independence from everything which is not our self, which is not our pure ego. However, he mistrusted the individuality and the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment, also due to the influence of the Napoleonic Wars.

Fichte developed his philosophy of history in the *Characteristics of the Present Age* (1806). His primary idea in this work was the development of humanity away from oppression and slavery towards freedom. Parallel to the development of the individual, the external development of their position in the state moves away from the role of subject towards a free citizen. At the forefront is the development model which divides history into five ages. In this context, Fichte understands his own age as a disastrous one, finding itself in the position of maximum alienation. At the center of this development is the age in which we have freed ourselves

of all authority, but have not yet arrived at true knowledge; the characteristics of this age should, however, usher us into better future ages. In other words, the point of origin is virtually a biblical den of iniquity. In this age, we are living in “complete sinfulness.” Fichte defines the meaning of culture and the state as an effort to overcome the forces that stand in the way of the perfection of humankind. The meaning of the state is to align individuals with their life and the goal of their kind. This allows people to no longer be subjects, but become free citizens.

Fichte also tackles the idea—perhaps even without being familiar with Hegel’s fragment—that the state needs to be overcome because it acts as and is perceived as a coercive state only based on needs. In his diagnosis of modernity, Fichte also uses the metaphor of the state as a machine, which plays a central role. He adds to this idea the point that the state works on ensuring that its citizens perceive themselves as machines instead of independent beings (Fichte 1962, p. 286). This is why the state “aims at its own destruction. It is the purpose of government to make itself superfluous” (Fichte 1794, p. 40). According to Fichte’s prediction, the state will simply slowly cease to be, it will crumble as if decrepit, come to the end of its power, and ultimately die out. Fichte, optimistically, finds that this development will actually take place without any revolutions, excesses of violence, and similar external effects: “So, the former coercive state will quietly wither away into nothingness brought about by time, without any expression of force against it” (Fichte 1813, p. 599). How long until this happens? A lot of patience will be required, warns Fichte. For this project to materialize, for this condition following the automatic withering away of the state, we will have to wait for “myriads of years or myriads of myriads of years” (Fichte 1966, p. 37).

In the set of issues concerning the state and the individual, the subject of reason is opposed to the state, which mechanically imposes on this subject an external legal system and enforces it

in an oppressive way. In contrast, the non-repressive state based on reason, a realm unifying everyone as true rational beings, is pitted against the real, bare state based on need: "Everyone has the same convictions, and the conviction of any single person is the conviction of every person" (Fichte 1798, p. 253). This consensus euphoria with maximum conformity between opinion and conviction aims at unifying everyone by means of superior reason, which is based on the principles of rationality. It is an early form of the ideal, domination-free social community of communication (Frank 1983, p. 26). However, this is obviously not a modern state in the sense of *Realpolitik*.

*"Why Are We Still Barbarians?" (Schiller, Eighth Letter)*

Schiller's social analyses and his theoretical conclusions were formulated against the backdrop of political upheaval in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795). As manifests of the ideals of freedom, equality, and brotherhood, these letters are considered to be among the founding documents of the European theory of modernity (Alt 2000, p. 132; Safranski 2004, p. 409). In contrast to the *Systemprogramm*, Schiller's counterproposal is a better or ideal state. Clearly, Schiller develops his cultural criticism and his aesthetic theory, particularly the aesthetic education of humanity, with a utopian perspective. He deals with the French Revolution and is, despite his support for its goals, i.e., the overturning of the ruling political system, disappointed with the outcome of terror (Borchmeyer 1980, p. 204). By 1793, Schiller is horrified by the bloody events and assumes the French Revolution has failed. In his attempt to explain its failure, he considers whether and how revolutionary ideas could be achieved without a real revolution. According to Schiller, the derailments and aberrations of the French Revolution, its escalation into an excess of violence culminating in the decapitation of the king in public, demonstrate that

it is impossible for pure philosophy to establish a society or an ideal state solely through logical deductions. It will not succeed in causing people to gain insight into what is ethically good just by circulating a friendly reminder of the categorical imperative among them or sharing with them strict philosophical logic. Schiller seeks a non-violent, long-term solution to cope with a most dangerous political situation in order to institute a government of reason. His response to the French Revolution as the political crisis of the time sums up its cultural challenges: “All improvement in the political sphere has to proceed from the ennobling of the character” to avoid any new outbreak violence (ninth letter). Schiller’s apodictic postulate reads as follows: “If man is ever to solve the problem of politics in practice, he will have to approach it through aesthetics, because it is only through beauty that man makes his way to Freedom” (second letter). The individual is led through art and its beauty to liberty.

Schiller sees the process of civilization as the main cause of the deplorable, sad state of cultural and political affairs (sixth letter). The crisis of modern civilization came about through the alienation of reason from nature (Berghahn 2004). This is a process in which human reason increasingly dominates by repressing inner nature and exploiting outside nature. In his journey of cultural criticism, Schiller reaches a violence-free and idealistic response to killings elsewhere. Art is supposed to replace revolution (Borchmeyer 1980, p. 205). Art should be the venue for accomplishing a massive change of consciousness and conduct, which will precede future social and political change. He turns against the despotism of an aristocratic state as well as against the rule of the people, which cannot meet the demands of reason called for during the Enlightenment. Schiller’s whole-hearted concern is to advance humanity, “human dignity” (third letter), and “the nobility of human nature” (first letter) in order to “honour man at length as an end, and to make true freedom the basis of political union. Vain hope!” (fifth letter). Before Schiller, Immanuel Kant

already postulated freedom as an ideal condition. Schiller adopts this impetus. He wants to ensure that, for a person, “the freedom to be what he ought to be is restored perfectly to him” (twenty-first letter). For Schiller, it is about ending the “tyranny against the individual” (seventh letter). According to Schiller, “the ideal of society” (third letter) is nothing less than “a structure of a true political freedom” (second letter). For this purpose, it is necessary “to exchange the state of necessity for that of freedom” (fourth letter). He wishes to promote the critical “spirit of free inquiry,” i.e., scientific analyses, and in this way expose “fanaticism,” “erroneous opinions,” and “deception” for what they really are (eighth letter). Schiller wishes to point to a human condition in which “the blind law of the stronger” no longer applies (second letter).

Schiller poses a rhetorical question: “But can man’s destiny be to neglect himself for any end whatever?” (sixth letter). Not at all. Art is supposed to compensate for damage to heal “one-sidedness” and “splitting up” (ibid.). However, mutilation, disintegration, fragmentation, and instrumental reason are a sign of the times (ibid.). People are impoverished as “fragments,” the “totality of the species” disassociates itself in a rationalization process of a “derailed modernity” (Habermas 2005, p. 26). The goal is the “the restoration of the broken totality” (Habermas 1988, p. 41). Reconciliation can be achieved by a restored totality and “by a superior art” (sixth letter), because art reaches people with all of its powers, with its imagination, realizations, impressions, feelings, and sensuality. Thus, man can become whole again, a totality in a narrower sense. The connection between the aesthetics of autonomy and anthropology is as follows: The definition of the work of art as its own sole purpose in itself, i.e., the “idea of the whole that is made complete in itself” is transformed by Schiller into “the conception of humanity” in order to “bring about the missing totality” and to redeem the alienated individual from the “fragmentary character of man” (Bernauer 1995, p. 159). Through contemplation the aesthetic experience allows, at least momentarily, for a sense

of human completeness. It fulfils quasi-therapeutic, healing, and liberating tasks. It inspires, strengthens, and motivates the individual. In this respect, art has a compensatory function both for the individual and for humanity as a species. With its anticipation of future perspectives, art illuminates humanity's path and opens up new possibilities. "Totality is no longer experienced through love and friendship, but through art" (ibid.). In this sense, art is integrated into Schiller's model with three forms of the state: first, "the state of necessity" or the natural state, second is the "aesthetic state," and third the "state of reason." What Schiller is ultimately striving for is a "state based on reason." That is to say, an "ethical" state in which moral self-commitment applies alone and under all circumstances, because the moral law, as the command of reason, obliges and directs individuals. Such a state no longer needs any external coercive measures. The transition from a *de facto* state based on need to a moral state based on reason is, however, an extraordinarily difficult undertaking: the *modus operandi* of the state cannot simply be stopped and calmly improved. Schiller argues that the "clockwork of the state" (third letter)—again, mechanics is also used for political imagery—cannot first be shut down or even destroyed, only to then gradually develop a better alternative. It is like a clockwork which must be worked on and reformed while its cogwheels continue running mechanically. Therefore, it is true that "the revolving wheel must be repaired while it is in motion" (ibid.). Great social upheaval takes place in the process of transition. Schiller asks himself how this change in political conditions can be advanced, even "ennobled," under barbaric conditions and harmful influences (ninth letter). Only literature, art, and cultural products are able to address people, both in their sensuous perception and in a spiritually inspiring way. Because it is only beauty that offers the path to salvation. "Beauty is nothing but freedom in appearance" (twenty-third letter). "In a word, there is no other way to make the sensuous man rational than by first making him aesthetic" (ibid.). Only on this

basis, i.e., through such an evolutionary overcoming of the previous state, can the moral state be founded, in which the promise of true political freedom is honored and redeemed. Only art, the emancipatory effect of literature, art, and beauty, can give man his freedom. In this respect, the “aesthetic state” is characterized by special qualities. “The ideal of equality” is “fulfilled” here (twenty-seventh letter). Such a state is able “to bestow freedom by means of freedom” (ibid.). As an alternative to the French Revolution, Schiller recommends a collective aesthetic, spiritual, and sensuous therapy in order to reach a “reconciliation of a modernity that has fallen out with itself” (Habermas 1988, p. 59). He formulates an unprecedented appreciation of the beauty of art, an unprecedented advancement of aesthetics and culture. However, can this state ever really exist as an aesthetic utopian vision? It already exists, insists Schiller, but not as a political organizational structure. “In the Aesthetic State everybody is a free citizen, having equal rights with the noblest. [...] As a need, it exists in every finely tuned soul; as a realized fact, we are likely to find it, like the pure church and the pure republic, only in some few chosen circles” (twenty-seventh letter). This state of beauty exists only among the happy few who contrast the existing world with a better one, i.e., in select social-aesthetic circles that are based on the manners characteristic of a “good society,” politeness norms, and “pleasant conversation” (ibid.). The final passage indicates the resigned assumption that man cannot be educated to humanity per se, but that humanity is only to be found by a select few, i.e., an elite that is already trained and ennobled for humanity “by their own lovely nature” (ibid.; Hamburger 1965). Soon thereafter, Schiller was accused of elitism.

Schiller’s aesthetic model of the state and education offers an idealistic, even utopian, and certainly peculiar German model of harmony among humans, in which alienation has disappeared. He replaces political education with an aesthetic one. As a result, the antagonistic forces of nature and freedom, reason and

sensuousness, state and individual are in balance. Are such propositions driven by political realism? Should today's state really be aestheticized? Today, Schiller's utopian vision of an educational aesthetic state as an exquisite "realm of aesthetic appearance," in which "the ideal of equality" of all people, i.e., the goal of the French Revolution, is fulfilled so that, in the "state of beauty in appearance," "the chains of thralldom drop away" for everyone (twenty-seventh letter), is seen as anything but contemporary. Schiller can neither logically nor methodically explain in a satisfactory manner "the aesthetic path to the healing of an alienated society" and "the reconciliation of man with modern social reality" (Alt 2000, p. 151).

### *Leviathan Must Be Tamed*

Let us get back to the original question of what the intellectuals of the time would think of *us* today in view of excessive government activity, astronomical government debt, unchecked bureaucratic growth, increasing juridification, and current emergency measures imposing massive restrictions on our civil liberties, including a ban on attending cultural events, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The expansion of supranational entities makes things more difficult, especially when they are largely beyond democratic control. Could we really manage, however, without the state entirely? Is the state not also an authority with advantages, as it guarantees our basic rights and civil liberties, acts as a regulatory authority, provides security, and ensures public welfare services? Should it really "cease" completely? Would we not be, then, at the mercy of unregulated, digitally driven hyper-surveillance capitalism? Is "the withering away of the state in the process of globalization, the old leftist dream" as outlined in Marxism not a recipe for disaster bound to turn into a catastrophic "nightmare" (Dolar 2015)? Let us consider the arguments aimed at overcoming the state and its shortcomings.

Firstly, the thought processes of the three intellectual giants began around 1800 with an analysis of the deficits in the contemporary human condition. They share the conviction that humanity suffers from a profound alienation, which is yet to be overcome:

- Hegel's postulate on the state that "treats free people as a mechanical wheelwork" and should therefore "cease,"
- Fichte's testimony of "absolute sinfulness" and his prediction of the self-dissolution of the state through "withering away," as well as
- Schiller's transformation program focused on overcoming the state based on need through "ennoblement" and the aestheticization of the political sphere to improve human relations.

The central notion in this process is autonomous art. Its autonomy and art's utopian function becomes one of transforming humanity in order to make freedom possible. As a counterweight to the political and social reality it requires the vision of a better world in anticipation. Thus, it establishes liberty from external restraints. However, since beauty is a subjective quality, freedom will only be an inner experience, even if the world outside is still ruled by chains and oppression. Thus, it compensates for everything that is missing in society—a lack of freedom, justice, and equality—but without truly changing it.

Secondly, this kind of political thinking is state-centered, especially in rejecting the state in its current form. In this sense, the political is perceived and understood exclusively from the perspective of the state. In any case, the "state" is "the key word" around which this political and cultural perception and its understanding of the situation revolve in a negative way. This "ideal political" conception of the political remains fixed on the concept and phenomenon of the state, albeit with a negative connotation (Vollrath 2003, pp. 120, 126). In other words, the political is identified with the state and thus equated with it. In this sense, the state as a sovereign, potent legal system and form of government completely

absorbs political thought as a negative pole. The understanding of politics is narrowed down in a reductionist manner to statehood and its phenomena. “German political thinking is fundamentally and typically characterised by statist views”; it is “the result of a lack of specific identity, which the political has experienced in Germany due to historical circumstances” (Vollrath 1987, p. 103f). Can a large-scale social structure *without* the character of a factual state ever be the result of the self-reflection and self-realization processes that all subjects of reason go through as rational beings? If the ultimate goal is a state-free zone, a realm of unconstrained, non-violent, and domination-free association, in which the free development of everyone is the condition for the free development of all others, then no modern state is compatible with this anarchist impetus. Fichte’s consensus model (in which everyone not only comes to the same conclusion guided by human reason but even shares the same convictions!) and Schiller’s alleged solutions (the aesthetic state to overcome the bad, factual state based on need) are tantamount to a social mini-unit in the form of a free, beautiful community of associations. The construct of a state based on reason is certainly no longer a state in the true sense of the word.

Thirdly, it is not only Hegel who denounces the real-world institutional structure, “the whole miserable human work of state, constitution, government, legislature” as evil (Sölter 2021b). When it comes to the state based on need or the state of understanding, standards are applied against which such a state can only be regarded as irrational—and must therefore be abolished. Such an approach “constructs, being the rational form for the unification of all, a structure that exhibits all of the qualities of the state, above all that of being the universal legal personality of all, without having its compulsory character, a state without statehood, i.e. without a state” (Vollrath 1987, p. 136).

*“Modernity Is The Crisis” (Habermas)*

Habermas's dictum regarding the “theories of the twentieth century dealing with the diagnosis of the times” signifies the crux of the paradigm of cultural criticism (Habermas 2019, p. 41). It is condensed into a philosophical diagnosis of the crisis-laden modernity, fueled by an acute consciousness of disruption, which is reconfigured within a mentality of alienation and expanded into a radical criticism of the state and the society as a system. Radical cultural criticism defines the essence of these paradigmatic views and perceptions because, in them, the *conditio moderna* is interpreted as overall ambivalent and as the phenomenon of a deep crisis. In the course of a modernity that has become reflexive and that problematizes itself in terms of cultural criticism, philosophy offers a mode of communication for its burning questions (Bollenbeck 2007, p. 28; Sölter 2021c). Ideally, it also makes a constructive contribution to overcoming its shortcomings. However, the following double aspect is problematic: philosophy is “at the same time, believed and trusted to have comprehensive competence, and this also applies to the political” (Vollrath 2003, p. 171). By assigning this specific task to philosophy, significant weaknesses in the eccentric German cultural awareness become evident on the levels of both political perception and political practice. In summary, the following aspects of the inner connection between philosophy and the diagnoses of the contemporary age within cultural criticism, as it significantly shapes political perception in Germany, must be taken into account (Sölter 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b):

Firstly, the paradigm of cultural criticism indicates a fundamental awareness of crises and a sense of alienation. On the basis of such a perception of crises, which developed into a diagnosis of systemically generated “pathologies” and a functionalistically curtailed reason (as a deeply one-sided, reduced mode of instrumental thinking), a critique of occidental modernity, its ambivalences,

defects, and shortcomings, was formulated. According to this diagnosis, serious social, systemically induced “pathologies,” even destruction, arise “in the triumphant march of capitalist modernization” (Habermas 2009, p. 250; Habermas 2005, p. 31). Imperatives of the “system,” such as power and money, invade and colonize “the life-world” in a process of “monetization and bureaucratisation,” causing a massive “deformation” and destructive tendencies in it (Habermas 1981, p. 593). Such diagnoses sound like a distant echo of the early *Systemprogramm*.

Secondly, in their proposals both the author of the *Systemprogramm* and Schiller rely on a single binary opposition. The reduced terms of the fragment are liberty versus the machine, free expressivity and maximum individual creativity versus the state apparatus, its ideology and its mechanism of repression. The choice we are confronted with is either the state or art. The freedom of spirit found in art is incommensurate with the mechanical in the state. Both Hegel and Schiller are horrified by the cogwheels of the state. The aestheticization of politics is portrayed as an antidote to the *Räderwerk*, which they bitterly reject. The celebration of art with a spiritual and aesthetic elevation of the individual is seen as a remedy against its opposite, the ills of modernity. Of course, this thought is being accused of “simplicity and naivety” (Dolar 2015).

Thirdly, the radical perception patterns within cultural criticism in Germany led to deeply deficient political misjudgments, which even became catastrophic in the twentieth century (Lepenies 2006; Sölter 2019, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b). What all versions of the paradigm of cultural criticism have in common is complete disproportionality with respect to the civil-political concept of the political in the West (Vollrath 2003). In hindsight, the lack of a theory and an adequate concept of the state and the political turned out to be a fundamental basic historical flaw. This includes the inability to exercise pragmatism, a contempt for reality as it is presented with all of its faults, imperfections,

and unevenness, and an intellectual radicalism that tends to move towards philosophical extremism and reveals apocalyptic perspectives, such as those in *tabula rasa* approaches. In this view, catastrophic scenarios are favored, complexity-reducing thinking is applied, shaped by dualisms, antagonisms, and binary distinctions. As a consequence, in the further development of the history of ideas, democratic institutions and liberal state systems are generally degraded as such. This is often connected with a disdain for politics, its processes and mechanisms in general, and with an aesthetic interpretation of politics. This misguided impetus leads large portions of the population into mythological or aesthetic substitutions especially in Germany. As a result, political thinking is dominated by genuinely apolitical images, metaphors, and categories, as well as by the need for “apolitical politics” or “metapolitics” (Vollrath 1987, 2003). In the past, this has given German culture a special eccentricity and intellectual radicalism. Certainly, this has significantly contributed to its international reputation, its importance, charisma, and its attractiveness and appeal for people from other cultures. “However, the greatness of German culture is connected with a serious shortcoming: it is missing a sense for the political, precisely in its moderate civilized form—as H. Plessner put it: ‘the specifically Western spirit of normalised mediocrity’” (Vollrath 2003, p. 176). If greatness of mind and political weakness were directly related to one another in Germany, the taming of the very intellectual radicalism that has brought about bravado, admiration, and greatness to the German spirit would perhaps result in a loss of substance, the lowering of standards, and the degradation of cultural depth. Nevertheless, the perception of politics, not only in Germany, needs to be de-radicalized in order to reintegrate it into the sphere of overall Western cultural understanding. Therefore, politics must neither be dismissed as banal nor assigned exceptional expectations that turn out to be unrealizable or ignore fundamental, inevitable conflicts of interest.

In the fight against authoritarian regimes, against tyranny and oppression, the ideas of autonomous reason and critical thinking are still of the utmost importance. According to them, everyone is entitled to decide which beliefs they accept and how they want to live their life, regardless of pseudo-authorities. The same applies to the idea of the freedom of expression — i.e., the right to be able to stand up publicly for one's own convictions — and also to the ideas of equality of all citizens before the law and the right of all citizens to be involved in reaching decisions regarding legislation and measures implemented by the government, which has been elected for a limited time. Neither the “stabilization or strengthening of domination” nor the preservation of the existing power system are at the center of this idea of reason and freedom, but rather the domestication of the state, the limitation and “control of the ruling authority,” and considerations about how institutional regulations are created in order to achieve this goal effectively (Albert 1977, p. 194).

What would the enthusiastic protagonists of the idea of freedom and radical criticism of the state think of *us* today, facing a global crisis in the midst of our ongoing struggle with a coronavirus outbreak (Dolar 2020, Vieweg 2020b)? We can only guess. The pandemic — most likely triggered by a zoonotic disease jumping the species barrier — may be just the tip of the iceberg if we continue to encroach on natural habitats. Does this require a comprehensive systemic overhaul? “COVID-19: The Great Reset” (Schwab/Malleret 2020)? With many of our natural systems now on the verge of breakdown, we can no longer afford for nature to be absent from economics, argues Dasgupta (2021), who recommends a move away from Gross Domestic Product as a measure of progress — to rebalance our planet's natural systems, we must “include Nature as an ingredient” when judging the economic health of nations. Even if we concede that the current situation during the pandemic may require special measures, such as the current restrictions on freedom and contact, until COVID-19 is

contained in order to avoid overburdening intensive care units and causing the collapse of national healthcare systems, what should give us more reason to be concerned are the long-term consequences. The current state economic recovery policy may be necessary, but it is certainly not sustainable. The key question is: Whom do we trust to reduce the enormous expansion of government spending, government debt, government intervention, and government activity casting long shadows of public control over the individual's private existence and movements? Who do we wish to fully restore all civil liberties of individuals as well as regular parliamentary procedures, which have been temporarily overridden by ordinances? What kind of freedom is supposed to open up at the end of the day? "What if the only viable solution is to change the entire system?" (Žižek 2013, p. 303). What if "the role of the people is ultimately a negative one: 'free elections' (or a referendum) serve as a check on the party movements"? [...] "This is all that electoral democracy can do; the positive step into a new order is beyond its scope. [...] Even in a radical protest movement, people *do not* know what they want, they demand a new Master to tell them. But if the people do not know, does the Party?" (Žižek 2013, pp. 998–1000). In contradicting the Enlightenment's self-determination program, Žižek makes a strong case for rational ignorance among ordinary citizens (Sölter 1993).

Today, no reasonable blueprint for true radical change—the kind of comprehensive makeover of our entire social, cultural, economic, and political system—towards a new and better global order is yet available. Whether or not the historical period around 1800, with its transition to modernity, shares startling similarities with our own times remains to be seen. Those who do believe we are at a crossroads again, facing the beginning of a new era, for which they pose (just like in 1800) "the new key question about a rational society as such" (Rödder 2020), should consider Hegel's dictum: "Reason and freedom remain our watchword" (Hegel 1969, p. 18). Ultimately, we each have to serve as judge and jury

with respect to our own actions. Understanding, critical thought, boldness, and courage are crucial notions, signaling the mode used in the self-determined progress of knowledge and self-liberation. A systemic overhaul also means empowering citizens to make informed choices and to demand change. The social question is back on the agenda. Those thinkers who, more than 200 years ago, placed the idea of reasonable freedom at the very center of their thinking in order to raise the question of a more liberal system, would probably encourage or exhort us to devise more reasonable and more liberal alternatives to those already existing in our intellectual considerations, i.e., to be bolder in upsetting the status quo rather than simply rely on an expansionary interventionist state. In this context, there is no need to overstretch the emancipatory potential of art and culture's critical stance towards social, political, and economic reality. Neither should we, however, underestimate the thought-provoking, sometimes life-changing impulses arising from cultural events, experiences, and insights, or ignore their lasting artistic inspiration and the imprint they leave on our lives in the long run, and thus their liberating power during the great test of time.

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