

## Hegel and The Problem of Poverty

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### Introduction

G. W. F. Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* is one of the most famous texts in the history of philosophy. It is also a controversial work that has led to several important debates, such as between politically right and left Hegelians, the metaphysical versus non-metaphysical approaches and the systematic versus non-systematic readings<sup>1</sup>. Not all of these debates continue today although all exposed very different understandings of Hegel's philosophy at a fundamental level.

One interesting issue is Hegel's so-called *problem of poverty*. The problem is not only that Hegel believes the ideal state would be a political community where some would live in poverty. Instead, the issue is that Hegel's ideal calls for each of us to *be at home* and *reconciled* to our political community, but some of us cannot be because of poverty. The problem, for Hegel, is that he seems to lack any convincing solution to this problem. In other words, poverty is a problem, but it is a problem Hegel recognises and seems unable to solve. This is a major concern because it might entail the ideal state would also be politically unstable to some degree no matter our efforts. What makes this issue especially interesting for my purposes is that it is a topic where Hegel scholars sometimes with very different approaches to the study of Hegel's philosophy will agree on what this problem is. The debate about Hegel's problem of poverty is largely a discussion about possible solutions to it-but everyone seems clear about the problem.

This article argues that the consensus view of most leading Hegel scholars is incorrect. Their mistake is in viewing Hegel's problem of poverty as a problem about *economic* poverty. This is reflected in their proposed solutions which are presented in an economic light. The mistake is that Hegel's understanding of poverty is that it is a form of political alienation.

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<sup>1</sup> On these debates, see Thom Brooks, *Hegel's Political Philosophy: A Systematic Reading of the Philosophy of Right*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

Economic poverty might make political alienation more likely, but our focus should be on addressing alienation. The interesting conclusion is that Hegel scholars are correct to believe his problem of poverty lacks a convincing solution, but incorrect about what the problem is. This article attempts to make this case.

### **How the Problem is Understood**

There are two leading views about Hegel's problem of poverty. The first is best represented by Shlomo Avineri and the second by Raymond Plant. I consider each of these views here not in order to critique them, but to make clear where the debate is in current Hegel scholarship.

Avineri and Plant differ primarily in their understanding of the problem's solution: they are generally agreed on the problem. This problem is commonly understood as more than an inconsistency in Hegel's political thought, but a gap that shows the limits of his political ideal. Hegel claims that we should be *at home* in our social and political world. This idea about political reconciliation is not that should agree with every decision of our state, but that we come to identify with our social and political institutions. For example, I am a British citizen. If reconciled in the way Hegel discusses, then the idea is that I will identify myself with British social and political institutions. These will have my support over time and I will engage with other fellow citizens through them. We need not always agree about outcomes, but should be united in engagement with others. Individuals that are not reconciled will lack this identity with others and sense of social and political connection.

Hegel's problem of poverty is understood as the problem that some in society will be unable to achieve reconciliation. This is because reconciliation can be denied for persons in poverty. The wider issue is that Hegel endorses *laissez faire* capitalism for his ideal state. Hegel recognises that this form of capitalism—notwithstanding whatever merits it may have—will lead inevitably to some citizens living in poverty because of how capitalism operates.

Now let us turn to this problem and how the two leading views grapple with its solution. Avineri (1972) sees this problem as structural. In Avineri's view, Hegel's endorsement of capitalism is at the heart of the

problem. It is because he supports capitalism which creates inevitable poverty and so guarantees that some citizens will never achieve reconciliation with the state. Avineri argues that Hegel has an easy solution: abandon capitalism! The argument is that if Hegel abandons capitalism and endorses instead a different economic system, such as socialism, that did not permit for poverty this could solve Hegel's problem. The problem of poverty is an avoidable problem caused by Hegel's acceptance of capitalism. If capitalism is replaced, then poverty can be avoided and every individual can achieve political reconciliation with the state.

A second leading view is Plant (1981). He argues for a less radical solution to Hegel's problem. Plant agrees with Avineri that capitalism should be the focus for our reform. However, while Avineri believes it must be replaced, Plant claims capitalism need be reformed instead—and so Plant does not agree with Avineri that Hegel must reject capitalism to avoid the problem of poverty. If the problem is that capitalism *can* create poverty, then how might this be tackled? One idea is Avineri's claim we should abandon capitalism for a different economic system. But a second idea is Plant's claim that we can *reform* capitalism so that Hegel can retain it in his system, but so the problems faced by Hegel might not arise.

For example, Plant argues that Hegel's state should provide more public sector jobs to accommodate any individuals without work because of poor market conditions until these conditions improve so they can return to the private sector again. Plant's idea is that the problem of poverty is created by a lack of work. But the state can create work for these individuals: this can help safeguard citizens from the effects of poverty while keeping all citizens productive.

This section should make clear the two different approaches to solving Hegel's problem of poverty. Each recognises this as an *economic* problem requiring an *economic* solution. Avineri claims the problem is capitalism itself. A new economic system should be endorsed to replace capitalism. A new economic system would overcome what is, for Avineri, an economic problem. Every individual might be able to achieve reconciliation as a result. Plant argues the problem is capitalism as *laissez faire* capitalism. We do not require a new economic system altogether, but only a reformed model of what we have. If capitalism was better regulated permitting a larger public sector, then this can provide work where

necessary for persons lacking it. This economic problem can be solved by an economic approach. While Avineri and Plant propose different ways forward, each identifies a similar problem and kinds of solutions.

### What is the Problem of Poverty?

The problem of poverty emerges over a few pages of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. In sections 240 to 248, Hegel presents us with the problem and its possible solution. Scholars are not divided on the problem, but disagree widely on how it might be solved. Let us now move section by section to examine carefully Hegel's explanation to see if it helps us understand where the two leading views have gone wrong.

In section 240, Hegel says: 'Since civil society is obliged to feed its members, it also has the right to urge them to provide for their own livelihoods' (Hegel 1990: §240A).<sup>2</sup> This comment indicates a concern about individuals being able to feed themselves. Hegel says that 'every human being has a right to demand a livelihood from society' (1990: §240A). His understanding is not that society must create jobs and wealth out of nothing. On the contrary, society must make possible the conditions under which individuals can earn a living for themselves. The state makes possible such a livelihood, but individuals must come forward and make use of the opportunities available to them. He notes briefly here that what is 'at stake' is 'not just starvation', but 'the need to prevent a rabble' (Hegel 1990: §240A). While Hegel has not said anything yet about who *the rabble* is, he indicates that their creation is to be avoided and their problem is more material (*e.g.*, 'not just starvation'). These are important points we come back to shortly.

The following section 241 claims that individuals may be reduced 'to poverty' by 'physical factors and circumstances based on external conditions' (Hegel 1990: §241). Our lack of material wealth might be such a circumstance that might reduce us to poverty. However, Hegel is clear here that economic reasons alone are not to blame. He says: 'they are more or less deprived of all the advantages of society, such as the ability to acquire skills and education in general, as well as of the administration of justice, health care, and often even of the consolation of religion' (Hegel 1990: §241).

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<sup>2</sup> All references to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* are to G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. A. W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. 'R' indicates Remarks and 'A' for any Additions.

Some of these advantages appear to have some link to material wealth or its lack. For example, access to the courts and medical care suggest that the poverty Hegel has in mind is economic. However, this may not be the best reading of this passage. Our enjoyment of religion need not have any cost and our lacking skills and education suggests rather an absence of capabilities instead. It is true that Hegel discusses these in terms of kinds 'of want', but it is also true that he claims the help that those in poverty may require includes 'emotion and love' (Hegel 1990: §242). These comments do not paint an unambiguous view of poverty as a purely economic problem at all.

The next three sections develop Hegel's notion of the rabble in greater detail. Section 243 claims that an unrestricted civil society and its capitalist marketplace will contribute to an expanding number of individuals taking part and increasing industry (Hegel 1990: §243). But Hegel further claims that this will lead to an 'accumulation of wealth with negative consequences for many workers (Hegel 1990: §243). These consequences are that an expansion of industry and workers will contribute to greater specialisation leading to more individuals becoming ever more dependent on others as each pursues a greater 'limitation of particular work' (Hegel 1990: §243). This is a problem for Hegel because it 'leads to an inability to feel and enjoy the wider freedoms' arising within civil society more widely (Hegel 1990: §243). In other words, increasing industrialisation does not lead to more of us doing the same work, but more of us specialising in individual work that ties us each together in an intricate web of connections that can be difficult to fully appreciate. Our work can be a source of liberation and fulfilment, but also a cause of our feeling trapped and even disconnected as wealth concentrates in fewer hands. Hegel says later that 'this shows that, despite an *excess of wealth*, civil society is *not wealthy enough*...to prevent an excess of poverty and the formation of a rabble' (Hegel 1990: §245).

Hegel's most famous comment on poverty captures why this is a problem:

When a large mass of people sinks below the level of a certain standard of living that feeling of right, integrity and honour which comes from supporting oneself by one's own activity and work is lost. This leads to the creation of a *rabble*, which in turn makes it much easier for disproportionate wealth to be concentrated in a few hands (Hegel 1990: §244).

These comments are understood as key to the idea that Hegel's idea of poverty is an *economic* idea. It seems inescapable that poverty is linked here with individuals falling below 'a certain standard of living'. While a few become disproportionately wealthy, these resources are denied to the greater majority. Poverty seems clearly about people lacking sufficient resources to enjoy minimally decent lives.

It is easy to see why most Hegel scholars accept either the Avineri or Plant interpretations. Hegel appears critical of capitalism's potential for alienating the workers it ought to be liberating through the impersonal connections between workers and their work it creates-and this is manifest in wealth becoming concentrated in the hands of the few at the top at the expense of the many on the bottom. Avineri's critique that we should address this problem through adopting a new system of economic exchange that can overcome these concerns looks promising. In contrast, Plant can argue the concern is not so much capitalism *per se*, but 'unrestricted' capitalism. If we want to solve Hegel's problem of poverty, then we do not require the more extreme solution proposed by Avineri. Instead, we can accept Plant's more moderate proposal that we support a sufficiently regulated market economy and this can be our way of overcoming the problems identified by Hegel. These economic interpretations of Hegel's problem of poverty gain further support from his comments that a solution is to establish foreign colonies so that more can 'gain satisfaction for their needs by their work' (Hegel 1990: §248A). But is this correct?

### **Poverty Beyond Economics**

Both Avineri's and Plant's readings rest on an important mistake. They understand Hegel's problem of poverty as an *economic* problem requiring an *economic* solution. I have already considered their arguments and the evidence in support of their positions. In this section, I explain why this shared understanding of Hegel's problem is incorrect. This has consequences for the conclusions we should draw from Hegel's analysis.

We should first return to Hegel's most famous comment on poverty. Recall his statement that what people in poverty lose is 'that *feeling* of right, integrity and honour' (Hegel 1990: §244). This claim indicates that poverty is not a mere fact of how many resources we have, but a sense we have about ourselves.

This interpretation is given further support in Hegel's Addition to this section. Hegel says: 'Poverty in itself does not reduce people to a rabble; a rabble is created only by the disposition associated with poverty, by inward rebellion against the rich, against society, the government, etc.' (Hegel 1990: §244A). This is a highly important passage that must be unpacked. Hegel is now explicit: poverty is not an economic status, but a state of mind. It is not the amount of money in our pockets or property we possess that determines whether we are in poverty, but our dispositions. Anyone with any amount of wealth might possess such a state of mind. To some degree, any one of us might be in poverty in the sense implied here.

Poverty is a specific mind-set and it is often associated with being poor. Hegel is clear that our being poor is relative to the society we find ourselves in (Hegel 1990: 244A). To be poor in one country might be more affluent in another. But the question is: so what *is* this mind-set that defines poverty?

The answer is Hegel's comment about 'inward rebellion'. To be in poverty is to adopt a rabble *mentality*. This is a feeling -a feeling of alienation from others. To be in inward rebellion is to not identify oneself with others. A rabble view the wider society as an other. Society's laws might constrain all, but a rabble mentality would claim they are constraints created and imposed by others on them. Society is viewed as 'them' in a them versus us conflict. This division will appear unbridgeable for the alienated: society and its laws are determined by others without acknowledgement -or perhaps not even awareness- of 'our', the rabble's, wants and aspirations. No matter how loud the rabble voice, the rabble believe it will not be heard (see Brooks 2015).

None of this might be true. Society may extend to all -rabble or not- an equal vote and equal opportunities for participation. The problem is that, for the rabble, what counts is the feeling of self-identity they have: their *conviction* about their social and political alienation. Alienation is not a simple question of whether people enjoy certain opportunities, but the more difficult issue of whether people possess a conviction about themselves in relation to others. It can be easier to solve problems associated with political justice than personal convictions. For example, we can ensure each person has a single vote and political parties a fair hearing in public elections. But

how to win over hearts, as well as minds? Note that Hegel's problem of poverty has a further counterintuitive consequence. Hegel's rabble includes not only those in economic poverty, but also the fabulously wealthy: rabble membership may be mostly composed of persons from each group. This is because the very wealthy can share in a sense of alienated disconnection that the very poor can possess. Each can look to laws, institutions and even social mores as rules that are by others, for others and should not apply to them.

### **Conclusion**

This article has focused on Hegel's problem of poverty. There are two leading interpretations proposed by Avineri and Plant. Each draws different conclusions, but they both see Hegel's problem of poverty as an economic problem that requires an economic solution. There are no shortage of comments by Hegel that associate a lack of economic wealth with poverty used to support these interpretations.

The problem is that Hegel's understanding of poverty is about our *convictions*, not our *resources*. What makes us a rabble is a feeling of disconnection from others and not the fact that we may own less than others. This disconnected feeling is a conviction about our alienation from others. It is true that economic hardship can make this sense of alienation more likely, but: first, economic wealth does not determine whether anyone is in Hegelian poverty and, secondly, poverty is a state of mind that anyone can possess including the very wealthy.

What is interesting about this view is it leads to a significant reimagining of the kind of problem that poverty is for Hegel's political philosophy. It is widely thought to be a problem that Hegel indicated, but does not solve. I have already argued that Hegel's understanding of poverty as purely economic is a mistake. However, the claim that being a member of the rabble is made possible by our having a conviction about ourselves in relation to others is a more accurate depiction of why poverty is a problem for Hegel, but it remains a problem for which Hegel offers no convincing answers.



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