




2020

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Recommended Citation

Hacek, Ryan Andrew P. (2020) "Hegelian Agency and Communication in William Gaddis' JR," *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 54.

Available at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications/vol1/iss1/54>

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Cover Page Footnote

Many thanks to Professor Christopher Yeomans for helping with this research, and to the Purdue University Honors College for approving and funding it.

Hegelian Agency and Communication in William Gaddis' *JR*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the relation between different forms of agency (as conceptualized by GWF Hegel) in the capitalist systems presented in postmodern literature. The subject of my paper is William Gaddis' *JR* and its usage of postmodern techniques (from telephone conversations to clashing dialogue snippets) to express the chaos of late-stage capitalism. This paper argues that one can use Gaddis' narrative to extrapolate the significance of Hegel's account of agency for our own contemporary world, because Gaddis depicts individuals in capitalism having different forms of agency within different spheres and through different projects. This multiplicity can be understood through Hegel's division of agency into self-appropriation, self-determination, and self-governance. Hegel admits the possibility of one kind of agency overcrowding the others. Gaddis' picture of capitalism shows this possibility in action by having self-governance crowd out other kinds of agency, in particular through (1) commodified education through television; (2) the decline from established status to individualized contract work; and (3) the focus on materialism for its own sake. The child protagonist JR Vansant further demonstrates this by accumulating capital as his only want and replacing the agency of others with his agency. He diminishes others' linguistic agency by talking through the phone or intermediaries, and their extra-linguistic agency by assigning them to projects they would normally reject. Ultimately, by extrapolating Hegel's division of agency through Gaddis' postmodern lens, one shows how capitalism heightens tensions between agencies and how art resolves these tensions.

Keywords: Early Modern Philosophy, Postmodern Literature, Hegel, Theory of Action

Introduction

This paper analyzes the relation between different forms of agency (as conceptualized by GWF Hegel) in the capitalist systems presented in postmodern literature. The subject of my paper is William Gaddis' *JR* and its usage of postmodern techniques (from telephone conversations to clashing dialogue snippets) to express the chaos of late-stage capitalism. This paper argues that one can use Gaddis' narrative to extrapolate the significance of Hegel's account of agency for our own contemporary world, because Gaddis depicts individuals in capitalism having different forms of agency within different spheres and through different projects. This multiplicity can be understood through Hegel's division of agency into self-appropriation, self-determination, and self-governance.

GWF Hegel's theory of agency can be summarized as a three-part system (according to scholar Christopher Yeomans): self-appropriation, self-determination/specification of content, and self-governance/effectiveness. Self-appropriation means recognizing that one has a will/agency, self-determination is recognizing what the will wants, and self-governance involves manipulating the world to get what an agent wants (Yeomans 2-3). Hegel states that these types of agency are harmonious in the right contexts, such as when as the individual acts in accordance with the state. Modern Hegelian scholars note Hegel's warning that these agencies can be affected depending on the project in which one participates or the institution with which one associates. For instance, self-governance can take prominence so long as an individual takes on a project which epitomizes effectiveness at accumulating income, and that individual is supported

by an institution which shifts language and thought towards self-governance as the dominant form of agency. This kind of institutional change and project is present within *JR*; which shows how the language of capitalism affects the development of self-appropriation and self-determination in individuals.

Hegel admits the possibility of one kind of agency overcrowding the others. Gaddis' picture of capitalism shows this possibility in action by having self-governance crowd out other kinds of agency, in particular through (1) commodified education through television; (2) the decline from established status to individualized contract work; and (3) the focus on materialism for its own sake. The child protagonist JR Vansant further demonstrates this by accumulating capital as his only want and replacing the agency of others with his agency. He diminishes others' linguistic agency by talking through the phone or intermediaries, and their extra-linguistic agency by assigning them to projects they would normally reject. Ultimately, by extrapolating Hegel's division of agency through Gaddis' postmodern lens, one can show how capitalism can heighten tensions between agencies and how art provides a resolution to these tensions.

Summary of Novel and “Televised Education”

William Gaddis' *JR* centers around multiple characters that participate in a capitalist society. The main plot of the disjointed and fragmented narrative centers around several teachers that sign up to work for a child named JR Vansant in his bid to gain unlimited financial capital. JR Vansant abuses his workers in both minor and major ways. Minor ways are sending people on projects they don't like (such as preventing music teacher Edward Bast from finishing his ever-diminishing musical piece) (Gaddis 562-564). Major ways are demoting/firing some who cannot fulfill their financial obligations to his company (e.g. Bast when JR learns his acquisitions

resulted in an Indian uprising) (Gaddis 639). The novel ends with artistic characters like Bast and author Jack Gibbs either leaving their work incomplete (e.g. Gibbs' leukemia struggle) or shortening it for compromise (e.g. Bast writing a cello solo instead of a symphony).

Gaddis' conflict between art and corporate life emphasizes the key tension between self-determination and self-governance. Artists obey institutions to get what they immediately want--monetary and corporate success--yet fail to understand that they sacrificed their self-determined initial wants in favor of false wants made by a false sense of self-governance. Art is ultimately mechanized by capitalist industry and the artist can be exploited to further materialist aims. Gaddis proposed this in one of his essays through the metaphor of the piano player (which Gibbs later uses through his unfinished novel, *Agape Agape*) (Gaddis 287-89). The electronic instrument plays beautifully, but it lacks a human element of passion. This is demonstrated when Bast writes music for a zebra enclosure, only to find himself immensely dissatisfied with his product artistically and financially (Gaddis 702). This dissatisfaction is the result of one form of agency replacing another, a Hegelian fear Gaddis articulates through the several ways that capitalism encroaches upon American life. One point of examination is commodified television replacing traditional education, and its connection to Hegelian philosophy and agency.

In education, the key tension to consider is between self-appropriation and self-governance. Allen Wood explains that Hegelian education (or *Bildung*) lies in the formative self-development of the mind and spirit through "experience," where a being discovers their identity while striving to actualize the self in the process of discovering (Wood 3). *Bildung* is a fundamentally self-directed activity and distinguished from a child's upbringing through parents/pedagogues. Upbringing enables the child to be consciously for itself what adults already are--a rational (which, for Hegel, equates to a spiritual) being. Yet Hegel understands that the

child is already rational/spiritual, and thus *Bildung* is meant to be self-directed, so the child can rationally cognize objects initially outside their understanding (Wood 4). One can see how this connects to agency through self-appropriation. This form of agency means understanding one has a will, which entails recognizing oneself as a rational being that can understand rationally how the world is itself rational. It also involves the conflict between reason and emotions--reason is based in understanding the world's inherently rational laws, and emotions are based in feelings that drive one to follow their own subjective values. Hegel warns that people oriented toward subjective values can replace objective values/aims of the community with their own subjective aims (Hegel 1999, 8). Thus, educational development is needed to prevent that shallowness from forming -- it involves shattering the barrier between reason as self-conscious spirit (reason/aims considered subjectively) and reason as present reality (reason/aims considered objectively). This creates a reconciliation between one who demands to conceive clearly (subjective aims), and a reality based on what is and self-completed (objective aims) (Hegel 1999, 11).

But this education is dependent on a space that allows congenial disagreement with universal values, not merely a conditioning of environmental stimuli (Wood 4). Gaddis was critical of classrooms using this conditioning and expressed this in *JR*. The opening classrooms have teachers show educational videos that mindlessly relay information to children, and this connection to stimuli fosters an echo chamber that affects their linguistic agency (Gaddis 38). Even in open spaces, teachers in *JR* relate basic principles entirely to capitalist interests: Clancy the Math teacher instructs students about percentages by relating it to the desire for profits (Gaddis 29). This stimulus further manipulates a child's extra-linguistic agency by replacing self-appropriation with a false sense of self-governance. The child recognizes not that they have a will, but instead what the world wants out of them and how they can manipulate it. The child

prioritizes feeling and subjective aims over right and objective aims. The capitalist reality of wanting monetary gain has replaced the self-development towards rationality that Hegel demanded and Gaddis admired. Instead, the children ignore their own self-development towards their identity in favor of one told for them by capitalism. They are exploiters of objective institutions and other people, craving money over individual agency. JR Vansant himself epitomizes this capitalist education by only communicating on the phone to his employees throughout the book (his first appearance is playing with a phone) affecting their linguistic agency (Gaddis 34-35). He further exercises a paradoxical and false sense of self-governance. It's paradoxical because self-governance demands that other forms of agency should be balanced with it and false because self-governance further demands the recognition of other people for their agency and interests.

The Decline from Status to Contract

Hegelian recognition is prominent in the second way Gaddis is similar to Hegel, which is the decline from status within an established hierarchy to individualized contract work. The key tension to consider is between the false self-governance of elitist individuals (and respective projects) versus the state (Hegel's highest form of social existence made up of citizens/individuals in different groups) that harmonizes the different projects of agency. Hegel's political writings investigate such tensions in the context of his late-18th century struggles, such as the role of ideal citizens in "The German Constitution." Ideal citizens connect to status, the position one finds themselves in society, in that citizens connect to states. Hegel articulated that statuses, or the political dynamics of citizens, created the Holy Roman Empire, and that the Empire collapsed because those statuses were no longer present, due to the progression of history. For Hegel, a positive status change helps the individual "have a share in universal

affairs” and “allows [them] considerable freedom in subordinate activities of a universal kind” (Hegel 2002, 23-25). This means that an ideal citizen should focus less on the individual will of him/herself, and more on the universal will of the people around them. The statuses allow people to understand what their obligations were to society; one person could be clearly obliged to another based on their status. This is opposed to a contract, which makes people formally equal individuals and thus forces them to figure out those obligations to society. *The Philosophy of Right* connects contract to "arbitrary will," where the will is assigned by contracting parties and not universal will in-and-for-itself (Hegel 1999, 106). An arbitrary will would be detrimental to Hegel's ideal state, as it would have people think only of themselves and not for others.

Hegel was afraid status would decline to contract and predicted certain elements of it in "On the English Reform Bill." England in his time "had its privileges lie in the hands of those who possess so many privileges" (Hegel 2002, 240). This is because the bill "sanctions the principle that a free income derived from landed property fully qualifies an individual for the task of judging and deciding on [a person's] capacity for the business of government and political administration with which parliament are concerned" (Hegel 2002, 250). Hegel proclaimed that contract failed to utterly eliminate the group statuses that were within Feudalism. The German Constitution explicitly defined whether one was a servant or a lord, one had responsibilities that were legally dictated by that constitution. But modern contracts heighten the tensions of these statuses; the upper classes exploit the lower classes and perpetuate a mechanistic, uneven hierarchy. Gaddis extended Hegel's fear to entail the further alienation of the individual in a capitalist system. Contract reduces people to a situation where all individuals are atomistic, alienating them enough to where the individual/universal will-for-itself dynamic is irrelevant. The subject is now part of a mechanistic state, where one has relationships based more on

arbitrary will. This mechanistic state is predicated on corporate capitalism, where one is bound (as a contracting individual) not towards themselves but towards those they work for.

But all Hegel saw was that wealth rapidly accumulated within land. He could have never imagined the accelerationist progressive mercantile estate of modern capitalism. To articulate this accelerationism, one turns to Gaddis' excoriations of capitalism in *JR*. Bast laments the rapid ascension and decline of Eagle Mills (representative of all materialist, capitalist companies), and that the company should "stop somewhere." JR states that "that's the whole thing Bast...that's all Eagle Mills is..." (Gaddis 298). Capitalism is not designed to stop, instead it keeps statuses based around the alienation of will-for-itself. Beamish (the lawyer for an artist's stepmother) talks to artists Eigen and Gibbs about how caring for a child's assets requires letters of guardianship and judicial accounting. Gibbs laments the legal and financial bureaucracy of establishing child custody as the result of the "decline of status to contract" (Gaddis 393). Since capitalism emphasizes contract, it delegitimizes universal considerations in favor of arbitrary ones, alienating individuals so that simple decisions (child custody) become complex difficulties through bureaucracy. The language of *JR* itself emphasizes this point: it reduces the status of individuals by taking away primary identifiers (scene, plot progression, character names, etc.) to show how "status" is defined by who owns what and who's dealing with who. Statuses only occur with interactions as deals get clearer and the capitalist bureaucracy shows itself.

The Impact of Materialism

This leads into the final way Hegel and Gaddis intersect; both emphasize the strong impact of materialism. The key tension of this is between actual self-determination of conscience vs. a pure negation of conscience from the false self-governance of a mechanized and televised state. Leftist Hegelian Karl Marx used the M-C-M/Money-Commodity-Money model as a way

to articulate how money's value is enhanced by commodity, which is then sold to make more money, thus "the money is not sold, it is merely advanced" (Marx 164). JR Vansant initially learns the M-C-M model from Governor Cates, who states Amy Joubert should have taught that the "only damn time you spend money is to make money...money is credit (Gaddis 108). This formula is the principle of the capitalist state defined by contract and education.

This formula further affects the development of conscience, which, according to modern Hegelian Dean Moyar, is a condition of individual agency that gives individuals a "circumscribed claim over ethical content...distinguishing between one's own agency and the agency of others") (Moyar 15-16). Moyar claims that in an ordinary state, the principle of ethical conscience is the principle of the rule of law. However, in a disordered state, individual interests come to have ethical standing within the state. These individual interests are based in a principle of free spirit that is self-knowledge and the activity of liberation, making free human activity the source of all normative legitimacy (Moyar 27). Hegel and Moyar state that "free human activity" is taken to an extreme as an atomism of this freedom, with Moyar stating that conscience "also means taking a position that I can do nothing other than [whatever action one takes] (like the conscientious objector)...but the problem is that one can claim indeterminacy as a means to justify doing something by claiming they 'had no choice'" (Moyar 32). Those capitalists who blame their actions on a horrible system and their lack of choice thus neglect their own agency.

JR's materialism is coded by this atomism of freedom, which makes him project a lack of responsibility for whatever happens in the story. He negates personal responsibility by making his workers believe that their contractual relationship leads to having no choice of individual agency. To do this, he alienates his workers in three ways: not recognizing their interests unless they suit his, putting them onto projects that fit material gain, and alienating interpersonal

relationships through phone conversation. This is the opposite of a Hegelian conscience, where all avenues of decision-making are taken into account to produce an all-things-considered judgement, which emphasizes individual agency and self-determination of personal wants. Instead, JR employs a pure negation, “which comes from all avenues of decision-making being negated so it can be integrated into the overall judgement [of a single entity]” (i.e. JR making the decisions and thus affecting the workers’ agency, forsaking other possibilities of exercising individual agency) (Moyar 35).

Solutions and Conclusion

If there's one thing to take from comparing Hegel and Gaddis, it's that the former could never anticipate and provide solutions for the ethical dilemmas of the 20th century. But perhaps by using principles derived from Gaddis and modern Hegelians, one can update Hegel's account for the 21st century. I would propose that a solution to television education, contracts of a mechanized state, and free-activity-materialism in a three-fold system. The first would be allowing for individualized education that creates unique projects encourage congenial disagreement of universal values and activities. This emphasizes rational-spiritual understanding over emotional-subjective understanding. This would occur, according to Hegelian scholar Christopher Yeomans, through projects which foster engagement with objective purpose and subjective intuition. The former acts through talents which specify the activities an agent can do and are cultivated through habit. The latter acts through interests that locate an agent's place in the world and figure out what talents they'll pursue (Yeomans 70-72). Both define each other in Yeomans' cyclical understanding of agency, and an ideal education system would introduce talents and bring out interests to encourage alternative thinking far from capitalist metaphors.

This leads into the second solution to the decline into mechanistic contract, Robert Brandom's *Spirit of Trust*. He articulates that even in an atomically alienating system, people are still evaluating others' actions and constantly making judgement calls. Brandom's *Bildung* is about managing those judgment calls and figuring out which one was right or wrong (trusting that the outcome was correct for all parties involved). The best a community can hope for is congenial disagreement; aim at agreement but remember that reasonable disagreement happens even with trust (Brandom 367-369). This would alleviate the alienation from a "mechanized state" by allowing the synthesis of the universal will of the state and the individual will of citizens. Common concerns are worked out into Hegelian universal principles, having citizens exercise self-governance by engaging in rational consideration of all possible values.

The final solution is the replacement of materialist values with idealist values. This would mean focusing the institution and individual upon a higher universal principle that they can follow with mutual recognition and understanding. The creation of new art can be an individualized result of this higher principle, as it gives freedom to the individual (for Hegel) and the community (for Gaddis). This is accomplished through how art and recognition match together. Recognition for Gaddis is aesthetic, placing the artist in communication between self and community and organizing art "in the service of a ritual" (Vanwesenbeeck 143). In contrast, recognition for Hegel is the struggle for selfhood between two dominating consciousnesses, achieving balance between the two. Gaddis' recognition is a timelier update for Hegel's recognition, allowing selfhood to be defined by what the individual can give to a community. The artist would put the self within his/her artwork, and then contribute to the community in an idealized, meaningful way. This is the final message of *JR* as depicted through a Hegelian and

postmodern lens--although compromises have to be made, the creation of art is still a powerful tool for understanding how the self can fit within a society.

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