What Hegel Enables: Family Abolition as Immanent Critique

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Few of Hegel's commitments are firmer than his defence of the family; few feminist demands are more radical than the call to abolish it. That the two might nonetheless illuminate one another is the wager of Andreja Novakovic's *Hegel on the Family Form* — and a timely wager, for the family's form has seldom been so openly contested. A resurgent traditionalism extols the nuclear household — the breadwinning husband, the homemaking wife, the well-kept home — as a model of the good life; and it is met — and countered — by the renewed force of a feminist demand: abolish the family!

Abolition, in this context, is spelled out through the Hegelian notion of *Aufhebung*. *Aufhebung*, Sophie Lewis writes, is a simultaneous "destruction-preservation-transformation-realization" (Lewis 2022, 81). It aims at "preserving what is crucial to [the family] — human love, connection, care, community, romance — without binding these qualities to the particular form of the household within capitalism" (O'Brien 2023, 56). The family's form, in short, has become a site of open political and theoretical contestation. Lewis and O'Brien have brought family abolition back onto the political agenda of the present, and in glossing it as *Aufhebung* they suggest a connection to Hegel.

But it is Novakovic who develops that connection from the perspective of a Hegel scholar: in her lucid and felicitous book, she deftly links the abolitionist demand with Hegel's theory of the family. She concedes from the outset that Hegel is an "unlikely ally" for feminist struggle (4). Granted, he is one of the very few philosophers of the Western canon to treat the family as a major site of theoretical reflection; he places it centre stage in his theory of ethical life. Yet the reasons not to turn to Hegel for feminist thought are overwhelming. He conceives of the family as a pillar of a form of ethical life that he takes

to be, on the whole, worth upholding, and defends it as a sphere in which freedom is, in principle, realized. He rejects forms of social criticism that prefer unrealized ideals to the theorizing of what is — however deficiently — already realized. And he holds *prima facie* essentializing views on gender roles, which cannot easily be pulled apart from his views on marriage and the family.

Against this backdrop, Novakovic astutely interrogates whether Hegel's account of the family and the idea of family abolition are as irreconcilable as they appear.[1] While Hegel does not call for the family's abolition, she argues, he nonetheless offers "ways of thinking about it" (10). There are two distinct claims here. **(1)** Hegel's account does not rule out abolishing the family in the sense of radically transforming it. **(2)** It tells us something about the stakes of doing so, by illuminating the goods of the family.

To make the case, the book first establishes the family as a sphere that is to realize freedom (5–9). Three chapters then develop this Hegelian motif through three concepts — singular individuality, ethical love, and material resources — which Novakovic aligns with the three relationships constitutive of the nuclear family. The realization of singular individuality through mutual recognition is located in the relationship between brother and sister (14–27); the realization of 'ethical love' in the relationship between husband and wife (27–42); and the development and transmission of shared material resources in the relationship between parents and children (42–57). At each step she asks which aspects of the bourgeois institutional framework that Hegel describes are indispensable to the realization of these goods, and which are inessential (12). Her answer is consistent: Hegel "does not rule out a radical transformation of the family along the lines that family abolitionists would like to see take place" (12–13).

The individual arguments are insightful and nuanced. The first chapter contends that blood ties are insufficient for the kind of recognition central to the experience of singular individuality, and that such individuality cannot be recognized if the family is taken in isolation from other social institutions.[2] The vocabulary of recognition here is Novakovic's, and the tradition's, rather than Hegel's own — he does not frame his account of the family in the *Philosophy of Right* in those terms — so reading the chapter through it

[1] This is not to ask whether Hegel was a feminist, or to read (progressive) Hegel contra (conservative) Hegel. The question is rather which (if any) aspects of Hegel's texts are of interest to feminists (13).

[2] Novakovic, following Hegelian scholarship, stresses the concept of recognition as central to Hegel's theory of the family. However, Hegel does not himself invoke recognition, in his account of the family, in the *Philosophy of Right*.

is already an interpretive decision. The second attends to passages "perhaps hidden in the text" (38), where Hegel "strews hints" (30) that, on Novakovic's reading, point to ways in which heterosexual marriage might hinder rather than foster ethical love — for instance, by undermining equality and certain cognitive capacities (39–42). The third re-evaluates the role of gestation and motherhood and asks whether Hegel's distinction between property (*Eigentum*) and assets (*Vermögen*) in intergenerational relationships points beyond the family as a privatized source of care.

Novakovic's project is ambitious, innovative, and carefully articulated. Unlike the feminist interpretations of Hegel that, half a century ago, opened up a much-needed space for undogmatic engagement with the Western canon — Carla Lonzi's now canonical *Let's Spit on Hegel* (1970) among them — she is scrupulous about which texts she reads together, and explicit about her "willingness [to] take his texts in directions that he himself probably could not have imagined and likely would not have desired" (13). It is therefore idle to criticize the obvious: that Novakovic reads Hegel against himself, against the canon, and against the grain.

The interesting question lies elsewhere. For even a reader sympathetic to her progressive interpretation, and prepared to grant the textual evidence she assembles, may be left with the strong impression that Hegel's theory of the family is neither especially open to, nor suggestive of, radical transformation. My aim in what follows is twofold. I first specify why this difficulty is not incidental but structural. I then develop the reading I take to be more promising — and which I defend at greater length elsewhere[3] — on which Hegel's enduring contribution to feminist thought lies in his *method*, and on which family abolition is best understood as a *Hegelian immanent critique* of the family.

The difficulty can be stated as a dilemma internal to Novakovic's two claims. Whenever Hegel articulates a central good of the family — paradigmatically, ethical love — he does so through an irreducibly patriarchal lens; Novakovic herself concedes that Hegel's concept of the family and his biologistic views on womanhood "cannot be fully separated" (13). But then her two claims pull in opposite directions. To sustain the first — that Hegel's theory is *itself* open to radical transformation — she must abstract the goods from their patriarchal instantiation, treating the lens as inessential. To sustain the second — that his theory illuminates these goods with a depth feminist thought can use — she

[3] I develop this argument in my dissertation, 'In and Against the Family: A Hegelian Case for Abolition' (ms.).

must preserve the conceptual specificity that makes them distinctively Hegelian. But that specificity is inextricable from the patriarchal instantiation through which Hegel articulates it: a good such as ethical love is rendered determinate only by its embedding in the institutional form that betrays it. To preserve the depth, then, is to preserve the very instantiation the first claim must treat as inessential. In short, the more she abstracts, in order to secure openness, the thinner and less distinctively Hegelian the goods become; the more she preserves, in order to secure depth, the less plausible it is that the theory licenses radical transformation. Either horn weakens the very bridge between Hegel and family abolitionism that she sets out to build.

The first horn can be made vivid. Family abolitionists seek to 'minimize marriage' — to extend equal rights and recognition to a plurality of relationships: friendships, comradeship, broader networks of care.[4] Hegel, by contrast, plainly wants to *maximize* marriage, understood as a dyadic, heterosexual bond, and in explicit opposition to other interpersonal relationships. Three features of his account of 'ethical love' make this clear. He insists that the two parties enter marriage 'undivided', which implies that the marital bond is necessarily dyadic (§167) and forecloses not merely polyamory — as Novakovic grants (38) — but any multiplicity of lovers.[5] The recognition accorded the married couple is established expressly in contrast to other modes of relating, thereby championing heterosexual, romantic love. And "ethical love is incomplete without children" (43), which, in Hegel's own period above all, reinforces the requirement that the couple be heterosexual. [6] To ask, of a structure so tightly integrated, "which aspects [of the family] can in principle be abandoned" (11) may strike the reader as un-Hegelian in spirit, and as sitting uneasily with Novakovic's own concession of inextricability.[7] The worry is not merely that this abstraction thins the good; it is that lifting a good such as ethical love out of its institutional setting offends a commitment Novakovic shares — that a practice is rendered determinate only through its embedding in a whole network of others — so

[4] *Minimizing Marriage* (2012) by Elizabeth Brake is cited throughout the second chapter. It argues, among other things, for equal recognition and equal (minimal) state benefits for a diverse array of care networks. Brake is not herself thinking in family-abolitionist terms.

[5] Novakovic does not discuss §167.

[6] Thimo Heisenberg (forthcoming) argues that the grain of truth contained in Hegel's account of childless marriage as incomplete is that a committed loving relationship comes with a general social requirement to care about somebody else.

[7] I have pressed the dilemma through ethical love because that is where it is most lucid; I do not claim that recognition and *Vermögen* generate it to the same degree, only that any good Hegel articulates reaches us through the same patriarchal lens — so the tension is structural in origin even where it is less acute.

that the abstraction costs us the very determinacy that made the good worth analyzing.[8]

On Novakovic's behalf, one might reply that she never claims the family's goods *require* the bourgeois form, only that they were discovered and developed through it — that "specific goods ... became first realizable through, and hence first knowable through, participation in family relations" (10). On this view the tight integration just described shows only how a good such as ethical love was historically articulated, not that it cannot be prised from its patriarchal vehicle: the first horn, the reply runs, mistakes a genetic point for a constitutive one.

The reply is a good one, but it does not secure the claim it is meant to defend. To grant that the goods are neither realized in nor secured by the family — that the institution is neither necessary for nor ideally suited to them — is already to concede the point about inextricability in another register: it shifts the question from what the family *is* to the social conditions under which its goods *could* be realized. That is not a question Hegel's theory of the family answers, and it is not one Novakovic pursues. Her distinction, in short, tells against her first claim rather than for it: it shows not that Hegel's theory is *itself* open to radical transformation, but that the goods he locates in the family point beyond it — a conclusion she stops short of drawing.

Drawing it is the task of the reading I develop below: an immanent critique of the family, which takes Hegel's analysis of its goods as the measure of the conditions that betray them. The distinction I am pressing is not merely verbal: to say that Hegel's theory is *itself* open to radical transformation is an exegetical claim about what his account licenses, whereas to say that the goods point beyond the family is a diagnostic claim about what those goods, once analysed, demand of us. The first reads abolition out of Hegel; the second reads it through him.

Reading abolition through Hegel rather than out of him involves two distinct undertakings, which it helps to separate at the outset. The first is to recover from Hegel a method — that of immanent critique, resting on the methodological commitments set out below. The second is to turn that method on Hegel's own theory of the family: to show that his account itself displays a tension between the goods the family is said to promise and the forms that betray them, and that attending to this tension discloses the utopian potential of those goods as he conceptualizes them. The first locates what is Hegelian in family

[8]Thanks to Caroline Bowman for prompting me to make this explicit.

abolitionism; the second puts it to work.

To insist, *pace* Novakovic, on the inextricability of Hegel's concepts from their hetero-patriarchal instantiations is not to deny their feminist relevance. On the contrary. One may read Hegel's theory as an unusually elaborate articulation of patriarchal ideology and its embeddedness in bourgeois society — as drawing out, with rare explicitness, how dyadic, heterosexual love is bound up with the investment of love and property in a child, and with the intergenerational transmission of material resources. Insofar as these ideological formations continue to govern our lives, they remain of acute interest to feminist analysis and critique.

Novakovic neither subscribes to nor is especially interested in this reading; but if one is exegetically sympathetic to it, her first claim — that Hegel permits radical transformation in line with abolition — falters. Tellingly, the book's final line retreats to a more modest formulation: that Hegel's idea of the family need not be one of the "obstacles that stand in the way of finding out what lies on its other side" (57). Yet there is a significant gap between the claim that Hegel's theory poses no *obstacle* to abolitionist thought and the claim that it offers "ways of thinking about family abolition" (10). The weaker claim leaves unanswered the question that motivates the whole enterprise, at least from the feminist point of view: why anyone interested in family abolition should trouble to read Hegel at all.

The answer, I want to suggest, lies with Novakovic's second claim — that Hegel elucidates the *goods* of the family — which I take to be compelling, cogent, and genuinely productive for feminist thought. In fact, I propose to understand family abolition as *Hegelian immanent critique* of the family: a critique that analyses the goods internal to the family in order to guide the transformation of the structural conditions that impair their realization (cf. Jaeggi 2018).[9] Conceptual analysis — indeed, conceptual analysis in the Hegelian sense Novakovic favours — is indispensable to such a critique, which can be set out in three steps. First, the *explication* of the goods a social formation promises — 'ethical love', say, as a good of the family. Second, the diagnosis of the *immanent contradictions* that structurally impair their realization. Third, the articulation of the *transformative potential* implicit in the goods so analysed, which serves to orient those who would radically transform the family form. On this account the family's goods

[9]Novakovic cites Jaeggi — in her n. 30 — in glossing the family as a site of learning (10), though she does not foreground forms of life or immanent critique.

discharge a double function: as criteria of critique and as orientations for world-making.[10]

This framework dissolves the dilemma Novakovic faces, for it does not require her first claim. A reading attentive to the inextricability of concept and instantiation — a *diagnostic* reading of Hegel — can hold all of the following at once: (1) that Hegel clarifies the stakes of family abolition by identifying key social goods; (2) that his theory of the family exemplifies bourgeois-patriarchal ideology; and (3) that his concepts of singular individuality, 'ethical love' and *Vermögen* harbour a utopian potential.[11] None of these requires the further, and far more contestable, thesis that Hegel's theory of the family is *itself* open to radical change.

Immanent critique relies precisely on this inextricability. One can accept that Hegel richly theorizes the family's goods and still read him as articulating bourgeois-patriarchal ideology; it is the tension between the goods a form promises and the form that betrays them that immanent critique exploits. What presents itself, within Novakovic's framework, as a limit on Hegel's usefulness is, on this reading, the very condition of a different — and, I want to argue, more powerful — way of putting him to feminist use.

Hegel's method — the form of social analysis his philosophy makes available — is thus, on my reading, what warrants the persistent intuition that family abolitionism is Hegelian in gesture. Three methodological commitments are decisive — each, to her credit, registered by Novakovic in passing in her introduction, though the chapters that follow are designed less to develop them than to trace the goods of the individual relationships within the family. Taken together, they convert the diagnostic reading into the positive programme of a *Hegelian immanent critique* of the family (see von Samson, ms.).

The first concerns *history*. Hegel treats both social institutions and the goods they realize as historically emergent and open to transformation. 'Ethical love' is a distinctly modern concept: against a backdrop of marriage arranged for economic or dynastic ends, Hegel proposes a modern ideal in which two people fall in love largely irrespective of their families of origin and found a new household. The progressivity of this is easily missed but real: where partners had belonged primarily to their houses and patrilineal lines, the introduction of the wife as a new primary ally is, however partially, a feminist move.

Grasping this historicity is essential to identifying what in the family's promises is worth

[10] I set out this understanding of immanent critique in von Samson (2025).

[11] Jaeggi (2025) bridges this case with the demand for the socialization of housing.

preserving and what must be transformed. His method thus points beyond Hegel: a theory of the family *after* Hegel — at once temporally posterior to him and faithful to his method — must update his commitments to remain adequate to present conditions, in which liberal society promises a more encompassing freedom (the child's autonomous choice of partner, say, or queer forms of life) than the bourgeois family was built to deliver.[12]

The second concerns the *sociality of freedom*. For Hegel, freedom is realized through determinate social institutions — family, civil society, and state — which together constitute ethical life, and individual and social freedom are constitutively interdependent.[13] This is what allows the critique of the family to exceed the idiom of unjust distribution and, within the framework of immanent critique, to indict a *form of life* that fails to realize its own promises. Consider the gendered division of labour. On a merely distributive analysis, its wrong is the maldistribution of labour and resources; on the Hegelian analysis, its wrong runs deeper — it is the expression of an irrational form of life that fails to live up to the historically emergent standards of ethical love and mutual recognition it professes. The advantage is not merely academic: this analysis can name the specific wrong of the nuclear family even where households have grown internally more egalitarian and more diverse, just where purely distributive or anti-exclusivity arguments lose their grip.

The third concerns the family's *embeddedness in a wider social whole*. The goods of the several institutions — family, civil society, and state — are interconnected and mutually conditioning. It follows that the critique of any one institution must be conducted at the level of society as a whole, not at the level of the individual family or even the family form by itself. This is what renders assessable the social conditions under which goods such as love can be realized — not in this or that family, but across a social order. Here, too, Novakovic's close focus on the internal structure of each familial relationship, illuminating as it is, leaves the decisive question — under what social conditions these goods could be generally realized — largely untouched.[14]

[12]Novakovic registers the family's historicity in passing in the introduction (5, 9, 13), but the theme recedes once she turns to the specific family relationships.

[13]This way of reading Hegel is congenial to the literature on the social preconditions of freedom in Hegel (cf. Neuhouser 2000). Consider also Caroline Bowman's work on Hegel as a theorist of 'external freedom' as co-constitutive with 'internal freedom' (ms.).

[14]Novakovic's interpretation of ethical love focuses primarily on what it takes for two beings not merely to be infatuated with or to desire one another, but to find ethical love as a union — a focus on the

Taken together, these three commitments give family abolitionism its distinctively Hegelian inflection. What is Hegelian here is less any one commitment — each has analogues across critical theory — than their operating together with the inextricability thesis: because the family's goods are available only in and through the very form that betrays them, the critique must be immanent rather than imported, reconstructing its standard of judgement from the object judged.

This reading locates the value of Hegel's theory not in what it *permits* but in what it *enables*: a feminist critique that analyses the co-evolution of ideals and the patriarchal conditions of their articulation, rather than detaching the one from the other. And it vindicates the diagnostic reading defended above. For it is precisely where Hegel most emphatically defends the family as a sphere of freedom — precisely where he defends what contemporary feminists most strenuously reject, monogamy and heterosexuality — that the structure of immanent critique becomes most legible (see von Samson, ms.). The inextricability that defeats Novakovic's first claim is the very thing that makes her second contribution profound.

This vindication invites a further challenge. A sceptic might grant everything so far and still press that it secures only the *compatibility* of Hegel's thought with abolitionism, not the *alignment* that Novakovic, and I, want to claim. The objection turns on labour. Family abolitionism takes as its target — here Novakovic and I agree — the family as the *form* that *privatizes sources of care*.[15] To specify those sources one must speak of *labour*, and specifically of reproductive labour.[16] Family abolitionism is, at its core, an anti-capitalist and anti-work demand: a call for the socialization of all labour, reproductive labour included.[17]

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internal bond, not on the social conditions of its realization.

[15]This privatization is comprised of two characteristics which pertain in spite of the many mutations of the family form: first, the family as the primary source of care, especially for children; and second, a strict boundary between outside and inside, private and public (4).

[16]As Sophie Lewis puts it, the family is fundamentally a matter of labour: it is "the reason we are supposed to want to go to work, the reason we have to go to work, and the reason we *can* go to work" (2022, 4).

[17]There is little agreement about what transformation this warrants: O'Brien (2023) emphasizes prefigurative practices such as protest kitchens and occupations; Lewis cites Gleeson and Griffiths (2015) on collective crèches; Mattutat (forthcoming) resists the equation of abolition with the dissolution of the private sphere. Drawing on their work and on historical struggle in and against the family, I develop my own account of family abolition as prefigurative world-making in the present, which would render the nuclear family unnecessary through the socialization of reproductive labour, the de-establishment of the romantic couple form, and the de-coupling of resources and care from bio-genetic kinship — without abolishing privacy or private space (von Samson ms.).

Novakovic herself says almost nothing about labour.[18] To establish that "Hegel does not rule out a radical transformation of the family *along the lines that family abolitionists would like to see*" (12–13, my emphasis) would require engaging his concept of labour, and folding care labour into his conception of freedom.

But sharpened, the worry cuts deeper than coverage: the trouble is not that Novakovic does not center the concept of labour, but that the method itself may have no route to it, an immanent critique pitched at the family's internal goods threatening to bottom out in love and recognition without ever reaching the labour on which those goods depend. The objection which thus also reaches my proposal is no longer about what Hegel or Novakovic left out, but about whether immanent critique can reach labour at all.

It can. Immanent critique assesses the family's goods at the level of the social whole rather than the individual household, and so cannot but inquire into the social organization of labour — above all the privatized reproductive labour on which the bourgeois family depends.

In fact, the materials are already in Hegel's hands, where the family is integrated into civil society. Labour, for Hegel, is the social satisfaction of needs, and it is through the 'system of needs' (§189) that civil society realizes freedom as all-round interdependence. The hinge between that system and the family is *Vermögen*, the concept Hegel introduces in the household (§170) and reinvokes for the resources of civil society (§199): in both of its German senses — material assets and the capacities one is *able* to exercise (Jaeggi 2025, 386) — it names what members share in working to meet one another's needs, so that the corporation can even be called a 'second family' (§252). Llaguno emphasizes that Hegel's refusal to count reproductive labour as labour marks a 'double erasure', by sex and class, that reveals a contradiction in his theory of freedom — and complicates the possibility of identifying labour within the family (forthcoming).

But read positively, the same apparatus yields more than a contradiction. Since the labour performed in the household serves needs most directly, it fits the very definition of labour Hegel himself gives — a point Llaguno establishes; his communal system of needs, together with the double sense of *Vermögen*, then grounds a demand he never drew — the socialization of all labour, reproductive labour included, on the grounds of freedom

[18] She does, however, develop the theme elsewhere (Novakovic 2022). The historical reconstruction is especially illuminating—the paper opens with the domestic labor of Hegel's own wife, Marie (née von Tucher), and is careful to mark the class-specific character of his remarks about women.

itself. This route through the system of needs and *Vermögen* is my own; Llaguno reaches a kindred demand by another path — through that contradiction rather than through what Hegel positively affirms. The solution is shared even where the path is not, for freedom here demands a passage through the social. We are agreed, too, in our diagnosis: that Hegel detects the pathologies of civil society — the crises of the market, its atomism and self-seeking — yet fails to detect them in the bourgeois family, where they are no less at work, sustained by the privatization of care that socialization would undo.

In recovering Hegel's system of needs, the reading I have been developing puts the previous section's commitments to work — the family's embeddedness in a wider whole, the sociality of freedom — and so answers the objection where it now bites. Cataloguing the family's functions may be a task for which sociology is better equipped than Hegel; his distinctive contribution lies in a *method* that turns the analysis of goods into a critique of the conditions of their realization — the historically specific conditions under which a society promises goods such as ethical love while organizing social reproduction so as to withhold and pervert them.

Family abolition, on this account, is neither the negation of the family nor its mere reform, but the demand to *realize* — and thereby to transform — what the family itself promises: a project of world-making addressed to society as a whole and governed by the logic of determinate negation, of *Aufhebung*. Its aim is, in Barrett and McIntosh's phrase, "to transform not the family — but the society that needs it" (1991, 156): to reorganize the social conditions — above all the organization of labour and social reproduction — under which the family's promises can or cannot be met.

Read this way, Hegel's theory equips feminist thought less with conclusions than with a means of evaluating how the family's goods are instantiated, and so with a framework for assessing the contemporary crises of the family — crises that mark a widening gap between Hegel's bourgeois ideal and modern family life. The male-breadwinner household, once a demand of the (white) workers' movement, is now largely obsolete; dual-earner households proliferate as it grows impossible to keep anyone at home unwaged; and the family, idealized as a refuge from a heartless world, increasingly looks like a foundering attempt to render capitalist contradictions livable.What persists is the privatization of reproductive labour — and, with it, the demand for its socialization.

This is why a Hegelian feminism remains timely: it interrogates the entanglement of goods such as ethical love with labour, gender, and capitalist reproduction, letting the family

appear in its full ambivalence — at once an extension of capitalist heartlessness and a real if partial haven whose very promises disclose desires that might guide a different future.

That this ambivalence can be brought into focus through a close reading of Hegel is, I think, the deeper payoff of the diagnostic method I have been urging — and it is one that Novakovic's book, even though not its main intention, does a great deal to make available.

Hegel on the Family Form is a clear, careful, and genuinely original engagement with both Hegel's theory of the family and contemporary feminist theory; its discussion of childrearing, and of the pregnant woman as "genius" in the *Anthropology*, is only one of many insights I have had no space to address. If I have pressed against the book's first thesis, it is because its second is so fertile that one wants to see it carried further than the frame of 'openness' allows. Anyone who cares about the prospects of Hegel's social theory for emancipatory — and in particular feminist — change is well advised to read this brilliant book.[19]

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