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## Psychomagnotheric Slime or Value Soup? *Sittlichkeit* and the Ghostbusters

Since the dawn of society, cultures have had values that were unique to their sociopolitical place in history. South Korea holds Confucianism as the basis for their lawmaking; the ancient Greeks were a culture that prized hospitality; even the United States has always held fast to an identity of rugged individualism. With all of these values floating around as potential guiding principles for a society, the people in these cultures have always needed a method for deciding which values were compatible with their nation. Enter Georg Wilhelm Frederic Hegel.

To Hegel, this decision is decided through conflict. His most famous philosophical idea, the dialectic, is just that. One idea (in this case a value) called the thesis would be pitted against another, called the antithesis, and the resultant product, called the synthesis, would become a new thesis, ready to do the same thing again. This applies to value debate in a very specific way. Hegel has a term for the primordial soup that he believes all values are floating around it, called *Sittlichkeit*. In *Sittlichkeit*, conflicts come out of culture, are determined through strife, and are then thrust back into culture (1209). The way this strife plays out is through art.

In art that also functions as value debate, the characters are not so much rounded, as they are mouthpieces for and embodiments of a particular point of view. Neither of the two is right, but at the same time, neither one is wrong. Both embody a sound position that cannot coexist with the other (1212). In this essay, I aim to prove that the 1984 film *Ghostbusters* (with a little help from 1989's *Ghostbusters II* and the 2009 videogame), directed by Ivan Reitman, is an analysis of the economic debate between small government conservatism, and progressivism in 1980's America.

Before I take a look at the Ghostbusters, however, I would be remiss to not explain the political climate in which the film was released. In 1980, Republican Ronald Reagan was elected

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President of the United States of America. Reagan, originally an actor himself, ran on a platform of state's rights and individual liberty. In fact, one of his most famous quotes goes ""The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help."<sup>1</sup>

Once elected, Reagan enacted a myriad of government shrinking policies using a basis of supply-side or 'trickle-down' economics wherein he would cut taxes for the wealthiest of Americans in order to free them of any financial burden, so that they could create more jobs for the rest of the country. He also deregulated various industries and cut numerous social welfare programs<sup>2</sup>. Reagan was particularly outspoken "[a]gainst liberalism's reliance on bureaucracy, Reagan insists that "government is the problem" and that ordinary Americans should be recognized as heroes<sup>3</sup>"

Here is where the Ghostbusters come into the equation. *Ghostbusters* is a film about three paranormal psychologists (and their new hire) who devise a way to capture ghosts. After being fired from the university they work at, they go into business for themselves, privately dispatching ghosts. Eventually, a god from another dimension named Gozer the Gozerian attacks New York City, and the Ghostbusters are the only ones who can take it down.

Much has been written on the topic of the libertarian Ghostbuster. They dress like janitors, they have a commercial, and they bill like exterminators. Most of all, their politics have been characterized in contrast to the film's secondary antagonist, EPA Inspector Walter Peck.

If the Ghostbusters represent Reagan era small-government heroes, Peck is the ineffectual bureaucracy that the Reaganomics were trying to get rid of. We first encounter Peck when he asks to tour the Ghostbusters' facility. When denied, he comes back with a court order to search the premises. Upon finding where the Ghostbusters have been storing their ghosts, "[Peck]

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orders the [shutdown] of the ghost containment unit over the protests of Ramis' character, Dr. Egon Spengler, who says: 'Excuse me, this is private property!'<sup>4</sup>' When the Ghosts are released, the Ghostbusters are taken into police custody.

The height of this values debate comes from the scene in the mayor's office. The Ghostbusters, fresh out of jail, are brought in to make their case against Peck. Peck accuses them of being charlatans, and the Ghostbusters counter with the fact that on the off chance that they're not, saving the city will help the mayor's approval ratings, and he buys it. The Ghostbusters, small-business owners and private citizens save the city while the government of the City of New York either sits on their hands or tries to undermine them at every turn.

This does make the film seem to have only one side to it, namely a Pro-Reagan message of glorifying the "hardworking American" and demonizing the "wasteful government," but the rest of the franchise, as well as the film itself tell a completely different story.

Before we examine that, however, we must first take a look at the creators of Ghostbusters, who were surprisingly liberal given the film's supposed message. First, screenwriter Ramis is quoted as saying "I had that kind of healthy righteous indignation and I had this big sense that history was a series of great injustices against the poor, the dispossessed and the disenfranchised<sup>5</sup>." Akroyd calls himself "a dyed-in-the-wool Canadian liberal<sup>6</sup>" and the two of them, as well as director Ivan Reitman, have all given to democratic campaigns<sup>7</sup>.

The Ghostbusters, furthermore, want to be respected. One analysis points out "[t]hey set up shop in an abandoned firehouse, reconvert an ambulance for their company car and festoon it with sirens and lights of dubious legality. They may be operating for profit, but they also crave the legitimacy of public service; after all, they wound up in the firehouse in the first place to indulge Stantz's fantasies of New York's bravest.<sup>8</sup>" This is furthered in the 1989 sequel where the

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Ghostbusters literally walk around in the statue of liberty, and in the 2009 Ghostbusters videogame in which the Ghostbusters are all but assimilated into the New York Government, and are policed by Walter Peck and the Paranormal Contracts Oversight Commission.

The films also demonize some aspects of capitalism. Stanz is only able to afford the fire station that becomes the Ghostbuster's headquarters by acquiring an incredibly high interest mortgage. Their secretary Janine is constantly complaining about her low wages, lack of benefits, and sick days. The latter two, at least, are usually considered to be the greatest benefit to working for the government. In the second film, the lawyer for the City of New York is extremely competent, winning the case against the Ghostbusters and their ineffectual private attorney Louis Tully. Finally, and most importantly, the form that Gozer the Gozerian takes when it comes to Earth is that of the Stay Puft Marshmallow man, a corporate mascot that was summoned by Stanz because he thought it was a harmless symbol from his childhood.

What the Ghostbusters franchise attempts to depict is the American economy. The Ghostbusters, of course, represent an imaginary legion of small business owners that libertarians believe are the engine that drives the economy. The government, here, is represented very literally. The ghosts are financial ruin, recession, depression, etc. Neither the Ghostbusters nor New York can handle the threat on their own. New York doesn't have the specialized equipment necessary to deal with this problem, but the Ghostbusters are dependent on the equipment the government does have. In the second film, they find it necessary to tap into the New York power grid, not to mention literally walking around in the statue of liberty. Additionally, the government makes a few very good points. In the first film, Walter Peck points out that the nuclear powered containment unit doesn't have a safety switch. In the second film, the attorney

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for the City rightly balks at the idea that the supernatural is the exclusive domain of the Ghostbusters.

The argument played out here is of private industry vs. government control. The answer that the franchise comes to is a partnership. In the 2009 videogame, the Paranormal Contracts Oversight Commission regulates the actions of the Ghostbusters, and the City of New York covers the damage from their escapades, but the Ghostbusters remain fairly autonomous. Admittedly, this was easily corrupted when the Mayor of New York was possessed by a ghost, but the partnership between the public and private sectors has always been one on shaky ground.

Ibn Rushd has a reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* wherein he interprets tragedy as the art of praise and comedy as the art of blame<sup>9</sup>. In *Ghostbusters*, blame is passed to both sides. The Ghostbusters are irresponsible mavericks who would just as quickly let the ghosts run amok if they weren't getting paid (as they threaten to do in the first film) and the government is full of pencil-pushing bureaucrats who are afraid of progress. These two sides are the embodiment of their positions, and they come into continual conflict because that is all that they can do. Neither one is right or wrong, but they are ever locked in opposition to each other.

This brings me back around to the Hegelian idea of *Sittlichkeit*. In many cases, one of these values prevails over the other, but in this case they are forced to coexist, just as they do in the current American political landscape. The franchise doesn't have a clear victor, (the Ghostbusters remain around, but Walter Peck keeps showing up and the mayor has record approval ratings, even getting reelected while possessed) because America is still in the process of deciding themselves.

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