

# *Hegel and Haiti:* *three interpretations*

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Frantz Fanon argued that unless liberation from slavery and colonialism is the work of the oppressed themselves, it does not lead to another life (a life in freedom); instead, it is only a transformation from one way of living to another.<sup>1</sup> A key idea in modernity is that freedom is based on liberation, shaping the political landscape since the early modern revolutions.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, it is an idea linked to the ancient view that political life rises above “mere” life; political freedom is about the good life, not the life that humans share with animals (bios as opposed to zoe).<sup>3</sup>

1 Fanon 1967: 220.

2 Noting that revolution in the modern age has always been concerned with both liberation and freedom, Arendt argued that “liberation...is indeed a condition of freedom” but that it is “frequently very difficult to say where the mere desire for liberation, to be free from oppression, ends, and the desire for freedom as the political way of life begins” (Arendt 1990: 32f). Political freedom requires the constitution of the republic and revolution, in order to be true to its concept, must aim to the constitution of freedom and not only the liberation from oppression, according to Arendt (Arendt 1990: chapter 1).

3 Arendt 1958; Agamben 1998.

Both conceptions of political freedom are central when considering liberation and freedom in the context of colonial slavery. Among the several events that have shaped conceptions of this interrelationship over the past two hundred years, the Haitian Revolution stands out as a particularly important one. The revolution is currently seen as the most radical of the revolutions in the late eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Recently, Susan Buck-Morss has argued that Hegel’s master-slave dialectic was developed in the context of the revolution in Saint Domingue, thereby highlighting one of the ways in which the revolution can be theorized within modernity.<sup>5</sup> Others have contested Buck-Morss’ interpretation of Hegel and Haiti; however, they have also emphasized the centrality of the political action of Haitian slaves in this regard.<sup>6</sup>

The political role of slaves in overthrowing colonial slavery in Saint Domingue is stressed by Buck-Morss when she elaborates on how to read Hegel’s dialectic of master and slave in conjunction with the Haitian Revolution; however, Hegel did not argue that the dialectic is resolved by slaves rising up against their masters. For this reason, it is important both to reassess the argument concerning the political action of slaves and to suggest other interpretations which can highlight the relation between Hegel and Haiti. I will stress the labor of slaves, in the context of the fear of death, and point to the argument Hegel made regarding the unhappy consciousness. Hegel’s chapter on the master-slave dialectic is not the end of the story but it leads to the consideration of the unhappy consciousness. In this article, I attempt both to reassess Buck-Morss’ claim regarding the political role played by slaves and to contrast it with two other interpretations: the focus on the labor of the slave and the unhappy consciousness.

When discussing the master-slave dialectic, the labor of the slave is less often emphasized now than it was at the time when Marxian accounts of revolutionary action were politi-

4 Dubois 2004; Fick 1990; Fischer 2004; Nesbitt 2008; Trouillot 1995.

5 Buck-Morss 2000: 821-65; Buck-Morss 2009.

6 Nesbitt 2008.

cally significant. The most famous Marxian interpretation of revolutionary action is likely Alexandre Kojève's argument that the slave comes to understand his/her capacity to transform outer and inner nature, which involves his/her ability to rise above mere life, through labor.<sup>7</sup> However, rising above natural existence requires facing death. As Hegel makes clear, the slave does face death (and does not simply choose life instead of risking it); this gives labor a specific meaning. Death shows the instability of the master-slave relation and, in Kojève's view, this makes the slave aware of the possibility of change. The slave then brings this out through labor and, as such, points toward the realization of freedom.<sup>8</sup>

The unresolved tensions of the master-slave dialectic lead over to Hegel's account of freedom in terms of stoicism, skepticism, and the unhappy consciousness. Several scholars, such as Jean Hyppolite, have argued that the unhappy consciousness is the basic theme of *The Phenomenology* since it concerns the diremption of the world.<sup>9</sup> The crystallization of the unhappy consciousness in the concept of the person is of particular interest with regard to interpreting the Haitian Revolution. Several scholars have argued that the radical nature of the Haitian Revolution lies in its emphasis on realizing rights for human beings. Unlike the French Revolution, in which the human being (man) is subordinated to the citizen, the Haitian Revolution is both a singular event and "universal in its address to all human beings."<sup>10</sup> However, when looking more closely at the notion of person, not least in contrast with the slave, it is revealed that this, too, is a dirempted concept, expressing the separation of natural and political existence rather than their bridging and bringing them together.<sup>11</sup>

The three suggested readings of Hegel and Haiti – political action by slaves, labor and the development of freedom, and the unhappy consciousness – will now be discussed. The

<sup>7</sup> Kojève 1980.

<sup>8</sup> Kojève 1980: chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>9</sup> Hyppolite 1974.

<sup>10</sup> Nesbitt 2008: 20.

<sup>11</sup> Esposito 2012.

readings of Hegel's dialectic will be related to the Haitian Revolution and to reflections on its importance for understanding modernity. By outlining these interpretations in relation to the Haitian Revolution and, more generally, to colonial slavery, it is assumed that it makes sense to interpret the Hegelian dialectic in relation to colonial slavery. It should be noted, though, that several scholars argue that the dialectic does not have any direct social importance or, in case it has, that it is properly analyzed in the feudal context of struggles over honor.<sup>12</sup>

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## LIBERATION AND POLITICAL ACTION

The first interpretation of Hegel and Haiti stresses the revolutionary political action of slaves in overthrowing slavery and colonialism. The Haitian Revolution demonstrated how slaves were capable of political action, contrary to the common view of them as docile, irrational, and ignorant persons. Not only did they engage in politics but they also showed themselves capable of the most emblematic form of action at the time:<sup>13</sup> revolutionary transformation of the *ancien régime*.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Cole 2004: 577-610; Gadamer 1973; Siep 2000: 101ff.

<sup>13</sup> Geggus 2002; Fick 1990; Nesbitt 2008.

<sup>14</sup> The view that slaves were not capable of political action was not only an argument made by the proponents of slavery but also common among several of its opponents. Brissot, Condorcet, Lafayette and Mirabeau, who were engaged in the club *Société des Amis des Noirs* (established in 1788), thought that emancipation must be a gradual process. The immediate abolishment of slavery would lead to economic and political chaos because the slaves did not possess the required knowledge, habits, and predispositions (Sala-Molins 2006). Because abolishment of slavery was very unlikely, *Amis des Noirs* initially focused on enfranchising the already free persons of African ancestry (mulattoes) and giving them the same rights as white colonists (Geggus 2002: chapter 10). Just how deep this perception of slaves ran is shown by the difficulty also among critics of slavery to comprehend what was happening in Haiti. Brissot, who was among the founding members of *Amis des Noirs*, said in the French National Assembly, when the events in Saint Domingue were discussed, that everyone that had knowledge about the slaves must recognize that it was impossible for them to conceive of rebellion, get together, and act politically and that even if it was true that they had rebelled, they would be put down by the

Buck-Morss proposes this interpretation of the revolution in relation to Hegel.<sup>15</sup> She argues that Hegel was acquainted with the revolution through the reporting of events in newspapers and periodicals and that “given the historical events that provided the context for *The Phenomenology of Mind*, the inference is clear. Those who once acquiesced to slavery demonstrate their humanity when they are willing to risk death rather than remain subjugated.”<sup>16</sup> In relation to the Marxian criticism that Hegel never took the step to revolutionary practice, Buck-Morss argues that “the slaves of Saint-Domingue were, as Hegel knew, taking that step for him.”<sup>17</sup>

This interpretation anchors the Haitian Revolution in the context of the late eighteenth century revolutions and stresses its radicalism. Slaves engaged in revolutionary political action, not mere rebellion against slave owners, aimed at liberation from slavery.<sup>18</sup> Through this action, they rose above mere life and they enabled political freedom: the constituting of free life together as citizens. The Haitian Revolution, which in Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s words was unthinkable even when it happened, shows the possibility of freedom.<sup>19</sup> In many ways similar to how Kant interpreted the world-historical meaning of the French Revolution,<sup>20</sup> the Haitian Revolution is a sign for future politics as it shows the possibility of freedom in the context of colonial slavery. Several of the leading actors of the revolution, such as Toussaint L’Ouverture, articulated their conception of it in these terms. In a letter to the colonial assembly in Saint Domingue in 1792, L’Ouverture and other leaders argued both that “we have borne your chains without thinking of shaking them off” for too long and that the time had come to abolish slavery; slavery “must come to an end, and that end is yours.”<sup>21</sup> They continued the letter by reminding the assembly not only

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superior French forces (Trouillot 1995: 90f).

15 Buck-Morss 2000; Buck-Morss 2009.

16 Buck-Morss 2009.

17 Buck-Morss 2009: 54f.

18 Nesbitt 2008: chapter 2.

19 Trouillot 1995: 73.

20 Kant 2005: 95ff.

21 L’Ouverture 2008b: 7.

that it was bound by the French revolutionary declaration of the rights of man and citizen but also that, therefore, “we are within our rights” to demand and struggle for the abolishment of slavery.<sup>22</sup>

The view that the revolutionary events in Saint Domingue showed the possibility of freedom was also emphasized by several people engaged in the overthrow of slavery in other places from the 1790s and onwards.<sup>23</sup> Fredrick Douglass argued in the late nineteenth century that the freedom he and others enjoyed was largely due to the Haitian Revolution: “When they [slaves in Saint Domingue] struck for freedom (...) they struck for the freedom of every black man in the world.”<sup>24</sup> Later, writers such as C.L.R. James, who wrote *The Black Jacobins*,<sup>25</sup> argued that the revolution pointed toward anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles. In other texts, James also emphasized the revolutionary role of slaves and colonized Africans in shaping the modern world, connecting the Haitian Revolution to several other events in which slaves had rebelled and in which liberation from colonialism and the fight against racism was central.<sup>26</sup>

There is much to be said for interpreting the revolution in terms of political action by slaves. Nevertheless, problems arise when this is related to Hegel’s dialectic of master and slave. There is little textual support for Buck-Morss’ interpretation; even though she argues that Hegel’s text becomes obscure at the end of the chapter on the master-slave dialectic, there is little in what Hegel says that suggests he is thinking that slaves actually rebel against masters. Critics, such as Nick Nesbitt, point to this problem, arguing that Hegel did not think that the master-slave relation is “undone by the autonomous activity of a revolution.”<sup>27</sup> Nesbitt goes on to argue that Hegel’s proposal was gradualist and that emancipation for Hegel takes place through servitude rather than by rebelling against servitude.

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22 L’Ouverture 2008b: 7.

23 West, Martin 2009: 72-104.

24 Davis 2001: 3.

25 James 1989.

26 James 1939: 339-343.

27 Nesbitt 2008: 115.

However, Nesbitt arrives to a similar conclusion as Buck-Morss regarding political action.<sup>28</sup>

Nesbitt argues that Hegel (in *The Philosophy of Right*, unlike in *The Phenomenology*) addresses slavery explicitly and that he discards two traditional positions on slavery.<sup>29</sup> Hegel rejects both the view of proponents of slavery that Africans lack the reason, spirituality, and subjectivity that defines humanity as well as the argument of critics of slavery that it is contrary to natural right. Hegel does not think that taking a position against slavery in terms of an ought, supplied by natural law, is adequate; instead, he advocates, on the basis of his analysis of the Idea of freedom being its actualization, that power and right are interconnected. Hegel and Spinoza share the insight that as long as the slaves cannot overthrow slavery, they do not have the right to do it; however, when they show they can, they also have the right to do so.<sup>30</sup> Thus, even though Nesbitt bases his arguments about Hegel and the revolution on a different set of texts than Buck-Morss, he arrives at a similar conclusion: “The Haitian Revolution was, according to Hegel, a struggle for the realization of the Idea of freedom neither as mere empty concept (abstract, ahistorical natural right), nor as a limited, local event devoid of relation to the universal (rebellion).”<sup>31</sup>

When looking at the textual support in Hegel’s writings for the interpretation of the Haitian Revolution and the dialectic of master and slave, it matters how to make sense of revolutionary action qua political action. Nesbitt’s argument that we do not deal with rebellion is important in this respect. There is, as mentioned, little to suggest that Hegel had in mind that the master-slave dialectic is undone by the uprising of slaves against masters. Hegel did not think that there is a reversal of the master-slave relation by a new fight between slaves and masters. Emphasizing the physical struggle between master and slave would entail a reconsideration of the master-slave dialectic, for

instance, as it was suggested by Fanon in his contrasting of the emancipation of slaves by others<sup>32</sup> and the fight for freedom.<sup>33</sup> Another scholar making a similar argument is Paul Gilroy, who elaborates upon the argument with respect to Fredrick Douglass and his fight with slave owner Edward Covey. The latter was a known slave breaker, and Douglass had been hired to work on Covey’s farm. After being beaten, Douglass ran away but returned to fight against Covey.<sup>34</sup>

However, even if Hegel did not think that slaves become free through rebelling against their masters, it can still be concluded that the master-slave dialectic can be interpreted through the lens of political action by slaves. This is the case when we conceive of the Haitian Revolution as a set of events that undermined the socio-economic and legal-political system of slavery. In developing his/her independence, the slave undermines the presuppositions of the slavery system. In particular, the slave transforms the master’s point of view of him/her as a thing that mediates between master and life. By turning the thingish character of him/her into an active shaping of the world, the slave undermines the basis of the relationship. As a result, not only does this show how the master is dependent on the slave but it also shows that the slave possesses the truth of self-consciousness.<sup>35</sup> There is thus a reversal of sorts through this development, which turns the tables on the initial relationship between master and slave; however, this does not happen through a new fight against the masters. Rather, the new relationship undermines the presuppositions of slavery as a societal system.

Even though the initial establishment of the master-slave relationship suggests that independence comes from the

28 Nesbitt 2008: chapter 3.

29 Nesbitt 2008: 120f.

30 Nesbitt 2008: 123.

31 Nesbitt 2008: 122.

32 Fanon 1967: 216ff; Gibson 2002: 30-45.

33 Fanon distinguishes between emancipation by others, which is a recognition “without conflict” (Fanon 1967: 217) and the struggle for freedom by the oppressed themselves. It is interesting that Fanon does not draw on the Haitian Revolution but rather seems to have the 1794 French emancipation declaration in mind when arguing that blacks in the French Empire were granted emancipation without a fight and contrasts this with the US case in which fighting has been central (Fanon 1967: 221).

34 Gilroy 1993: 62ff; Kohn 2005: 497-514.

35 Hegel 1988: 134.

willingness to risk one's life, Hegel remarks that the parties to the struggle for recognition in which they stake their life also learn that "life is as essential to it as pure self-consciousness."<sup>36</sup> It is this experience of life and self-consciousness being equally important that is central to the argument regarding the master's independence being undermined and the slave turning out to be the truth of self-consciousness. This truth is expressed not in rebellion but in the combination of life and self-consciousness that develops on the basis of shaping the world through labor. To understand the slave's role in undermining the slavery system, one needs to take into account the argument concerning labor—something Buck-Morss does not do. I will elaborate on this understanding in the next section, but before that, it is important to take a closer look at the element of physical violence alluded to above.

Like several other interpreters, Gilroy suggests that Hegel did not take the violent character of slavery seriously enough and that he underestimated slaves' risking their lives in struggles with their masters.<sup>37</sup> This is as much a problematic interpretation as is the argument proposed by Buck-Morss and others that Hegel had the rebelling of slaves against masters in mind when writing the dialectic. In the beginning of the dialectic, Hegel is quite clear that the struggle that establishes the master-slave relation is a struggle over life and death. It is through this struggle that the experience of life being equally important to self-consciousness is formed. Rather than not risking their lives, those who become slaves fail to win or die, and instead go on living – as slaves.<sup>38</sup> This does not mean that the slaves do not face death in the struggle; it is important for the development of Hegel's argument regarding the slave that slaves have faced death. By having faced death, the slave can develop a sense of self-consciousness through work in ways that allow a conception of freedom which is different from the master's idea of freedom. The master has a conception of freedom qua independence that entails the subordination of the slave

and the treatment of him/her as a thing. For the slave it is different, but not because he/she has not faced death; rather, it is the experience of having struggled over life and death that allows the slave to develop the knowledge of life and self-consciousness being equally important. This experience is the basis for the slave expressing the truth of self-consciousness.<sup>39</sup>

Even though the Haitian Revolution started as a rebellion (a revolt against the masters) in the northern provinces of the colony, it soon developed into a revolution in which the system of slavery was destroyed.<sup>40</sup> This development can be understood through the lens of Hegel's dialectic in spite of (or perhaps because of) him not indicating that the slaves rebel against the masters. If the revolution was only a matter of fighting back against the masters, it would revert to where the dialectic started: with the impossibility of a mutual recognition between equal and free beings. As Hegel makes clear, if both die in the struggle, they show that they had the courage to risk their lives; however, the end-result is mutual destruction.<sup>41</sup> The important theme in the dialectic is not the risking of life or the failure to do so, but the acquired knowledge from the experience that life and self-consciousness are equally important for a life in freedom.

Therefore, the task of the slave is to bring to life that thingish middle that the struggle in terms of life and death had given rise to. This bringing to life – in freedom – of the middle is a key element for Hegel because what is learned from the struggle is that life matters as much as self-consciousness. This is not postulated by Hegel; instead, it is shown in the dialectic in which independence and life are initially posed in contrast to each other. What the slaves show is something much more profound than the reversal of who is slave and who is master; theirs is not a revolution through which they become masters. Rather, they show the possibility of freedom being borne out of the dual elements of action and labor.

36 Hegel 1977: 115.

37 Gilroy 1993: 62f.

38 Hegel 1988: 132.

39 Hegel 1988: 134.

40 Fick 1990; Geggus 2002; Nesbitt 2008.

41 Hegel 1988: 131.

## LIBERATION AND LABOR

The second interpretation of Hegel and Haiti focuses on how slaves establish their independence through labor and thereby undermine the hierarchical relation between master and slave. The slave turns out to be independent in ways that the master cannot become, but it is not labor, as such, that enables freedom – only labor which takes place in the context of the fear of death does so. Labor enables the slave who has faced death to express the truth of self-consciousness.<sup>42</sup>

I argued above that the Haitian Revolution, when viewed through the lens of Hegel's dialectic, can be interpreted as a form of action that undermines slavery. Since this is not primarily the rising-up against the masters, it is important to look at this action within the context of labor. This is the meaning of Hegel's argument that the slave expresses the truth of self-consciousness. Buck-Morss does not consider this connection between action and labor; consequently, she cannot adequately identify the implications of the slave expressing the truth of self-consciousness.

Among the interpreters of Hegel, Kojève most consistently argued the case that labor provides the basis of a progressive history.<sup>43</sup> Kojève interpreted the dialectic in terms of desire; he emphasized that “human reality can be formed and maintained only within a biological reality,” which makes “animal life” a necessary condition.<sup>44</sup> However, this is not a sufficient condition for self-consciousness. It is not labor, as such, that accounts for the possibility of transformation but labor in the context of the experience of facing death. The fear of death clarifies that the hierarchical relation between master and slave

42 Hegel 1988: 134f.

43 Kojève 1980; Kojève's interpretation has been widely criticized (Kelly 1966: 780-802); my point in addressing his interpretation is not to restore his views regarding labor and progressive history but to illuminate how labor does play a role in elaborating the inter-relationship between natural and political existence.

44 Kojève 1980: 4.

does not “exhaust the possibilities of human existence.”<sup>45</sup> The master thinks that this relation is the only one possible, but the slave arrives at the knowledge that this is not the case. The slave's fear makes him/her understand that the master-slave relation is neither fixed nor stable. This severing of the slave from the worldview of slavery is central to his/her realization of the possibility of freedom.<sup>46</sup> In Kojève's words, the slave understands the “‘vanity’ of the given conditions of existence.”<sup>47</sup>

Thus, Kojève's view is that when the slave understands that there are other possibilities than the slave-master relationship, he/she is ready for change. For the slave, nothing is fixed, and everything can be altered. This change is not only the metabolic exchange of inner and outer nature through labor, which would remain within natural existence, but it is also the historical possibility of transformation that is the outcome of labor in the context of experiencing a life and death struggle. This entails that the slave is history, a historical possibility, and is no longer only nature. The slave overcomes the attachment to natural existence through work. In the beginning, the slave was tied to nature and to his/her nature; however, through labor, the ties to nature are unleashed and, by this, the slave also “frees himself from his own nature.”<sup>48</sup> The historical possibility embodied in the slave makes clear that the struggle expresses the requirement that the pure consciousness (the highest good) and the sustaining of biological life are both presuppositions for freedom.<sup>49</sup>

45 Kojève 1980: 22.

46 Kohn discusses this element in relation to Fredrick Douglass and suggests that the central element in him becoming “free” is not so much the fight with Covey but the experiences leading up to that fight. Douglass' resolve to fight Covey follows from his facing death (or, rather, contemplating death) while being a runaway: death of starvation or death by Covey's whip. Douglass emerged out of this experience as the very opposite of the docile and faithful slave he had been. The fear of death “severed his lingering connection to the worldview of slavery” (Kohn 2005: 511). Instead of becoming more attached to life through this, it stripped away the “unessential elements” (Kohn 2005: 511) of his life and revealed a universality which consists of rising above mere life.

47 Kojève 1980: 22.

48 Kojève 1980: 23.

49 Siep 2000: 103.

It is now important to highlight another significant element concerning the Haitian Revolution: the problem of reconstructing the economy. By the mid-1790s, most of the colony was controlled by ex-slaves and others opposed to slavery; the French authorities followed the emancipation policy adopted in 1793.<sup>50</sup> The question of how to successfully rebuild the colony became important; some propagated establishing small-scale subsistence farming, whereas others argued in favor of re-establishing the plantation system. The French authorities were in favor of the latter, and L'Ouverture and other members of the Creole elite shared this view. In 1796, L'Ouverture argued that if the liberated slaves wanted to remain free, they needed to "submit to the laws of the Republic, and be docile and work."<sup>51</sup> The reasons for preferring the plantation system have been widely discussed, but whatever these reasons were, they show how liberation from slavery became disconnected from a life in freedom.<sup>52</sup>

Against the reconstruction of the plantation economy stood the preference for small-scale farming, especially propagated by the Bossale community. Many ex-slaves refused to return to the plantations and, already at an early stage of the revolution, it became common to establish subsistence-based farming on former plantations. In making use of plantation land for subsistence farming and in selling the surplus at local markets, former slaves established a way of laboring that, intentionally or not, was a major break with the old regime. Several scholars stress this contrast between the more egalitarian Bossale society and the hierarchical, plantation-centered economy proposals of L'Ouverture and other members of the Creole elite.<sup>53</sup>

50 The local French commander, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, had in 1793 declared slavery abolished in the colony in order to muster support against the British. Sonthonax' declaration was followed by the general French declaration of emancipation in 1794 (Geggus 2002; Dubois 2004: chapter 7).

51 L'Ouverture 2008a: 22; The 1801 Constitution confirmed the importance of the plantation system (The Haitian Constitution of 1801: 45-61; Gaffield 2007: 81-103).

52 Dubois 2004: chapter 7; Nesbitt 2008: chapter 5.

53 Fick 1990: chapter 7; Nesbitt 2008: chapter 5.

Carolyn Fick suggests that the attitudes regarding farming and the widespread refusal to comply with the work-codes imposed in the post-emancipation context can be seen not only as an extension of the small measure of autonomy that kitchen gardens had enabled slaves to enjoy during the slavery regime, but also as an understanding that small-scale farming was the "very antithesis of the plantation regime and its requisite organization of labor."<sup>54</sup> Fick's way of stressing what is both a continuity and break with slavery through small-scale subsistence farming is interesting in the context of Hegel's dialectic. Labor enables the slave to develop a sense of independence that is not only manifested through labor, such as toiling and cultivating the land, but is also seen in the ability to thereby raise him/her above mere life. Labor is no longer tied to natural existence, but is an example of free practices. This freedom is a break from slavery, a refusal to go back to the plantations, yet it builds on practices established prior to the liberation from slavery. Being acquainted with the practices that form their understanding of a life in freedom, the ex-slaves created a context in which freedom could be realized. However, the conflict regarding the organization of the economic system, the system of needs, points to another interpretation of the relation between Hegel and Haiti: the interpretation of the unhappy consciousness.

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## LIBERATION AND UNHAPPY CONSCIOUSNESS

The third interpretation of Hegel and Haiti focuses on understanding the Haitian Revolution in terms of the unhappy consciousness. This is one of the key concepts in *The Phenomenology* because it expresses and reflects how modern society is dirempted. There are, in particular, two dimensions of the unhappy consciousness that make it interesting in theorizing the revolution in Saint Domingue.

First, the unhappy consciousness refers to the experience of oscillating between actively shaping the world and be-

54 Fick 1990: 180.

ing passively shaped by it and, importantly, being aware of this oscillation.<sup>55</sup> Revolutions accentuate this experience because of the attempts to radically refashion state and society and the difficulties in this task. Second, this experience of oscillation is reflected in how the unhappy consciousness designates that consciousness is divided against itself. An interesting example of the latter concerns the notion of the person. This concept is intended to combine the notions of rights relating to human beings and citizens, but following Hegel's analysis, the concept instead reflects the diremption characteristic of modern society.<sup>56</sup> The concept of the person is bifurcated in the animalistic and rational self, thereby showing the separation between natural and political existence. This analysis is of interest to the Haitian Revolution as several scholars interpret it through the lens of human rights.<sup>57</sup>

I will elaborate on both of these dimensions of the unhappy consciousness in the following, showing how they depend on each other. In his analysis of the revolution in Saint Domingue, and James' account of it, David Scott has pointed out the importance of this kind of reflection, in the context of what he calls the tragedy of colonial enlightenment.<sup>58</sup> Scott draws attention to how James, in the latest edition of *The Black Jacobins*, published in early 1960s, reflected on the tragic character of the Haitian Revolution in ways that he had not in the first edition, published in the 1930s.<sup>59</sup> The first edition was written in the light of anticolonial struggles, while the second edition drew attention to the tragic dilemmas L'Ouverture faced. L'Ouverture's dilemmas concerned questions about the plantation system and freedom of ex-slaves, the incorporation of Saint Domingue in the colonial economic system, and especially the relation to

55 Hegel 1988: IV B; Hyppolite 1974: 194ff.

56 Hegel 1988: 316ff.

57 Nesbitt 2008; The interest in this interpretation concerns that feature of modern politics which Judith Butler brings out in her consideration of the Hegelian unhappy consciousness: the problematization of radical action when "liberation' from external authorities does not suffice to initiate a subject into freedom" (Butler 1997: 33).

58 Scott 2004.

59 Scott 2004: chapters 4-5.

France. L'Ouverture did not want to declare independence vis-à-vis France, both for pragmatic reasons (hoping that France would help in rebuilding Saint Domingue) and because of the ties to the revolutionary ideals that France symbolized. Scott argues that what James articulated in the second edition of *The Black Jacobins* was less hopes of anticolonial overcoming than how L'Ouverture was caught in the "colliding historical forces" of colonial modernity.<sup>60</sup> The tragedy of L'Ouverture consists of that "he must seek his freedom in the very technologies, conceptual languages, and institutional formations in which modernity's rationality has sought his enslavement."<sup>61</sup>

The chapter on the master-slave dialectic is followed by the chapter on stoicism, skepticism, and the unhappy consciousness.<sup>62</sup> These shapes of freedom are all concerned with the freedom that stems from the dialectic of slave and master. Their common characteristic is a freedom that is neither that of the master nor that of the slave, but that of the person.<sup>63</sup> The shapes of freedom are understood by Hegel in terms of the development from the Hellenic Empire over the Roman Empire to Christianity; it leads from Athens to the unhappy consciousness of Christianity. The tragedy in ethical life that entails the dissolution of the Greek polis is resolved in Rome by the establishment of law centered in the concept of the person.<sup>64</sup>

The notion of person, which is central to Roman law, expresses an equality of individuals in terms of their subjective freedom.<sup>65</sup> This freedom is no longer tied to ethical life and, thus, is not grounded in the substantial freedom of the polis but built on the idea that freedom crystalizes in the indi-

60 Scott 2004: 167.

61 Scott 2004: 168.

62 Hegel 1988: IV B.

63 Hegel 1988: VI C; Kojève related the unhappy consciousness explicitly to the lack of rebellion on the part of the slave. The slave comes to realize an idea of freedom through his/her work that raises the slave above nature, but he does not dare to act and fight against the master. Instead, the slave constructs ideologies of freedom: stoicism, skepticism, and the unhappy consciousness (Kojève 1980: 53f).

64 Bernasconi 1991: 78-93; Hyppolite 1974: chapters 2-3.

65 Hegel 1988: 316ff.

vidual person. The key element in this story is the freedom of the “I” who is neither master nor slave, but person. The reality of the individual subject (or self) appears by the emergence of the concept of the person in a “developed form,” Hegel argues, but it is also “alienated from itself.”<sup>66</sup> The concept of the person is bifurcated, expressing rather than resolving the diremption that is produced by the tragedy in ethical life. In the chapter on the master-slave dialectic, Hegel emphasizes that it is possible, without engaging in the struggle over life and death, to be recognized as a person. However, the concept of a person is faulty as it lacks in the truth of self-consciousness.<sup>67</sup> There are several reasons why Hegel thinks that recognition as a person is problematic, but—concerning political action and labor, life, and the rising above mere life to attain political existence—it is particularly interesting to examine both how the concept of the person is intended to bridge natural and political existence, and how, ultimately, it fails to do so.<sup>68</sup>

Roberto Esposito has recently dealt with this question when asking why human rights and the concept of the person, which is thought to unite law and life and to extend the protection of life to all human beings, fail to protect the right to life.<sup>69</sup> Esposito argues that this failure is not explained by a lack of extension of the concept, as is commonly argued, but that it is implicated in the concept of person itself. The problem of human rights, “their inability to restore the broken connection between rights and life, does not take place in spite of the affirmation of the ideology of the person but rather because of it.”<sup>70</sup> The reason for this is found in the separation between “artificial entity” and “natural being” that characterizes the concept of the person;<sup>71</sup> this separation is traceable to the elaboration of the notion during Roman times. The slave expresses the problems of this concept in pertinent ways: the slave is situated between person and thing, between political-legal existence and natural

66 Hegel 1977: 294.

67 Hegel 1988: 131.

68 Hegel 1988: 318ff.

69 Esposito 2012.

70 Esposito 2012: 5.

71 Esposito 2012: 9.

existence, and between law and life. These distinctions seem to be clear-cut because slavery is thought to be the very opposite of freedom. As pointed out by several scholars, the contrast between freedom and slavery has, for a long time, been central to conceptions of freedom.<sup>72</sup> During the eighteenth century revolutions, it was common among revolutionaries to describe what they fought against in terms of slavery but, most often, not to challenge chattel slavery.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, when looking more closely at this contrast, it is obvious, as Esposito points out, that there are several intermediary stages between slavery and freedom which are expressed through the possibility of passage (manumissions) from the status of slave to the status of free.<sup>74</sup>

The several stages between slavery and freedom entail that this relation, when addressed in the context of Hegel’s dialectic, corresponds to the movement of self-consciousness in inverted form. The intermediary stages between freedom and slavery, crystallized in the concept of person, express the inversion of the development of self-consciousness. This follows from Hegel arguing that recognition as a person is not achieving the truth of self-consciousness. The concept of person does not move through the process by which the truth of self-consciousness is clarified; it arrests this movement. By arresting the movement, the passages and intermediary stages between slavery and freedom can be understood as expressing an inverted form.<sup>75</sup> Accordingly, the concept of the person does not resolve how modernity is dirempted – it merely expresses this diremption.

72 Davis 1966.

73 Dorsey 2003: 353-386; As Buck-Morss notes, the contrast between freedom and slavery had, by the eighteenth century, become a “root-metaphor” where slavery connoted “everything that was evil about power relations” (Buck-Morss 2009: 21).

74 Esposito 2012: 76ff.

75 That Hegel talks about the person as an abstract individual indicates that this arresting of movement of self-consciousness is a problem of abstraction. However, it is only partly that; it is an abstraction from the actual movement of self-consciousness, but this does not mean it is a stable category. Instead, the intermediary stages between slavery and freedom, which the concept of freedom is implicated in, show that both concepts are thought of in terms of transition from one status to the other.

The concept of the person reflects the division and disreption that characterizes the modern world, and the dispositive of the person works “at the same time toward personalization (in the rational part) and toward depersonalization (in the animal or bodily part).”<sup>76</sup> This oscillation between rational and animal parts is the unhappy consciousness; it shows the difficulty of combining action and labor, or law and life, in ways that lead to freedom. The concept of person appears as that which, on the one hand, promises a unified basis for status and rights and, on the other hand, expresses the limitations of this project of freedom. Liberation from external authority does not necessarily lead to freedom, and, as Esposito clarifies, the reason for this does not lie in the lack of extension of the concept of the person – in the lack of interpenetration of human being, rights, and reality – but in the way freedom is thought to be expressed through the concept of the person.<sup>77</sup>

The bifurcation of the person highlights some of the problems in interpreting the Haitian Revolution as a matter of extending and radicalizing human rights.<sup>78</sup> Nesbitt argues that the revolution in Saint Domingue can be interpreted as a resolution of the conflict between the rights of human beings (man) and the rights of citizens, which the French Revolution did not accomplish.<sup>79</sup> The Haitian Revolution was a radical realization of human rights: it was singular in how it related to specific power structures in the colony of Saint Domingue, and it was universal since liberation was extended to all human beings. The latter entails that the revolution moved beyond the French Revolution and that, while the French Revolution influenced the revolution in Saint Domingue, there was a “radical discontinuity” between them.<sup>80</sup> The Haitian Revolution “exploded into an Occidental consciousness unprepared to address, and even to comprehend, the sweeping claims of its transformation of the concept of human freedom.”<sup>81</sup> Even though this in-

terpretation places the Haitian Revolution at the center of the age of revolution – and, as such, provides a counter-history to the relegation of the revolution to the periphery (or the simple forgetting and silencing of it) – it does not question some of the problems involved in interpreting it in terms of human rights. The unhappy consciousness can provide important insights regarding the problems of thinking about freedom in terms of the concept of the person.

It may be argued that the problems related to the concept of the person only concern situations where freedom is granted by others; Fanon’s focus on emancipation without conflict suggests this, as does Nesbitt’s argument that the struggle for rights is what matters in the extension of human rights through the revolution in Saint Domingue. Nesbitt explicitly contrasts an understanding of human rights built on natural law, which issues in the condemnation of slavery – the mere ought, in Hegel’s terms – with the struggles against slavery that show the coincidence of power and right. Certainly, given the contrast between freedom achieved through liberation and freedom achieved through emancipation by others, this is central. However, the problem of the concept of the person, illustrated through the unhappy consciousness, is not addressed by Nesbitt. He overlooks that the idea of person is implicated in the relationship between slavery and freedom, which expresses the inversion of the development of self-consciousness. The Haitian Revolution can be seen as a radical actualization of rights not as based on natural law but as part of a political struggle. Simultaneously, it provides valuable insights into how human rights, however radical they seem, do not provide a self-evident solution to the problems of freedom. From Hegel’s point of view, the concept of the person does not provide the resolution of the disreption of the modern world. Pointing to this problem entails the relevance of the unhappy consciousness in interpreting the Haitian Revolution through the lens of Hegel’s philosophy.

76 Esposito 2012: 92.

77 Esposito 2012: chapter 2.

78 Knight 2005: 391-416; Nesbitt 2008.

79 Nesbitt 2008: chapters 1-2.

80 Nesbitt 2008: 64.

81 Nesbitt 2008.

## CONCLUSION

Buck-Morss' interpretation of Hegel and Haiti is important both for theorizing the revolution in Saint Domingue and for re-conceptualizing Hegel's master-slave dialectic. It highlights the importance of the political action of slaves in overthrowing colonial slavery and makes this into a central theme in the consideration of Hegel's philosophy and, more generally, in the philosophical reflection on the age of revolution. The Haitian Revolution plays a central role in shaping modernity, and it brings out, as Nesbitt has argued, a radicalized understanding of freedom that also exposes some of the contradictions of the American and French revolutions.

This interpretation has several merits but, as an elaboration that is fitted into Hegel's account of the master-slave dialectic, it also runs into problems. The major problem is that Hegel did not suggest that slaves rise up against masters; he did not think that the dialectic is resolved by slaves fighting (again) against their masters. However, this does not mean that we cannot interpret Hegel's dialectic in terms of political action, but doing so requires that we consider the labor of the slave. Labor allows the slave to develop a sense of independence, but it is not labor, as such, that matters but, rather, labor conceived in the context of the slave having faced death. The life or death struggle teaches the slave, in a more profound way than the master does, the equal importance of life and self-consciousness. This experience is the reason why Hegel argued that the slave expresses the truth of self-consciousness. This understanding highlights the connection between labor and political action, life and the rising above mere life, which Hegel, following the received tradition, argues is central for political freedom. It is necessary to think of political freedom in both terms; to emphasize only one dimension would fail to understand what freedom involves.

The Haitian Revolution can be interpreted through the Hegelian framework along the suggested lines as interconnecting political action and labor, showing that both are required for liberation and freedom. However, this is not the end of the

story; by addressing Hegel's conception of the unhappy consciousness, we increase our understanding of the problems involved in achieving freedom. The unhappy consciousness crystallizes in the concept of the person. The concept of the person is a central concept for interpretations of the Haitian Revolution which stress how it radically developed the promise of human rights. Even though it did this in ways which were not accomplished in the American and French revolutions, it also highlights the problems in bridging natural and political existence through the notion of the person. The notion of the person does not overcome the diremption of the modern world in the ways it sets out to do as the person, in an inverted form, reflect the movement of self-consciousness. Interpreting the revolution in Saint Domingue in terms of the unhappy consciousness allows us to place it not only in an age attempting to accomplish freedom through action and labor but also in an age in which the methods of undertaking this proved problematic, and the Haitian Revolution belongs to the age of revolutions in that respect as well.

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