

HEGEL, HAITI AND FANON: TOWARDS A DIALECTIC OF RECOGNITION

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Abstract. In her now seminal work, Susan Buck-Morss links the Haitian Revolution with the slave writings of Hegel, positing that the revolt in Haiti constitutes a moment of dialectical import. She is not, however, the only dialectician to have read the Haitian Revolution through Hegel's master-slave dialectic. Indeed, Frantz Fanon's canonical *Black Skin, White Mask* also made reference to such events, although Buck-Morss' engagement with him, in her work, is sparse. In this article, then, through confronting Buck-Morss' account with Fanon, I argue that Buck-Morss' argument loses sight of the material utilised in the master/slave abstraction, namely the actual lived experiences of colonial subjects, thereby glossing over the particularity of the material. In contrast, Fanon's account reincorporates the concrete situatedness into the master/slave dialectic, thereby surpassing typical limitations of philosophical abstraction, which has concrete political implications.

Keywords: dialectics, Fanon, Hegel, Haiti, Buck-Morss, revolution, master, slave

*A Marxist analysis should always be slightly
stretched when it comes to addressing the colonial issue*

Frantz Fanon

The crossroads at which Haiti and dialectics both lie reflect the charged relationship between the latter and decolonisation more generally. On the one hand, dialectical thought has often been relied upon by ambitious theorists zealously waiting to transform existing social orders, with the Marxist tradition being the most influential instance of such an approach. Simultaneously, the conservative potential of Hegel's philosophy has been seen as merely attempting

to simply justify the *status quo*, primarily due to the Eurocentric and largely linear, determinist teleology found within both Hegel and Marx's works. In seeking to reaffirm the importance of the universal within politics, and thus echoing these latter sentiments, contemporary dialectical thinker, Slavoj Žižek, has rather provocatively urged those on the political left to openly espouse Eurocentrism as opposed to relying upon a politics of difference, most commonly referred to as "identity politics" within contemporary political circles (Žizek 2019). However, such a sharp return to the universal may hail more woes than cheers if we do not carefully consider what such a move constitutes; to begin to ask such questions is the driving force of this essay, then.

One means to begin considering such issues lies at the junction between Haiti and dialectics, namely in Susan Buck-Morss' essay *Hegel and Haiti* (2000). Within said essay, Buck-Morss traces the link between the Haitian revolution and Hegel's *master-slave* dialectic – more appropriately translated as *lord-bondsman* dialectic – and argues for the idea that "Hegel's spirit is tainted with the blood and suffering of enslaved Africans," as Walter Dignolo describes it. Notably, Žižek celebrates Buck-Morss' work as "the most succinct formula of communism", thus aligning Buck-Morss with Žižek's own championing of the universal (Žizek 2019). In order to properly understand the potential problems of returning to the universal, however, it will prove necessary to look beyond Buck-Morss' resurrection of the universal. In other words, we need to look at actual postcolonial works, namely those that deal with the universal within the context of colonialism. Therefore, in this essay, I put Buck-Morss' account into conversation with Frantz Fanon's reformulation of the lord-bondsman dialectic in his work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). The consequence of this is twofold: firstly, it provides a point of critique for Buck-Morss from the perspective of an actual lived experience of Black existence; secondly, it places Fanon's theoretical stance into the context of Buck-Morss' historical analysis, allowing for a cross-temporal dialogue between these two dialecticians.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: in the first half, I introduce and summarise Buck-Morss' seminal work. In the second half, I introduce Fanon's text, discussing it in relation to Buck-Morss' paper, before concluding by reaffirming Fanon's importance to the political questions that Buck-Morss' work brings with it.

“HEGEL AND HAITI”

The premise of *Hegel and Haiti* is the eye-catching claim that Hegel's lord-bondsman dialectic, arguably the most famous passage of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), was directly inspired by the contemporary Haitian Revolution. The argument, Buck-Morss declares, has seldom been made, and even less so has it been investigated by Hegel scholars: “One wonders why the topic Hegel and Haiti has for so long been ignored. Not only have Hegel scholars failed to answer this question, they have failed, for the past two hundred years, even to ask it” (Buck-Morss 2000, 849). Buck-Morss supports her claim that Hegel was familiar with the Haitian Revolution by referring to the fact that the revolution was ongoing while Hegel was writing *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, and that he was an avid reader of such periodicals like the German *Minerva* and the English *The Morning Post* at the time, both of which covered the affairs in Haiti in depth. Buck-Morss argues that the conclusion to be drawn is that Hegel, who was at the time engaged in theorising through the historical project of freedom, was influenced, if not compelled, by his reading of journalistic depictions of a contemporary slave rebellion that she conceives as a concrete unfolding of the lord-bondsman dialectic.

Buck-Morss does not limit herself to such circumstantial pieces of evidence. However, she also points to specific nuances found in the relevant passage of Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* to highlight two aspects of his dialectic to further support her claim. Firstly, then, Buck-Morss points to Hegel's insistence that the two

individuals initially confront each other in a “life-and-death struggle” in which “it is only through staking one’s life that freedom is won” (Hegel 1977, 114). In other words, freedom can only be obtained through risking one’s life. Secondly, Hegel gives priority to the bondsman in this dialectic because the bondsman, through his subjugation by the lord, transforms himself into an active individual with self-consciousness. The once bold and determined lord, meanwhile, slides into a sloth of self-absorption through his reliance on the bondsman’s labour. Buck-Morss contends that both of these aspects resonate with the Haitian experience of revolution, from the flag that reads “Liberty or Death” – under which Saint-Dominguans overthrew Napoleon’s army – which reflects the Hegelian encounter of “life-and-death struggle” (Buck-Morss 2000, 838)¹, to the fact that the Haitian slaves gained their freedom through their efforts *alone*, that is, without merely depending upon the generosity of others or simple formal recognition: “Those who once acquiesced to slavery demonstrate their humanity when they are willing to risk death rather than remain subjugated” (Buck-Morss 2000, 848). The significance of the Haitian slaves working alone is related to Hegel’s lord-bondsman dialectic because, “according to Hegel, it was the slave himself who was responsible for his lack of freedom by initially choosing life over liberty, mere self-preservation” (Buck-Morss 2000, 849), along with the fact that the lord’s turn to self-absorption mirrors the ignorance of the colonisers with regards to the colonised, that is, the Haitian people. Concerning the oft-cited Marxist criticism that Hegel never actually included the step to revolutionary practice, Buck-Morss asserts that “the slaves of Saint-Domingue were, as Hegel knew, taking the step for him” (Buck-Morss 2000, 848 [Footnote 84]).

Buck-Morss’ interpretation docks the Haitian Revolution amidst the late 18th-century revolutions and stresses its radical character. Slaves occupied by revolutionary political action, not mere rebellion against their owners, aimed at liberation from slavery, according to this interpretation. Through this practice, they are said to rise above mere life and have thus enabled political freedom. Therefore, in a

fashion similar to Kant's interpretation of the world-historical meaning of the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution shows the possibility, and thus universality, of freedom within the context of colonialism:

The actual and successful revolution of Caribbean slaves against their masters is the moment when the dialectical logic of recognition becomes visible as the thematic of world history, the story of the universal realisation of freedom... Theory and reality converged at this historical moment. Or, to put it in Hegelian language, the rational-freedom-became real. (Buck-Morss 2000, 852)

THE ONTOLOGICAL FLAW

For those familiar with Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), it likely comes as a surprise that Buck-Morss' *Hegel and Haiti* has but one acknowledgement of Fanon, and it is *only* a footnote at that (See footnote 89 of Buck-Morss 2000, 849. This is despite the fact that the two are dealing with the same dialectic – that of recognition – and their analyses are both situated within the context of race, slavery and colonisation. Furthermore, given what Buck-Morss is grappling with in her text, namely the issues of insurgency and universal futures, neglecting a thinker who can appropriately be described as insurgent, be it in his personal life or academically, a thinker whose work strove to dialectically overcome the historical priority of the universal, would seem, at first glance at least, to be a rather damning misjudgement on her side. That is not to suggest that the two share much beyond these common research interests; however, for instance, whereas Buck-Morss acknowledges the bloodbath of white-skinned individuals as *only* a retreat from the universal, Fanon instead sees in such violence the “only work” by those colonised that could ever lead to the universal. This is because, as articulated by Anthony Peter Spanakos, “it is only through violence, through the first drops of the coloniser's blood, that the colonised recognise that the distance between them and the coloniser has been a socio-historical product of a process of

‘epidermalising’ the coloniser’s norms” (Spanakos 1998, 150). In other words, there is something supposedly distinct that juxtaposes the colonised and coloniser, at least so says the coloniser, but through the violence the colonised “discovers that his life, his breath, his beating heart are the same as those of the settler” (Fanon 2001, 35). The fundamental difference between Fanon and Buck-Morss, then, lies in what Fanon adds to Kojève’s classical Marxist reading of the lord-bondsman dialectic: the requirement of black, and subsequently colonial, ontology.

Within *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon effectively argues that “ontology is made impossible” under colonisation, a result of the presence of “an impurity or a flaw that prohibits any ontological explanation” (Fanon 2008, 89-90). In other words, the two abstract individuals in Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit* are not abstract in any way; rather, they carry with them the burden of a colonial-racial history of which this “flaw” is a reminder: one is a human being, the other is not. In this sense, the colonised is overdetermined from beyond, and thereby forcibly entering a struggle they are guaranteed not to succeed in. One instance of this is seen in the chapter entitled “The Black Man and Language”, in which Fanon explains how language, in the colonial context, is utilised as an instrument for instilling discipline rather than a means to legitimate communication. In the Haitian context, French becomes a marker of identity; one who speaks French well is regarded as white, while the white French person assumes any black person speaking in French will do so incorrectly. As Fanon writes:

To speak gobbledygook to a black man is insulting, for it means he is the gook. Yet, we’ll be told, there is no intention to wilfully give offence. Ok, but it is precisely this absence of will—this offhand manner; this casualness; and the ease with which they classify him, imprison him at an uncivilised and primitive level—that is insulting. (Fanon 2008, 15)

As a consequence, Fanon writes, “it is already safe to say that to speak gobbledygook means: ‘You, stay where you are’” (Fanon 2008, 17). If, however, the colonised is able to demonstrate an expertise

in French, they may indeed receive a kind of praise, although not one that invites much hope. Fanon summons up the instance in which he was enthusiastically told in response to his fluent French, “Basically, you’re a white man” (Fanon 2008, 21).

The implication, then, is that the recognition of “the Other” in the vein of Hegel’s lord-bondsman dialectic is impossible within colonial contexts because the terms of the recognition are set by the colonisers, and these terms do not reflect the situation at hand. After all, most values that can be said to be “shared” are, in reality, impositions of the coloniser. Or, as Fanon writes:

From time to time [the black man] fights for liberty and justice, but it’s always for a white liberty and a white justice, in other words, for values secreted by his masters. (Fanon 2008, 196)

The Haitian freedom fighter, then, cannot be recognised as a self-consciousness, in the language of Hegel, but rather is always regarded as either white or black, but black in relation to the white man, not for-itself. This is a result of the colonised having no “ontological resistance” to support them because, as Fanon writes, “[t]heir metaphysics, or less pretentiously their customs and the agencies to which they refer, were abolished” (Fanon 2008, 90). Without ontological resistance, the colonised is doomed to a “zone of nonbeing” (Fanon 2008, xiii) – the aforementioned condition of being regarded as white or black in relation to white *solely* – and fails to appear at the position of reciprocity that is a necessary precondition of Hegel’s lord-bondsman dialectic. Fanon writes:

For Hegel, there is reciprocity; here, the master scorns the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work. Likewise, the slave here can in no way be equated with the slave who loses himself in the object and finds the source of his liberation in his work. The black slave wants to be like his master. Therefore, he is less independent than the Hegelian slave. For Hegel, the slave turns away from the master and toward the object. Here, the slave turns toward the master and abandons the object. (Fanon 2008, 195; *See also Footnote 10*)

The actual relation between slaves and masters in colonial societies, then, lacks the basis for recognition that is presupposed in the Hegelian dialectic. Consequently, this ontological flaw means that subjective and independent action by those colonised is entirely necessary before the dialectic can be overcome; politics of difference thus become a crucial step toward the universal. Otherwise, the colonised concedes to an identity dictated by the terms of the coloniser, meaning that the colonised does not realise their freedom through the creation of their own values. Recognition, then, does not entail a victory for the colonised, at least in this rendition. Briefly turning to *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), we see this point come to the fore more readily than in *Black Skin, White Masks*. There Fanon writes:

The struggle for freedom does not give back to the national culture its former values and shapes; this struggle, which aims at a fundamentally different set of relations between men, cannot leave intact either the form or the content of the people's culture. After the conflict, there is not only the disappearance of colonialism but also the disappearance of the colonised man. (Fanon 2001, 197-98).

For Fanon, successfully achieving recognition, and thus freedom, requires *action* explicitly, as opposed to reaction (that is, by entering a dialectic of recognition on terms set down by the coloniser), and in the case of colonialism, the most appropriate action is violence: to be merely recognised by the colonised is to concede to an identity that is constructed by the colonised, while to act is to exceed that identity, thereby producing a new identity and achieving freedom. In contrast, Buck-Morss does not investigate the insight that the ontological flaw generates. Instead, she reads into Hegel's silence the reality of the Haitian revolution, thereby positing that where Hegel's dialectic does not match the experienced reality, "the slaves of Saint-Domingue were, as Hegel knew, taking that step for him". Fanon does not treat Hegel in the same vein; he acutely interrogates the missing step, as opposed to providing a conclusion for Hegel that was never found in his actual writing. Interestingly, Fanon

comes to this realisation after turning towards the notion of labour within the lord-bondsman dialectic, an aspect of said dialectic that Buck-Morss never discusses in her seminal work. I shall not discuss this decision of Buck-Morss to neglect the aspect of labour any further because it would only amount to speculation on my part, however, that Fanon comes to this insight after turning to labour makes a great deal of sense: as he argues, the ontological flaw lies in the colonised turning to the coloniser, not labour, and consequently seeking recognition on grounds produced by the coloniser.

THE PARTICULAR IS THE UNIVERSAL

The ramifications of this difference in approach begin to explain the contrasting conclusions that both Fanon and Buck-Morss come to. For instance, as a result of not probing the Hegelian dialectic, Buck-Morss aligns herself with the same measurement for progress as Hegel, that being freedom solely in a *formal* sense. This is seen in her celebration of the Constitution of 1801, written by Toussaint, which she highlights for its universalising content rather than for any impact it had (Buck-Morss 2000, 834).

Fanon, meanwhile, accords such formal freedom with the reason why slavery was abrogated from above and “the black man was acted upon” (Fanon 2008, 194). Fanon’s point, then, is two-fold: firstly, that the actual impact of freedom is what one should strive for; and secondly, that formal freedom and claims of universal equality, while beautiful words, are even worse than mere empty promises—they are actively dangerous in the sense that they create an impediment along the road to the actual universal by passing on conflicts with the status of particular.

Secondly, Fanon’s analysis can be said to, in a sense, pre-empt the sort of criticism of John Rawls put forward by Jamaican philosopher Charles W. Mills, a criticism pertaining to our starting point in questions of humanity (Mills 2005). If we take our starting point in questions of recognition as one that places us on equal

footing, then we would be right to follow Buck-Morss' lead of championing universal humanity. However, if we see struggle as a necessary stepping-stone towards recognition, and most importantly, if we see that struggle as being the successor of a necessary pre-dialectical struggle that is one-sided, then that will inform our understanding of the later struggle. In other words, if we agree with Fanon in recognising the struggle for recognition as the heir to another struggle, one that already has the agents of the later struggle on unequal footing, then we cannot claim that the individuals of the later struggle are abstract, thus transforming our understanding of the later struggle in the fashion Fanon posits. Fanon thereby takes the ontological dominance of whiteness as something that must be recognised and resisted in the later struggle, lest the universal claims to freedom be repeatedly postponed to the future, as Fanon's experience suggests it is.

Returning to Buck-Morss' analysis, then, Fanon's critique of Hegel's lord-bondsman dialectic aligns him with Dessalines' constitution of 1805 as opposed to the constitution of 1801 that Buck-Morss champions; indeed, Buck-Morss even goes as far as to denounce the former, due to it being a "deliberate retreat from universal principles" (Buck-Morss 2000, 835).

In the constitution of 1805, all Haitians are declared to be Black, thus granting an advancement of Being to those who were previously lost to a "zone of non-being" (Fanon 2008, xii). Fanon's critique of the lord-bondsman dialectic thereby calls for an immediate scepticism toward the formalism read into the constitution of 1801 by Buck-Morss. Furthermore, if one accepts Fanon's critique, the sort of white dominance seen during Fanon's lifetime, and indeed still very readily seen today in light of the *Black Lives Matter* movement, becomes easily explainable *despite* formal claims of universality: formal claims to freedom do not guarantee freedom; in fact, they impede it. Thus, in accounting for the lived reality of black existence, Fanon adds to the lord-bondsman dialectic in a way that Buck-Morss does not and cannot as a result of her starting point. After all, and as Fanon reminds us, "a Marxist

analysis should always be slightly stretched when it comes to addressing the colonial issue” (Fanon 2001, 31).

Attempting to justify this omission on the side of Buck-Morss is one that will prove speculative and will thus be avoided here. However, returning to the political context that I sketched at the beginning of this work, it would seem that the championing of the Haitian Revolution in the name of universalism is something that should be further scrutinised; that is not to suggest that the status of Buck-Morss’ work should be withdrawn, only that, as Buck-Morss herself concedes, “There [is] much research to do” (Buck-Morss 2000, 852). The celebration of it, so plainly without proper attention given to the claims of Fanon, merely obscures the contradictions inherent to such a revolution, ones that Fanon did well to place the limelight on already. Yet, this is given no attention by Buck-Morss. Selma James, a Jewish socialist-feminist thinker, once claimed that “if sex and race are pulled away from class, virtually all that remains is the truncated, provincial, sectarian politics of the white male metropolitan Left” (James 1974, 92). Without discussing the fact that the Haiti that Buck-Morss champions was established on the subjugation and rejection of Black women, a point well made by Ehrmann in *Haitian Revolution* (Ehrman 2018, 72), James’ quote still seems like a fitting conclusion to this paper: if we fail to properly address the actual context in which these struggles are found, we risk concealing, purposefully or not, the contradictions that such struggles for recognition, and ultimately freedom, are tied up with. Fanon’s reformulation of the lord-bondsman dialectic shows the limits to abstraction for philosophy, then. More importantly, however, is that Fanon shows how one can go beyond those limits by reincorporating the reality of lived experiences and concrete situatedness (social, ethnic, historical) into philosophy: to strive towards reaching the universal values that Buck-Morss and Žižek hold dear, thus requires that one carefully consider the particulars, such as the black experience that Fanon was readily pointing to forty years before Buck-Morss’ seminal essay.

NOTES

1. As Hegel writes, “And it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won; only thus is it proved that for self-consciousness, its essential being is not [just] being, not the immediate form in which it appears, not its submergence ill the expanse of life, but rather that there is nothing present in it which could not be regarded as a vanishing, moment, that it is only pure being-for-self. The individual who has not risked his life may well be recognized as a person, but he has not attained to the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness” (Hegel 1977, 114).
2. For a thorough overview of Kant as a revolutionary enthusiast, see Beck 1971, “Kant and the Right of Revolution.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 32 (3): 423-432. doi:10.2307/2708356.

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