

## BOOK REVIEW

Ulrike Kistner and Philippe Van Haute, eds. *Violence, Slavery and Freedom Between Hegel and Fanon*. Johannesburg: Wist University Press, 2020. 168 pp. Bibliography. \$20.10. Paper. ISBN: 978-1776146239.

This volume adds to an already lively debate on one of Fanon's best-known essays, *The Negro and Hegel*, the interpretations of which reveal various sources of friction. Here, one thinks of Cedric Robinson's trenchant article on the contemplative use of the essay and the intellectual consumption of Fanon by a liberal, progressive academy.

It is anything but simple to speak conclusively on how Fanon, in his rapid yet lucid writing, dealt with the lacerations of Black self-consciousness in history. Nevertheless, this book succeeds in its endeavor to gather contributions that speak to each other without too much effort or disagreement. Together they support a common denominator that Bernasconi, in his introduction to the various chapters of the work, describes as "Fanon's French Hegel." The reception in France of section IV A of Hegel's *Phänomenologie*—which was the only one that meant anything to Fanon at the time—is the hub from which various readings around self-consciousness radiate. In their chapters, Sekyi-Otu and Kistner read *Bewußtsein* as "consciousness for-itself" in a faithful analysis of Hegel's conceptual drama. Van Haute and Stawarska address Fanon's frenzied imaginings of genuine violent action as "cleansing" (because it disintoxicates while at the same time works to create new human and social relations). Their contributions look at the role of violence in the form of historical liberation from alienation or as inherent in pernicious forms of subjugation without dominion, and voluntary servitude.

Collectively, the chapters are alert to the demonstrable distinctions in situation of different readings and use this as a platform to examine decolonial turns and politics of location; everyone reads history and the world from their own particular standpoint. It is Kistner who, in her contribution, returns to the question of whether Hegel was aware of the uprisings in Haiti, when writing the *Phenomenology*, and if the chronicles of those years influenced his thoughts on the relation between lord and bondsman. Here she follows Scott's conclusions rather more than Buck-Morss's conjecture and insists (in line with the thinking of all the authors in the book) that "Hegel is not describing a real or historical situation" and that "Hegel's perspective is primarily epistemological and ontological, not socio-political" (54). This is a theme that continues to rage in the Hegelian literature; it is constantly being taken up anew and developed, as is demonstrated by this collection of essays, however excessive and even painful it sometimes seems in its insistent repetition that Hegel had no specific historical situation in mind. Tembo's strikes me as the contribution that takes this specter

of Hegel to task the hardest, in the context of a critical response to its instrumentalization by Mbembe in his *On the Postcolony*.

Taken literally, the Hegelian relation is not a struggle for recognition between a lord and a bondsman, nor a master and a servant, but between two self-consciousnesses that start off equal and only later, faced with a risk of death, divide into one that accepts to the benefit of the other, which prefers to (pre)serve life (as Remo Bodei stressed). But, although they are distinguished by two positions that are ontologically asymmetric and politically unequal, they are historically modifiable. Hegel describes the *becoming-bondsman* and *becoming-lord* as possibilities deriving from their circularity and reciprocity. That Hegel, indeed, had knowledge of events in Haiti is evidenced in traces to be found in the notes to his *Randbemerkung*, in the *Grundlinien*, and in his Berlin courses on the *Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*. But what it led his interest towards was the historical creation of a black state (*Negerstaat*), in opposition to the peasant revolts in Europe or the Caribbean conspiracies, or any other forms of communal uprising (which in his view led nowhere and produced nothing in terms of *transformation*). Haiti offered proof of the (gradual) possibility of self-consciousness for slaves, confirming, for Hegel, that the lord–bondsman relation is a necessary transition for every people.

What emerges very clearly from this book is that Fanon could not follow Hegel all the way. When he realized that it is a dialectic that does not apply to a colonial situation, that there is no correspondence between the abstract figures of lord and bondsman and the flesh-and-blood bodies of colonized and colonizer, Fanon did not hesitate to bend the logic of recognition to his own situation and abandon the French Hegel. Like Hegel, Fanon looked to the future but, unlike Hegel, he did so from the midst of struggle. He is the decolonizing intellectual, springing from a class flight from *petit-bourgeois* Antilles, and lodged in a complex and perhaps interminable relation with the racialized identification of the radically other.

Today, we are once again living in a dualistic world: the atmosphere of death makes daily life suffocating. Death is no longer a risk one runs to raise oneself to a higher consciousness of oneself, no longer seen as value-giving or honorable, but rather as wretched, premature, gratuitous, senseless, and voracious. Faced with a *death like that*, one might hope to see more and more intellectuals ready to choose a life of resistance and launch social theories on liberation and human capacity like stones, directed at the glass house of history, just as Fanon did for as long as he could. And *that* is why, as we set this book down, we should remember Said, who unfortunately is little cited by the authors.

This volume can be used as well as read. Should we stand or not with Said on that little plot of land, north of Gaza and south of Lebanon, to throw a stone today, as he did more than twenty years ago with his son? The self-consciousness upon which Hegel, and then Fanon, invite us to reflect is no more than the capacity to be; inasmuch as we are human beings in a history that has been chosen, not endured or imposed.

Simona Taliani 

University of Naples 'L'Orientale', Naples, Italy

[simona.taliani@unior.it](mailto:simona.taliani@unior.it)

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