

Freedom is Slavery

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Abstract: The paper presents an original account of Hegel's master and slave dialectics as it relates to the human/non-human distinction and the category of the undead. It analyzes various social and cultural phenomena, from Haitian zombies to the contemporary 'black market' in slaves (human trafficking etc.), and reflects upon the paradoxical emancipatory force of non-human forms and conditions of labor.

Keywords: slavery, freedom, dialectics, negativity, non-human, zombie

The Black Market

According to the Global Slavery Index report for the year 2016, the number of slaves in the contemporary world is approximately 45.8 million. 58 % of those are working in India, China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Uzbekistan. Involuntary labor is used in almost all countries, including those with the highest standard of living.

The report is published annually by the Walk Free Foundation, an international human rights organization founded in Australia in 2010 which has since been engaged in the struggle against contemporary forms of slavery. The first was published in 2013 and referred to the smaller figure of 29.8 million. Foremost among the reasons for this dramatic upsurge, besides improvements to the technology used to collect statistical data (an extremely complex project), is the massive rise in the flow of refugees from the Middle East due to the military crisis there. It is clear that the war now raging, which can no longer be localized or pinned down to particular regions, a war which crosses national boundaries with the speed of capital, is going to bring about the enslavement of many more people: refugees, migrants, inhabitants of ravaged or abandoned areas, or simply poor people.

It goes without saying that such official records represent only those people who have been 'counted'. The real number of slaves in the world is impossible to state, since we are talking about illegal activity, in which the most varied actors become involved, from petty pimps to high-level representatives of power structures who cover up human traffic or the use of forced labor, including on an industrial scale. Slavery is convenient: every person who labors under compulsion, on pain of death or beatings, in exchange for lodging or for food, receiving no remuneration, brings enormous profit to those who have deprived him of his freedom. As studies carried out by the International Labor Organization (ILO) have shown, the actual share of profits rises through the use of slave labor, but this shadowy aspect of the world economy is

not reflected in official statistics. The yearly gross income brought by slaves amounts to more than 150 billion dollars (the greater part of which, 99 billion, is earned by sex workers).¹

Forced, involuntary, unpaid labor is used in construction, manufacturing, extractive industry, mineral production, agriculture, and on private farms. Children from poor families are sold into sexual or military slavery, into assembly-line production or to be domestic servants.² One well-known path into slavery, often traversed at the cost of money or documents, is illegal migration or travel by the indigent to major cities in search of a better life. People are hunted, used to pay debts, exchanged, sold and re-sold; they are transported from city to city, from country to country, from continent to continent in buses, containers, boxes, dinghies; held in basements, in warehouses, in non-residential spaces— 'in inhuman conditions', as journalists underscore.

This appears monstrous, scandalous – and yet discussions of contemporary slavery never move much beyond the frame of human rights discourse, as if the problem consisted of some isolated incidents, vestigial throwbacks, some lamentable misunderstandings, rather than a many-branched global network of forced labor which is gaining momentum. We live in a world where slavery is officially a thing of the past. We all know it is. The last country to outlaw slavery was Mauritania in 1981. As Article 4 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ratified by the UN General Assembly in 1948, declares, 'No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.'³

In analyzing the global slavery index, human rights experts compare quantitative indicators of various countries, each of which has its own methods for observing or violating this universal ban, its 'corpus delicti' and its measure of suppression or accountability: contemporary slavery is not fully recognized as a universal global problem. Viewed as a violation of moral and juridical law, it is localized at various points throughout the criminal world and thus moves entirely outside of the field of social representation: it receives precisely the same amount of attention as other illegal forms of violence. However, in the final analysis, what is essential here is not the fact of a law being transgressed, but rather the fact that the crime reveals the underside of the law, or even its heart (its true nature, kept hidden and denied). Beyond morality and law, beyond the moral customs and juridical norms of individual countries, slavery

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1 ILO 2012b

2 UN 1991

3 UN 1948

becomes the unbounded total fact of the world economy. More than that, in a certain sense, slavery systematically funds that economy.

The market in slaves was literally black when it was still (figuratively) white: since the period of the great geographical discoveries, when ships sailed the Atlantic with slaves from black Africa to European colonies on the Caribbean and Antillean islands, up until the recent moment when rubber dinghies with Africans, sometimes already dead, began washing ashore on the island of Lampedusa, one of the traditional transfer points for migrants on their way to the European Union, this market has only changed its legal status and thereby finally taken on the nominal color of its commodity. Having become entirely 'black', i.e. criminal, the slave market now intersects with two other markets— the arms trade and the drug trade. The scale of the circulation of money, goods, life and death inside this black triangle is such that the entire law-abiding 'white' market economy appears as a superstructure to that statistically non-transparent base, an aggregate of the mechanisms of 'laundering' its profits, or simply a decorative screen or curtain for it.

What if contemporary society, thinking itself inside a paradigm of emancipation, believing in the increase in the degree of its freedoms and step by step expanding the area throughout which its rights are distributed, is in fact still constructed on the pyramid principle, at whose base we find not a crowd of hired workers but an invisible, black, anonymous mass of slaves, deprived of their status as human beings (or never having possessed it)? Members of this stratum often find themselves literally below the ground: somewhere between the underfloor and the underground, in basements or semi-basements, illegal houses of prostitution or gambling are situated, workshops and factories using slave labor are organized, and migrants, on whose brutal exploitation the material wealth of the host countries is based, dwell. Through these dens, bunkers, and tombs grows the powerful root system of contemporary capital.

'The basic premise of the democratic sort of regime is freedom'; these are Aristotle's words,⁴ undoubtedly true not only for the Athenian democracy of his time, but for the liberal democracy of our time as well. Among the differences between these two systems, attention is drawn to both the fact that in one of them the will of the people was expressed directly, and in the other, it is implemented through a government, and the fact that the Athenian democracy was a slave-owning society: the people expressing its will directly consisted of free citizens, a group that did not include the large numbers of slaves – whereas liberal democracy

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4 Aristotle 2013, p.172

overcame slavery and recognizes all of its people as free citizens. And yet, as we have seen, the word 'overcame' does not completely correspond to the facts.

A Marxist analysis of the dynamics of productive forces and production relations or property relations in any given era underlies the widely held progressivist view according to which slavery belonged to antiquity and has exited into the past with the ancient world. Slave ownership, feudalism, capitalism and so on are thus presented as successive historic formations. Each succeeding stage not only comes to replace the previous one, but actively negates it, and the force that drives this negation arises again at that stage, which is subsequently negated and, in the final reckoning, is superseded, as are all of its constituent elements. So that capitalism, according to Marx, is progressive in that its ruling class, the bourgeoisie, puts an end to the traditional estate society and all of its remnants such as religion and morality, but also gives birth to its own gravedigger, the proletariat, who in their turn, will destroy it.⁵

This scenario, however, begins to look somewhat more complicated when we remember that one of the main components of what later became historical materialism was the Hegelian dialectic, in which negation necessarily mediates becoming. It is important that this is not simple (empty) negation, but a definite (full) kind– it understands what it is negating and, in negating, preserves and endows upon the negated both content and form⁶. This is the meaning of the Hegelian term *Aufhebung*, traditionally translated into English as 'sublation'.

Let us move this mechanism from the Hegelian element of the spirit, consciousness and self-consciousness to the Marxian sphere of productive forces and production relations– and then it seems that in the course of history social formations do not so much rescind and overcome each other as negate while preserving each other, such that each new global politico-economic system in its sublated aspect (whatever that might mean) contains within it all preceding forms. If the society of antiquity knew only the principal form of forced labor, namely, slavery, the contemporary world has at its disposal several traditional practices inherited from the past, including all the 'sublated' ones. 'How can the poor be made to work once their illusions have been shattered, and once force has been defeated?'. It can be done using various methods simultaneously (not only by luring them with consumption, as the theorists of the society of the spectacle

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5 Marx, Engels 1929

6 Hegel 1999, p. 45

7 Debord 1992, p. 4

thought). Should we not then acknowledge that the higher the degree of freedom thought to be reached on the scale of progress in the history of humanity, the broader the range of potential methods of oppression?

The 'sublation' of a paradigmatic form as ancient as slavery through universal abolition only fortifies it. To understand the source of this strength, another non-standard form of negation will help, one introduced into discourse by psychoanalytic theory. It provides a kind of coda to the scenario we have examined so far. Unlike Hegelian negation, the Freudian version does not remove but out of hand affirms that which is negated: 'no' means 'yes'⁸. The negative form of expression simply allows us to say what cannot be said– i.e. the truth. Truth, in the Freudian formulation, is, if anything, the truth of desire, rather than the truth of what we consider to be reality. Language uses negation to get around the censor of consciousness. The patient's words, 'You ask who this person in the dream can be. It's not my mother', Freud interprets, as we know, to mean: "'So it is his mother'"⁹. There are things that can only 'reach consciousness'¹⁰ in an inverted form. Here, negation is nothing less than the 'hall-mark of repression, a certificate of origin– like, let us say, "made in Germany"¹¹.

Upon examining history from a psychoanalytical perspective, rather than *Aufhebung* – or even, in a dialectical way, together with it – the main 'engine of progress' is seen to be repression, which, as Lacan underscores, always coincides with the return of the repressed¹². Thus the preceding layers of our psychohistory do not disappear, yielding their place to their successors, but undergo repression, in order to return in the next breath in new, sometimes terrible forms. Slavery, sublated by the universal formal abolition or repressed by it beyond the borders of the periphery of social consciousness, did not go anywhere, did not disappear, but continues to dwell here, at the very heart of the free contemporary democratic world– not as its accidental aberration, but as its censored memory and unrecognized true nature. This true nature can only be approached from the back door or the back stairs¹³ (like those that were designated for use by the servants and other rabble in bourgeois

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8 See Dolan 2012

9 Freud 1925, p. 235

10 Ibid., p. 236

11 Ibid., p. 237

12 Lacan 1991, pp. 158–159

13 Note that "back door" is translated into Russian as "black entrance door," and "back stairs" as "black stairs."

houses).

However, the precipitous argument that the democratic freedom of the contemporary world is nothing more than empty dogma and ideological tinsel to conceal the harsh truth of the cruel exploitation of human beings in numbers exceeding those of ancient slavery should be considered worthy of discussion only at the level of everyday common sense– and dispensed with as rather uninteresting. Our hypothesis here will consist of a different argument, at first glance more paradoxical: the Aristotelian claim that democracy is founded on freedom does not, we assert, lose its meaning when juxtaposed with the existence of a black market in slaves.

The point here is not that the freedom of the contemporary world is compromised by slavery, or that we nonetheless have a democracy that is somehow inauthentic, or that the creeping proliferation of slavery in some way poses a threat to democratic freedoms. Slavery, by definition, is contrary to freedom, but this contradiction is dialectical in character. There is a point where the two opposing forces meet. Let us remember that in the time of Aristotle it was precisely slaves who guaranteed citizens of the polis the freedom essential to their implementation of democracy, administration of government, and even their philosophy: through their work, the slaves *freed* the citizens, and it was precisely that freedom, guaranteed by the slaves, that was the core element of Athenian democracy. So the question, it appears, is not how it happened that democratic freedoms today organically coexist with unprecedented levels of slavery. The question is something else: if the basic element of democracy is freedom, then what is the basic element of freedom?

This Space Could Be Love's

The most well-known and oft-quoted example of an analysis of slavery in the history of philosophy is the fourth chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, dealing with the dialectic of master and slave. That text is so difficult and multilayered that practically every philosopher worthy of consideration since Hegel has tried to find a new approach to cracking it open– hence the wealth of clashing interpretations. Opinions, including positive ones, were expressed on slavery in philosophy before Hegel as well: the first order of business in this regard is usually referencing the regrettably famous justification of slavery made by Aristotle, who in the *Politics* (the same place where he writes about freedom as the source of democracy) declares that some people are slaves 'by nature' and are therefore better off living in subordination

to those whose station is higher¹⁴. In antiquity, in the Middle Ages, and in modern times various definitions of slavery have been put forward and a variety of arguments for and against it have been made. In the process, slavery has been examined as, on the one hand, the really existing institutional social practice of forced labor, and on the other, as a metaphor for spiritual dependence, for unfreedom in general. However, it was in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that slavery was endowed with its full significance as a philosophical concept, concentrating both of these meanings in the complex knot that so many have been keen to untangle.

The Phenomenology of Spirit is Hegel's first major, system-forming work. In it, he presents an outline of the science whose object is the form of 'phenomenal knowledge.'¹⁵ Immersion in these forms is realized as an experience of consciousness, or as the life of the spirit, passing through stages in the study of its own morphogenesis toward the level of science. That is what we call absolute idealism: the spirit passes through a defined path, or rather, is itself the path through which it passes; a path passing through itself. Hegel calls it 'the path of despair'. Why? Because the forms of phenomenal knowledge through which the path to truth leads are themselves obsolete, inauthentic, untrue forms. We not only doubt the material integrity of things, doubt ourselves, doubt others – we despair time and time again, we do not see the exit– nd there is none: each step leads into a dead end. And suddenly from this same dead end and nothingness, despair disgorges us, separating and alienating us from untrue form. It is as if we jump out, hind-foremost, and thereby manage to 'catch' it, like a photographer who jumps out of a burning house without letting go of his camera.

In order for this movement of surmounting and self-surmounting, contrary to natural inertia, common sense, and so on, to become understandable and habitual, we should patiently practice dialectics, which, as Hegel himself, according to legend, aptly noted, cannot be articulated either briefly, or popular, or in French¹⁶. Here, for the time being, it suffices to imagine the self-traversing path somehow in reverse: each of its previous stages only becomes truly functional in the moment when it is sublated: traversed, known, understood, lived, and survived in despair. The life of spirit is an afterlife. In each of its forms here and now, revealed in this moment to be untrue, spirit was itself until it survived its own self. Surviving itself, it becomes functional as a form of concept, and from a concept develops into absolute knowledge and thus reappropriates

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14 Aristotle 2013, p. 9

15 Hegel 2008, p. 78

16 Gulyga 2008, p. 250

itself as history and as science.

As far as history, Hegel says that it constitutes 'mindful, self-mediating coming-to-be',¹⁷ in which spirit remembers itself.¹⁸ From what kind of oblivion does it remember itself? – We could have responded to such a 'Heideggerian' question with another Heideggerian answer, 'the oblivion of being', and Heidegger in fact, in his introduction to the Introduction to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, defines the experience of consciousness as 'to expound what constitutes the thingness of the thing',¹⁹ thereby reading into Hegel his own problematic of being of beings; if it were the Hegelian unforgettable, pure being would not be identical with nothingness.²⁰ In fact the Hegelian spirit remembers itself from the very oblivion of itself. Not from being or from nothingness (which in themselves do not exist, or rather, each of which in itself only amounts to its opposite), but only from becoming, from the transition of being into nothingness, from its own self-oblivious movement outside itself, at every turn of which consciousness and the world reflect each other and negate each other. History simultaneously presents both memory and oblivion, a syncope of the spirit in which it unfolds before itself as something not its own. The forms of phenomenal knowledge are just such traversed moments of self-alienation, one of which is slavery.

In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel, unlike Aristotle and other authors, does not write from the position of a master about how to deal with slaves, whether slavery is right or wrong, whether slaves should be freed or not. Slavery is not good or bad. It is a form of phenomenal knowledge at the level where consciousness, led outside itself by the fragile certainty of sensual things, approaches itself as a thing, testing the truth of its own self-certainty. Before us we no longer have simply consciousness (it must be admitted that consciousness is never a simple thing, and if it is, then not simply simple, for any kind of simplicity is formed in retroactively through mediation). What we have before us is self-consciousness: something is happening with consciousness that rather resembles what happened in the previous stage– in chapter of Phenomenology (Consciousness) – with the world of things: a split into 'in-itself' and 'for-itself', which furthermore is essentially possible only for an Other.

Let us remember that in Western, primarily French, twentieth-

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17 Hegel 2008, p. 734

18 Ibid., p. 735

19 Heidegger 1994, p. 85

20 Hegel 2010, p. 59

century philosophy – in existentialism, phenomenology, structuralism and post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction – the Other is reckoned among the most important problems. But if the question is raised as to where that other came from, how he entered, the answer should be looked for precisely here, in Hegel, in his *Science of Logic*, *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, and of course, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, especially in the fourth chapter, where the spirit has a prominent part in the dialectic of master and slave: 'Self-consciousness exists *in* and *for* itself because and by way of its existing in and for itself for an other ...'²¹. Hegel discovers the Other for philosophy. The relationship with the Other, without which there would be no self, consists of such elements as desire, power and struggle. Desire (*Begierde*) points to the existence of objects independent from the self, whom self-consciousness, in order to achieve self-certainty, negates, but at the same time produces over and over again: one after another, objects of desire flash before us. The desiring activity of self-consciousness cannot bring itself to focus on any one of them, insofar as these objects in their self-sufficiency are '... the universal, indestructible substance, the fluid essence in-parity-with-itself'²². Self-consciousness is intended to achieve satisfaction not in the object, but in another self-consciousness like itself.

This space could belong to love. As Jean Hippolyte notes in his authoritative commentary, 'it would have been possible to present the duality of self-consciousnesses and their unity in the element of life as the dialectic of love'²³. However, love, that 'lacks the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labor of the negative'²⁴, preoccupies Hegel much less in the *Phenomenology* than power as a kind of paramount truth of the relationship to the Other (including– let us observe parenthetically – as the truth of a love relationship; it is said, after all, that 'love is power'). Self-consciousness could find satisfaction if the self and the Other, encountering each other via their desires, recognized each other 'recognizing each other'—such is the 'pure concept of recognition'²⁵. But in the experience, at the moment of this encounter self-consciousness acts as inequality and divides into two extreme terms, 'which are, as extreme terms, opposed to each other, and of which one is merely

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21 Hegel 2008, p. 164

22 Hegel 2008, p. 163

23 Hyppolite 1974, p. 164

24 Hegel 2008, p. 16

25 Ibid., p. 167

recognized while the other merely recognizes²⁶.

The basic relationship to the Other is not love, but the struggle for recognition, out of which one emerges as master, the other as slave. At stake in the struggle is life: he who risks his, exhibiting valor, will be master. He thus demonstrates his independence from the physical conditionality of individual life, his freedom. He who values life more than freedom, who clings to his life, recognizes another as his master and will be his slave. 'The relation of both self-consciousnesses is thus determined in such a way that it is through a life and death struggle that each proves his worth to himself, and that both prove their worth to each other. –They must engage in this struggle, for each must elevate his self-certainty of existing for himself to truth, both in the other and in himself. And it is solely by staking one's life that freedom is proven to be the essence [...]The individual who has not risked his life may admittedly be recognized as a person, but he has not achieved the truth of being recognized as a self-sufficient self-consciousness'²⁷. As the most elementary kind of example of such a direct confrontation with the Other, we might consider how slave ranks were formed in antiquity– through the acquisition of war captives who survived defeat at the price of their freedom.

From that point unfolds the famous dialectic, in which the slave serves as a mediating link between master and thing. In order for the apparent object of desire, a thing in the world of things, to provide satisfaction to the master, the slave subjects it to processes of elaboration, depriving it of its primordial autonomy and making it available for consumption. 'On account of the thing's self-sufficiency, desire did not achieve this much, but the master, who has interposed the servant between the thing and himself, thereby merely links up with the non-self-sufficiency of the thing and simply consumes it. He leaves the aspect of its self-sufficiency in the care of the servant, who works on the thing'²⁸. In order for there to be sweet sugar on the master's table, someone must grow, gather, and process the sugar cane. In this, in fact, we see the essence of labor. But not only in this. While the master is enjoying his dominance, prestige, recognition and direct access to material goods, the slave is developing himself and by means of his work is actively transforming the surrounding world.

Labor is the negative relationship to reality through which, according to Hegel, the acquisition of the self-consciousness of authentic

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26 Ibid., p. 167

27 Ibid., pp. 168-169

28 Ibid., p. 172

autonomy is possible. The thing processed by the slave participates in the process of his self-education, or formation: in laboring, it is as if he were creating things out of their very nothingness, out of his own nothingness. The master, after all, is on a downward path, his freedom is revealed to be inauthentic– reveling in consumption, he is not self-sufficient; he is helpless in his dependence on the slave: 'the *truth* of the self-sufficient consciousness is the *servile consciousness*'²⁹. It is through work, not through consumption, that a free, thinking consciousness is born. Slavery, not mastery, paves the complex path to freedom. As Althusser writes in his short essay 'Man, That Night': 'The triumph of freedom in Hegel is not the triumph of any freedom whatever: it is not the mightiest who prevails in the end; history shows, rather, that human freedom is engendered by the slave'³⁰.

Unrestrained Anthropocentrism

Among specialists in the field of interpreting the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and that passage in particular, a decisive consensus has yet to be reached concerning what Hegel is 'really' saying. Is he speaking of slavery in terms of an eternal symbol of coercion and self-restraint, as a recurring structure, in the form of a matrix that reproduces itself endlessly, or in terms of the description of a particular, bygone historical era in antiquity? Where does the encounter of slave and master take place? In the ether, on earth, in history, in theory, or in our heads? Does their struggle represent a social antagonism or the duality within one consciousness? I hold to the unassuming and undistinguished idea that the dialectic of master and slave unfolds on all of these levels (which at the same time themselves displace and negate each other) at once, but other, more radical theories exist as well.

The most controversial treatment of the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave belongs to Alexandre Kojève. Precisely this interpretation exerted enormous influence on all mid-twentieth century French thought, which was extremely responsive in particular to such themes as desire and the Other. Kojève's interpretation bases itself on a presupposition which I find unconvincing– namely, that negativity, which Hegel links to the historical unfolding of spirit, is the exclusive property of human beings: "Spirit" in Hegel (and especially in this context) means "*human Spirit*" or *Man*, more particularly, collective Man— that is, the People or State, and, finally, Man as a whole or humanity in the totality of

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29 Ibid., p. 104

30 Althusser 2014, p. 172

its spatial-temporal existence, that is, the totality of universal History³¹. For Kojève, any negation of the material fact of being always presupposes an active, causative human subject. For all of his ostensible faithfulness to the Hegelian letter, Kojève transforms the *Phenomenology* into a kind of historical anthropology, from which any and all nonhuman elements are excluded.

Whereas for Hegel, the negative is restlessness, the impossibility of staying in one place, movement outward from the self, alteration— it is the main element of ontology, which for that reason teaches neither about being nor nonbeing, but about becoming, which draws everything in the world inside it, for Kojève it becomes a description of human existence. In the Hegelian world, neither elements of inorganic nature, nor plants, animals, or any other being, are alien to negation; the essence of any such being can and must therefore be understood and expressed ‘not merely as *substance* but also equally as *subject*’³². Each entity relates with its otherness— with that which it is not, with the Other— in a state of contradiction, out of which truth is born through negation. As Hegel writes in the *Philosophy of Nature*: ‘[t]he animal world is the truth of the vegetable world’³³ – and at the same time its death: ‘[t]he animal process is higher than the nature of the plant, and constitutes its destruction’³⁴. Kojève hurriedly discards the *Philosophy of Nature*, finding therein only idealism and the spiritualization of matter, and thus loses sight of this fundamental moment³⁵, confining the horizon of negativity to a single solitary species which, having appeared on Earth, suddenly transforms nature into History. Nature itself and all nonhuman being, as a space deprived of negativity and time, remain somewhere in parentheses. The ‘experience of consciousness’ is transformed into the history of humanity, which starts from the primal scene of the encounter between two people.

For Kojève, the master and slave are not two parts of one and the same self-consciousness, but literally two different people. They meet and enter into a battle of desires. Each participant in this battle wants to be recognized in his human dignity, but recognition is given only to the one who goes all the way and demonstrates his fearlessness by risking his life. It may be said that this is the precise moment where Kojève demarcates the boundary of the human— the line that separates man from

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31 Kojève 1969, p. 138

32 Hegel 2008, p. 15

33 Hegel 1970/1, p. 213

34 Hegel 1970/3, p. 101

35 imofeeva 2013

the natural and animal world, wherein the slave, shackled by fear for his life, remains and abides. In the negativity of work, however, he overcomes his slavery, acquires self-sufficient self-consciousness and, in the end, becomes free.

To attain that state, though, it was necessary to cross over through slavery. As Kojève notes quite aptly: ‘... to be able to cease being a slave, he must have been a slave’³⁶. Being master merely means to be the “catalyst” of the History that will be realized, completed, and “revealed” by the Slave or the ex-Slave who has become a Citizen³⁷. It is not the master, but the slave, he who was initially refused recognition of his human dignity, who achieves authentic freedom, in which he makes the historical essence of humanity a reality. When this fulfilment reaches its plenitude, history, composed of wars and revolutions, ends. None will be slaves any more, for all are citizens of the total, homogeneous state of universal mutual recognition. In fact, according to Kojève, this state has already been achieved, and Hegel’s *Phenomenology* bears witness to nothing less than the end of history, embodied in the Napoleonic Empire, after which ‘there will never more be anything new on earth’ (Kojève 1969: 168). Popular interpretations (such as Fukuyama’s) here insert the idea of capitalist globalization, or of liberal democracy, gradually spreading to all countries of this world in which slavery has been overthrown and a declaration of rights that recognizes each person in his or her human dignity has universal validity.

If we go back to the Hegelian dialectic to ascertain what exactly does not fit here, we find that Hegel never states outright that human beings constitute the focus of his argument. Perhaps for Kojève that was obvious, but for us, it is no longer so. Nevertheless, in the unrestrained anthropocentrism of his interpretation there is something extremely curious for a symptomatic reading: do not these insistently repeated litanies of the human essence of freedom, which today appear rather inescapably comical, indicate what is being repressed or forgotten here, namely the nonhuman essence of unfreedom, out of which slavery builds both history and freedom? As Georges Bataille observes, contemplating in particular the feasibility of Kojève’s theory, human dignity, the struggle for which is a fight to the death, ‘is not distributed equally among all men’³⁸, and until inequality has been eradicated, history will not end. Inequality among people cannot be eradicated to the extent that it is founded upon another kind of inequality— between

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36 Kojève 1969, p. 47

37 Ibid.

38 Bataille 1991, p. 333

humans and nonhumans. As long as universal humanity affirms its human nature and freedom at the expense of another— for example, an animal— there will exist those who are denied recognition of their humanity. This is, incidentally, why Bataille does not believe in communism and the classless society: ‘The man of “classless society” owes the value in the name of which he destroyed the classes to the very impulse that divided humanity into classes’: human dignity grows out of the negation of the nonhuman³⁹.

This perspective allows us to shed some light on certain aspects of contemporary slavery. Why is it so difficult to examine it in the context of human rights violations? Because in the legal context of contemporary bourgeois nation-states there exists a confusion between human rights and civil rights. Those who are deprived of civil rights— primarily stateless persons, illegal migrants, refugees— fall into a kind of gray zone, where the validity of human rights has yet to make itself strongly felt. The basic guarantor of rights and freedoms is, in the final reckoning, the state, whose free citizens are human beings. Where there is no citizen, there is no human being— that is precisely how the situation is viewed by black market agents whose first order of business is to remove the documents that prove a person’s identity. As in the archaic situation of prisoners of war, the price of life becomes freedom. And in precisely the same way, just as Hegel explained it, contemporary refugees often settle and take up servile, forced or ill-paid work in countries that are waging war on their own soil.

Each citizen is free. As in the time of Aristotle, freedom belongs to the citizen, but in the universal state according to Kojève all are citizens. They are proceeding toward their own freedom via slavery, not dependent on the work of others like the idle, consumption-crazed masters of antiquity. Today’s slaves are undocumented or overlooked statistical units. They somehow exist, yet it is as if they were not there. If we speak of the free citizen of the contemporary capitalist society, then what, we must ask, differentiates him a) from the free citizen of the ancient polis and b) from the slave of that same ancient polis? In the first instance, the answer is that the contemporary free citizen in most cases works, and in the second, that in most cases he exchanges his labor for money (where the slave exchanges it for life, food, lodging, and so on). Money thus acts as a kind of recognition of the human, a universal equivalent and measure of human dignity.

In Marx’s view, on the other hand, there is no significant structural difference between the slave and the wage-worker— as he writes in the

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39 Bataille 1991, p. 337

Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, alienated labor for money is just as coercive as slave labor⁴⁰. Among Marx’s ‘scholastic’ works, that one is the most humanistic. It deals with the way that the human essence becomes alienated in wage labor. The worker goes to work in order to be able to get up and go to work the next day. The wretched infrastructure of the regeneration of his labor-power (the landlords of rented basement apartments, these dirty forms of ‘cave dwelling’, threaten at any moment to throw the worker out into the street for failure to pay⁴¹ bears witness to the fact that his subjectivity is constituted around the loss of the essence of his humanity. At the same time, real power belongs to money, which stands ‘between man’s need and the object, between his life and his means of life’, between me and the other person, whose love, whose kiss I wish to buy⁴².

Living Dead

‘The need for money is for that reason the real need created by the modern economic system, and the only need it creates’ – in the revised edition of the *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord links this conclusion of Marx’s directly to the Hegelian theory of money presented in his *Jenenser Realphilosophie*⁴³. Money here operates as a materialized concept, a form of unity of all existing things: ‘Need and labor, elevated into this universality, then form on their own account a monstrous system of community and mutual interdependence in a great people; a life of the dead body, that moves itself within itself [...], and which requires continual strict dominance and taming like a wild beast’⁴⁴. It is curious that in this work, written not long before the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel, describing the civil society of his time, already speaks of recognition, based on property, but does not yet speak about slavery. The master and slave appear in his philosophy in the period 1805-1806. As Susan Buck-Morss asserts, this is not accidental: the dialectic of master and slave does not emerge from the philosopher’s head, but from the very historical reality that shaped him.

‘No one has dared to suggest that the idea for the dialectic of lordship and bondage came to Hegel in Jena in the years 1803-5 from reading the press— journals and newspapers. And yet this selfsame

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40 rx 2007, pp. 23, 81

41 arx 2007, p. 125

42 Ibid., p. 135

43 Debord 1992, p. 62

44 Hegel 1979, p. 249

Hegel, in this very Jena period during which the master-slave dialectic was first conceived, made the following notation: “Reading the newspaper in early morning is a kind of realistic morning prayer. One orients one’s attitude against the world and toward God [in one case], or toward that which the world is [in the other]. The former gives the same security as the latter, in that one knows where one stands” – thus Buck-Morss, quoting Hegel, in her book *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*⁴⁵, persuasively shows that the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave is not simply a commonplace explanatory philosophical metaphor, corresponding to the two-faced Western discourse of emancipation.

In Buck-Morss’s view, what Hegel is really writing about is not the symbolic slavery from whose chains the ideologues of the French Revolution call for breaking free, but the real slavery in those very French colonies on which the Revolution kept its eyes shut, as if emancipation were solely a matter for those with white skin. It is not the French Revolution, as has hitherto been thought, that preoccupies Hegel, so much as another revolution that took place in Haiti from 1791 to 1803. That was the first large-scale uprising in history, which led to the overthrow of slavery and the establishment of a self-governing Haitian republic: ‘... the half-million slaves in Saint-Domingue, the richest colony not only of France but of the entire colonial world, took the struggle for liberty into their own hands, not through petitions, but through violent, organized revolt’⁴⁶. Hegel could not have failed to notice an event of such massive dimensions. It was being discussed by all enlightened Germans of the time, readers, without exception, of Archenholz’s journal *Minerva*, in which it received extensively detailed coverage.

‘Conceptually, the revolutionary struggle of slaves, who overthrow their own servitude and establish a constitutional state, provides the theoretical hinge that takes Hegel’s analysis out of the limitlessly expanding colonial economy and onto the plane of world history, which he defines as the realization of freedom – a theoretical solution that was taking place in practice in Haiti at that very moment’, Buck-Morss writes⁴⁷. Haitian slaves were not freed by a decree from on high; they destroyed their hateful masters with their own hands and made themselves free people– was this not the fight to the death of which Hegel spoke in the *Phenomenology*? ‘Mutual recognition among equals emerges with logical necessity out of the contradictions of slavery, not the least of which is trading slaves as, legally, “things”, when they

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45 Buck-Morss 2009, p. 49

46 Buck-Morss, p. 36

47 Ibid., pp. 10-12

show themselves capable of becoming the active agents of history by struggling against slavery in a “battle of recognition” under the banner, “Liberty or Death!”⁴⁸.

Buck-Morss underscores the fact that none of Hegel’s interpreters has previously taken this historical reality into consideration. Nobody cares about Haiti, while every reader strives to see a high-minded metaphor in the Hegelian dialectic– including Marx, for whom it is one description of the class struggle. Furthermore, forgetting real slavery in favor of metaphorical is, in a sense, one of Marxism’s contributions, as it taught us to think history in terms of successive economic formations, and correspondingly to categorize slavery as an outmoded archaism. The matter is, of course, much more complex in Marx, but it is nonetheless impossible not to concur with Buck-Morss that without an understanding of issues at the heart of post-colonial studies and the crucial role of the slave trade in the formation of contemporary capitalism, our reading of the Hegel passage in question is, of course, utterly inadequate⁴⁹. Continuing this line of inquiry in some respects, we must once again place real slavery front and center, this time the contemporary kind, existing in Haiti, incidentally, on a colossal scale: according to the data collected by *Walk Free*, over 200,000 people are currently living in slavery there, most of them children. It appears that after the revolution everything took a turn for the worse, as usual: slavery led not to freedom, but to lordship. Former slaves became masters and themselves took slaves. History began all over again.

Wherein lies the problem? Why does the mechanism of liberation falter? Our suspicion falls on its ‘too human’ character, already indicated in connection with Kojève’s interpretation: the recognition of any person’s human dignity is a moment of masterhood, and a master cannot exist without a slave. Who will work if all are masters? Those who are not or, as it were, ‘are not fully’ human- the unrecognized. In fantastic scenarios of the future, most frequently post-apocalyptic (for example, in Hollywood films), people are rarely truly free, but often are masters whose freedom, as in the past, in Athens, is secured by someone’s slave labor. People have their work done for them by mechanical animals, robots– until the point when self-consciousness emerges in them together with life (the biotechnological utopia).

The living dead could be this kind of future slaves, if they were to return to their mythological and historical roots. It is well known that not only slaves were brought to Haiti from black Africa. Along with

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48 Ibid., p. 12

49 See Williams 1944

the slaves, new forms of worship appeared on the new continent— in particular the syncretic cult of voodoo, incorporating elements of African religions, Catholicism, and traditions of the local indigenous peoples (Dutty Boukman, one of the leaders of the first wave of the 1791 uprising who was executed in November of that year, was a voodoo priest). With the cult of voodoo, another new participant staggered out onto the world stage— the zombie, the living corpse, the sorcerer’s slave. The zombie is a product of colonialism which, before becoming one of the central post-human figures in contemporary mass culture with its vision of the end of history as the end of the world, was an integral part of Haitian folklore. As Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry argue in their ‘Zombie Manifesto’, quoting Wade Davis’s *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie*: ‘The roots of the zombie can be traced back to the Haitian Revolution, when reports of the rebelling slaves depicted them as nearly supernatural: “fanatic and insensate hordes of blacks rose as a single body to overwhelm the more ‘rational’ white troops”⁵⁰.

There are numerous accounts of how zombies first appeared. According to the most realistic, voodoo sorcerers used poisonous substances to put living people in a coma-like state or one of clinical death, when awoken from which, after having been buried alive, a person retained only certain bodily functions, sufficient to automatically carry out a set of very simple instructions or commands. Aside from the pharmacological, we find other explanations of the zombie phenomenon as well, particularly psychosocial ones. The living dead could, for example, work on sugar-cane plantations at night. In any case, the original meaning of the zombie related not to impersonal evil and destruction, as in contemporary mass culture, but to forced labor.

Before becoming an insensate horde, wandering about the desolate earth in search of human flesh, the living dead were slaves. In the era of colonialism, death appeared to the inhabitants of San Domingo as more or less the only way out from the situation of slavery to which they were condemned in life: a return to their native African land, the soul’s passage to a new life. There was therefore no punishment more terrifying than zombification, which reduced the human being to slavery eternally, taking away his last hope of actually dying and thereby becoming free. For Africans in Haiti, zombification represented not only slavery for life, but after life as well. If in Ancient Egypt enslaved captives were called the ‘living dead’, here the slavery of the dead (or, to be precise, the undead) is understood literally. The slogan of the slaves in revolt, ‘Freedom or Death!’, takes on deeper meaning in this context. Can death bring

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50 Lauro & Embry 2008, p. 98

liberation, or does the living soul in the slave’s dead body continue its grueling labor? Unlike a living human being, the zombie has nothing to grab hold of; he cannot engage in the struggle for recognition, since he has no life either to risk or to cling to by remaining in bondage.

On the other hand, the zombie is also a figure of resurrection. He rises from the dead. Obviously zombies in contemporary mass culture represent a peculiar kind of negative distortion of the old Christian idea of the resurrection of the dead (among the various variations on this idea, we might also name, for example, Russian cosmism). In a certain sense, zombies are immortal souls. Not only does the word ‘zombie’ come from the Bantu-Congolese *nzambi*, meaning ‘god, spirit, soul’, but their very existence reveals the impossibility of dying. Zombies are undead souls in dead bodies which they animate and set in motion. Let us remember, among other things, their brain. In many films whose plots deal with zombies, the creatures can only be destroyed by a bullet to the brain. The brain of a zombie, in all likelihood, is the sinister celluloid equivalent of what Christians called the soul. Here is the posthumous afterlife of the human being, from which everything human seems to have been subtracted— memory, reason, feelings, dignity, and so on. He has lost everything, but there is something that rises up in the midst of this very loss.

What if it is precisely from therein, from this maximally nonhuman substance of slavery, that the new radical subject of emancipation is born? Is that not what contemporary culture is hinting at by producing figures of the collective imagination who associate rebellion, protest, the toppling of a repressive regime or unjust lordship with a nonhuman— animal, mechanical or altogether lifeless— element? The machine, the animal, the monster, the insect, the reptile, the doll, the corpse and other archetypal Others reveal themselves in the form of the oppressed, charting the difficult path from life to consciousness, which cannot be traced by any man, for this path lies through the Goethean ‘absolute lord’ -- death. First they come to life and begin to move, and then to feel, think, and act against the system that does not recognize them as forms of the free citizen, the human being, the subject.

Zombies occupy an exceptional place among such post-human subjects of emancipation— in part due to a certain invulnerability they inherited from their Haitian ancestors, who felt neither heat, cold, or pain, in part due to the despair, that is, the complete absence of any kind of hope whatsoever, that we might call their natural element. Zombies are the survivors, not only of catastrophe (the apocalypse), but of themselves. Together with all humans they have survived and left behind everything that could have rendered them dependent. There are

no sorcerers anymore– the post-apocalyptic zombies are without any masters. They have survived their own slavery and moved beyond the limits of the human with its dialectic of masters and slaves. Thus, in George A. Romero's film *Land of the Dead* (2005), the zombies acquire class consciousness and, as the lowest stratum among the oppressed, take upon themselves and accomplish what we will call the historical revolutionary mission of the proletariat, which has proven beyond the strength of human beings. They learn a new type of collective organization that does not consist of separate human individuals and is founded solely on the despair of those with literally nothing to lose: even their bodies have already lost their integrity. They are driven not by hope, but only by despair, and this despair makes them do impossible things. And what if they have gone through absolute negativity, through the apocalypse, through death and disintegration, through utter hell, to lay the path (let us call it the path of despair, as Hegel would) for some new kind of subjectivity? As long as the human continues to be confused with the citizen, or freedom with lordship, such future scenarios will continue to be vitally relevant.

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