

Hegel and the Antidialectic

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This work, using the case study of the Haitian Revolution, positions Paul C. Mocombe's theory of antidialectic within Hegel's dialectical reasoning. Mocombe posits that the antidialectical position in Hegel's dialectic is the position of each self-consciousness when they initially encounter each other at the onset of the master/slave dialectic. Whereas, the master seeks to move to the dialectical position in order to dominate and eliminate the original (antidialectical) position of the slave, the slave remains in this antidialectical position so long as they seek to fight against their enslavement for the purpose of maintaining and reproducing their original, antidialectical, position, which is social, political, economic, and ideological. In any other instances, they (the slaves) are either in the dialectical, seeking to maintain the status quo, or negative dialectical, seeking to integrate the status quo on equal footing with the master, positions.

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Introduction

The Haitian Revolution commenced on August 14th, 1791 at a place called Bois Caïman, Haiti. The traditional interpretation of the revolution is that representatives of twenty-one African nations met at the site to discuss the denouement of the revolution and appoint its military leaders who would eventually liberate the island from slavery and French rule. This classic interpretation of the Revolution is a liberal reading, which highlights the purposive-rationality of the mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks, Affranchis, of the island who would go on to assume leadership roles in the revolution and write its history. This work, using the case of the Haitian Revolution, positions Paul C. Mocombe's (2019) theory of antidialectic within Hegel's dialectical reasoning to argue against this classic liberal reading. Mocombe posits that the antidialectical position in Hegel's dialectic is the position of each self-consciousness when they initially encounter each other at the onset of the master/slave dialectic. Whereas the master seeks to move from their antidialectical to the dialectical position in order to dominate and eliminate the original (antidialectical) position of the slave; the slave remains in this antidialectical position so long as they choose death and seek to fight against their enslavement for the purpose of maintaining and reproducing their original, antidialectical, position, which is social, political, ideological, and economic. In any other instances, they (the slaves) are either in the dialectical or negative dialectical positions. In the former position, dialectical, the slave seeks to maintain the status quo in order to stay alive; in the latter, negative dialectical position (which is itself still a dialectical position), made famous by the theorists of the Frankfurt

School, the slave seeks to integrate the status quo by convicting the master for not identifying with their (antidialectical) values as it should be applied to not only the master but the slave, who has attained self-consciousness within the dialectic, as well. The latter two positions, I want to argue here, represent the purposive-rationality of the *Affranchis*; however, the former, antidialectical position, is the purposive-rationality of the African nations who commenced the revolution at Bois Caïman.

Background of the Problem

Hegel's master/slave dialectic highlights the initial encounter of two self-consciousness and their unfolding interactions. As in the case of CLR James's work, *Black Jacobins*, Susan Buck Morss (2009) in her work, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* attempts to understand the originating moments of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) metaphorically through Hegel's master/slave dialectic. Suggesting, in fact, that it is the case of Haiti that Hegel utilized to constitute the metaphor:

Given the facility with which this dialectic of lordship and bondage lends itself to such a reading, 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. (Morss, 2009, p. 56)

My position here is that James's and Morss's (dialectical) conclusions do not hold true for the Africans who met at Bois Caïman, the originating moments of the revolution, and only holds true for the case of the *Affranchis*, mulatto elites and creole blacks, of Haiti—who usurped, following their assassination of Jean-Jacques Dessalines (the leader of the Revolution who declares Haiti an independent nation in 1804), the originating moments of the Revolution from the Africans who met at Bois Caïman—who, in choosing to rebel against their former masters, were not risking death to avoid subjugation, but in rebelling were choosing life in order to be like the master and subjugate the Africans (pejoratively referred to as *Bossales* by the *Affranchis*) by recursively organizing and reproducing the (mercantilist and liberal) ideals of their former white slavemasters. Hence, whereas the Africans (who constituted sixty-seven percent of the population with the onset of the Revolution) remained in what I am calling here the antidialectical position, which is the original position of encountering in Hegel's master/slave dialectic, the *Affranchis* and the white French masters would constitute Hegel's master/slave dialectic, in the dialectical and negative dialectical positions, at the expense of the Africans of Haiti, which they both have been seeking to subjugate since slavery and the revolution. This work highlights the antidialectical position, which scholars have ignored in favor of understanding the dialectical and negative dialectical positions of the French and *Affranchis*.

Theory

In Hegel's master/slave dialectic as Morss explains in relation to the Haitian Revolution,

Hegel understands the position of the master in both political and economic terms. In the *System der Sittlichkeit* (1803): "The master is in possession of an overabundance of physical necessities generally, and the other [the slave] in the lack thereof." At first consideration the master's situation is "independent, and its essential nature is to be for itself"; whereas "the other," the slave's position, "is dependent, and its essence is life or existence for another." The slave is characterized by the lack of recognition he receives. He is viewed as "a thing"; "thinghood" is the essence of slave consciousness—as it was the essence of his legal status under the *Code Noir*. But as the dialectic develops, the apparent dominance of the master reverses itself with his awareness that he is in fact totally dependent on the slave. One has only to collectivize the figure of the master in order to see the descriptive pertinence of Hegel's analysis: the slaveholding class is indeed totally dependent on the institution of slavery for the "overabundance" that constitutes its wealth. This class is thus incapable of being the

agent of historical progress without annihilating its own existence. But then the slaves (again, collectivizing the figure) achieve self-consciousness by demonstrating that they are not things, not objects, but subjects who transform material nature. Hegel's text becomes obscure and falls silent at this point of realization. But 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. The law (the *Code Noir*!) that acknowledges them merely as "a thing" can no longer be considered binding, although before, 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. In *The Phenomenology of mind*, Hegel insists that freedom cannot be granted to slaves from above. The self-liberation of the slave is required through a "trial by death": "And it is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained... The individual, who has not staked his life, may, no doubt, be recognized as a Person [the agenda of the abolitionists!]; but he has not attained the truth of his recognition as an independent self-consciousness." The goal of this liberation, out of slavery, cannot be subjugation of the master in turn, which would be merely to repeat the master's "existential impasse," but, rather, elimination of the institution of slavery altogether. (Morss, 2009, pp. 53-56)

The Africans at Bois Caïman, given that they were directly from Africa when they commenced the Revolution and already recursively reproducing their African practical consciousness (the libertarian communism of the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism) in the maroon community of Bois Caïman, and elsewhere, away from the master/slave dialectic of whites, neither cared for the master, nor his structuring metaphysics, but instead wanted to be free to exercise their African practical consciousness, their original antidialectical position of encountering, which would be precarious, given the possibility of their re-enslavement if captured, by whites and the *Affranchis*, who also practiced slavery, remained on the island. In essence, the events at Bois Caïman represented an attempt by the Africans to push for their already determining independent African self-consciousness (the antidialectical position of encountering of their Vodou Ethic and spirit of communism, which was social, political, economic, and ideological) against the whites and *Affranchis*'s dependent self-consciousness which sought to either repeat the masters' "existential impasse", the dialectical position; or convict it of its nonidentitarian logic, the negative dialectical position.

The African position, as such, represents the antidialectical position, and the *Affranchis* the dialectical and negative dialectical ones of Hegel's master/slave position and the Frankfurt school's, respectively. The former, antidialectical position, as highlighted by the lakouism of the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism of the participants of Bois Caïman, characterized by its Vodou religion/ethos and communal/subsistence living, is the original position of the Africans in their encountering with white French consciousness, and the latter two the subjugated consciousness of the mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois creole blacks on the island looking to either remain slaves (the dialectical position) or achieve master status (the antidialectical position) by convicting the white slavemasters for not recognizing the potentiality of the slave to become master according to their (liberal) rules of conduct, which are sanctioned.

Discussion and Conclusions

Traditional interpretations of the Haitian Revolution attempt to understand the sociohistorical phenomena within the negative dialectical and dialectical logic of Hegel's master/slave dialectic of the *Affranchis* (James, 1986; Du Bois, 2004; Buck-Morss, 2009). Concluding that the Revolution represents a dialectical and negative dialectical struggle by the enslaved Africans, who have internalized the (liberal) rules of their masters, for equality of opportunity, recognition, and distribution within and using the metaphysical discourse of their former white masters to either remain slaves (the dialectical position) or convict them (the antidialectical position) for not identifying with their norms, rules, and values as recursively organized and reproduced by blacks. This traditional

liberal bourgeois interpretation of the Haitian revolution attempts to understand its denouement through the sociopolitical effects of the French Revolution when the National Constituent Assembly (*Assemblée Nationale Constituante*) of France passed *la Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* or the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in August of 1789. The understanding from this perspective is that the masses of enslaved Africans, many of whom could not read or write French, understood the principles, philosophical and political principles of the Age of Enlightenment, set forth in the declaration, and therefore yearned to be like their white masters, i.e., freemen seeking liberty, equality, and fraternity, the rallying cry of the French Revolution.

Although, historically this dialectical, and its negative dialectical counterpart, understanding holds true for the mulattoes and free petit-bourgeois (creole) blacks or *Affranchis* who, interpellated and embourgeoised by whites, used the language of the declaration to push forth their efforts to gain liberty, equality, fraternity with their white counterparts as slaveholders and masters as brilliantly highlighted by Du Bois (2004). This position, I posit here, is not an accurate representation for the Africans who met at Bois Caïman, the originating moments of the Haitian Revolution, who were and remained in their original antidialectical position of their encountering with the white French and *Affranchis*.

This purposive-rationality of the *Affranchis*, to adopt the ontological and epistemological positions of whites by recursively organizing and reproducing their language and ways of being-in-the-world, through a dialectical and negative dialectical struggle between free-trade and mercantilism, is, however, a Western liberal dialectical understanding of the events and their desire to be like their white counterparts, which stands against the anti-dialectical purposive rationality, which emerged out of the African/Haitian Epistemology, Vilokan/Haitian Idealism, of Boukman Dutty, Cecile Fatiman, and the rest of the maroon Africans who congregated for the Petwo Vodou ceremony at Bois Caïman/Bwa Kayiman. In fact, the dialectical and negative dialectical approaches of the *Affranchis* have undermined the Revolution and turned Haiti into a periphery state within the contemporary capitalist world-system where the masses are exploited by the latter, who negatively dialectically appeal to the West for equality of opportunity, recognition, and distribution within the (neo) liberal global order.

Conversely, the Haitian Revolution as initiated on August 14th, 1791 at Bois Caïman by Boukman Dutty and Mambo Cecile Fatiman was led by various representatives of African nations, 21 nations in total, who constituted sixty-seven percent of the population at the onset of the Revolution, seeking to recursively reorganize and reproduce their (antidialectical) African practical-consciousness/thesis, the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism, which emerges out of their African ontology and epistemology, Vilokan/Haitian Idealism, in the world against the bourgeois liberalism of whites and the mulatto or *Affranchis* class of Haiti, who would subsequently, with the assassination of the *houngan*, Vodou priest, Jean-Jacques Dessalines in 1806, undermine that attempt for a more liberal purposive-rationale, similarly to their former slavemasters, which would reintroduce wage-slavery and peonage on the island. At Bois Caïman, the African nations, through what the academic literature calls Boukman's prayer, pushed to abandon the white man's religion for their own religiosity, i.e., Vodou; abandon inequality on the island as perpetuated by the capitalist order of the whites; and embrace their language and culture against that of the whites. In essence, they sought to remain in an antidialectical position against the antidialectical, dialectical, and negative dialectical positions of the whites, mulattoes, and petit-bourgeois blacks, respectively, on the island (Mocombe, 2016; 2017).

Future research must explore Haiti's history and its continuous subjugation as a periphery state within the global capitalist world-system under American hegemony within this continuous dialectical and negative dialectical struggle of the *Affranchis*, now augmented with a Syrian minority, who, contemporarily, are seeking

to integrate Haiti in the capitalist world-system through tourism, sports and entertainment, and industrial production against the lakou system of the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism, their original antidialectical position, where subsistence living via agricultural production is emphasized, of the majority of the Africans who are dominated and led by a black professional managerial class seeking wealth through the control of the latter process by securing authority and legitimation of the political process and its ideological apparatuses.

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