



Ulrike Kistner and Philippe Van Haute: *Violence, Slavery and Freedom between Hegel and Fanon*, Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2020, 168 pp., ISBN 978-1-77,614-623-9, ISBN 978-1-77,614-627-7

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Abstract

Violence, Slavery and Freedom between Hegel and Fanon is a volume of secondary literature that dispels common misconceptions about the relationship between Hegelian and Fanonian philosophy, and sheds new light on the connections and divergences between the two thinkers. By engaging in close textual analyses of both Hegel and Fanon, the chapters in this volume disambiguate the philosophical relation between Sartre and Fanon, scrutinize the conflation of Self-Consciousness in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and subjectivity in Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* in light of Hegel's reception in decolonial thought, and flesh out the pivotal ontological role of violence in Fanon's work. In particular, this volume underscores the necessity of Fanon scholars to pay heed to the distinction between Hegel's dialectic of lordship and bondage and Kojève's master-slave dialectic, as the latter—an anthropological (mis)interpretation of a Hegelian epistemological *gestalt* of consciousness—is what enables Fanon to engage with the former as a historical dialectic. This review emphasizes that *Violence, Slavery and Freedom between Hegel and Fanon* is a pedagogically significant text, and ultimately concludes that this volume is a vital resource for Continental Philosophical scholarship on Fanon and Hegel.

Keywords G. W. F. Hegel · Frantz Fanon · Continental Philosophy · Social and Political Philosophy

When teaching Frantz Fanon, philosophy instructors are forced to make difficult choices about how to position him *vis a vis* the Western philosophical tradition, as the interdisciplinary nature of Fanon's work makes it challenging to situate in any clear-cut philosophical lineage. Moreover, Fanon's relationships with certain

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Continental Philosophical lineages are ambivalent. One instance of this ambivalence is Fanon's reception of Hegel. Yet, depending on the context, it makes sense to either take the position that Fanon inherits Hegel's dialectic of lordship and bondage and applies it to the colonial context faithfully, or to take the position that Fanon dismisses Hegel's dialectic of lordship and bondage as premised on a primordial level playing field that is absent from colonial intersubjectivity. As a new collected volume on the Hegel-Fanon connection demonstrates, Fanon's relation to Hegelian philosophy is much more nuanced than a straightforward affirmation or rejection. Indeed, *Violence, Slavery and Freedom between Hegel and Fanon* is an indispensable resource for philosophers teaching Fanon, as it clearly addresses the complex theoretical relation between Fanon and Hegel without shoehorning Fanon's thought into a single linear philosophical tradition.

Editors Ulrike Kistner and Philippe Van Haute explain that the volume responds to a pedagogical demand: the volume was "initially prompted by the need to rethink the place of the relation between Hegel and Fanon in undergraduate philosophy courses taught in South Africa."¹ As they note in the Preface, three aspects of Hegelian philosophy are routinely discussed in the context of Fanonian and decolonial thought: dialectic in general, the master-slave dialectic—or more accurately, the dialectic of lordship and bondage—and Hegel's notorious comments on Africa in his *Philosophy of History*.² This volume scrutinizes and disambiguates the false conflation of the latter two aspects by scholars within and outside of Continental Philosophy—a long overdue undertaking that has serious philosophical implications for researchers and instructors alike. Overall, *Violence, Slavery and Freedom between Hegel and Fanon* demonstrates the importance of acknowledging the complex connections and divergences between Hegel and Fanon in order to accurately understand—and teach—Fanon's philosophy.

Editors Kistner and Van Haute are both scholars of philosophy and psychoanalysis, and they—along with contributor Josias Tembo, who works on political philosophy and philosophy of race—are affiliated with the University of Pretoria in South Africa. The other contributors not affiliated with the University of Pretoria—Robert Bernasconi, Reingard Nethersole, Ato Sekyi-Otu, and Beata Stawarska—represent a variety of different disciplinary backgrounds, like African American Studies, Comparative Literature, Social Science, and Social and Political Thought in addition to Philosophy. In spite of this perspectival diversity, each chapter in the volume refers to at least one other chapter, which demonstrates that the contributors intentionally developed philosophical cohesion amongst their respective chapters—an attentive detail that makes it easier for the reader to draw connections between each chapter, should they choose to teach one or more of these chapters in conjunction with Fanon's primary texts.

In the first chapter, Sekyi-Otu argues that Fanon's colonial encounter expresses neither a Hegelian dialectic nor a Sartrean "equal opportunity" negative dialectic, as both presuppose—in different ways—certain transcendental features of subjectivity, like universal freedom and reciprocity. Instead, as Fanon himself notes, the colonizer-colonized

¹ Kistner and Van Haute, (2020, p. VIII).

² Ibid., p. VIII.

relation is “obedient to the rules of pure Aristotelian logic, they both follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity”: the two figures in the colonial encounter are *fundamentally* unequal.³ In the second chapter, Van Haute claims that to understand the function of violence as the vehicle for liberation in Fanon’s work, we must have recourse to Kojève’s mistranslation of the German “Herr” and “Knecht” into the French “maître” and “esclave,” as well as Kojève’s imposition of the historical-Marxist idea of class struggle onto Hegel’s ontological-epistemological *gestalt* of Self-Consciousness.⁴ Further, Van Haute points out that if, as Kojève suggests, the actualization of one’s humanity involves the act of negating an object of desire, and Fanon asserts that in the Manichean colonial context, the slave’s desire is to *become white*, the violent negation of the white master is the only way that the slave can be freed and “become human.”⁵ In the third chapter, Kistner draws a parallel between the *Phenomenology’s* independent and dependent consciousness, represented by the personae of the lord and bondsman in the Self Consciousness chapter, with their reappearance as judging and acting consciousness, represented in the persona of Diderot’s valet in the Spirit chapter. Kistner then draws out that in contrast with Fanon’s historical-racial account of colonial psychology, Octave Manonni’s culturalist-psychological account of colonial psychology echoes Diderot-via-Hegel’s “valet” consciousness.⁶ In the fourth chapter, Tembo argues that Achille Mbembe’s conflation of Hegel’s lord-bondsman dialectic in the *Phenomenology* and Hegel’s portrayal of sub-Saharan African subjectivity in *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* is wrongheaded, insofar as the former is an epistemological *gestalt* representing two moments of the tautology of “I am I,” and the latter is a socio-historical analysis of the relation between what Tembo calls “Negro consciousness” and “universal history.”⁷ Moreover, Tembo notes that Mbembe’s conflation of these categorically disparate versions of consciousness is philosophically damaging, as it unconsciously appropriates Hegel’s colonial lens and delegitimizes African thought and histories.⁸ In the fifth chapter, Stawarska demonstrates that applying Beauvoir’s analysis of violence to Fanon allows us to recognize the moral ambiguity of Fanonian violence as a “negative and positive force,” which reveals that Fanon’s relationship to violence is much more complicated than critics—like Arendt—and supporters—like Sartre—have previously suggested.⁹ In the sixth chapter, Nethersole compares Sartre’s 1961 Preface and Bhabha’s 2004 Foreword to *Wretched of the Earth*, and explains that the former is a Kojèvean reading with an anticolonial agenda, situated in the context of the European reception of the Algerian war; and the latter is an interdisciplinary twenty-first century reading, with a focus on the contemporary cultural relevance of Fanon in the postcolonial world. Ultimately, Nethersole underscores the importance of maintaining the association of Hegelian and Fanonian thought amidst dominant readings—like Sartre’s and

³ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴ Ibid., p. 45.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 44–45.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 61–2.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 81, 85–6.

⁸ Ibid., p. 89.

⁹ Ibid., p. 113.

Bhabha's—which emphasize either the emancipatory political dimension or the racial postcolonial dimension of Fanon's work.

In particular, almost every chapter stresses that it is incorrect to draw a direct line from Fanon to Hegel. Rather, readers of Fanon must pay heed to the mediation of Kojève's creative misinterpretation of Hegel's dialectic of lordship and bondage. In addition to the fact that Fanon explicitly rejects features of the dialectic of lordship and bondage—like the capacity of work to meaningfully “free” the slave—Fanon's understanding of work is itself informed by Kojève's reading of the dialectic of master and slave. As Van Haute highlights in the second chapter, Kojève's mistranslation of “Herr” and “Knecht” into “maître” and “esclave” opened a Pandora's box of anthropological readings, whereas a correct translation of the terms might not have inspired the association of this Hegelian *gestalt* of consciousness with historical forms of slavery.¹⁰ This significant mistranslation not only makes it imperative for scholars to stop referring to Hegel's dialectic of lordship and bondage as Hegel's “master-slave” dialectic, but it also requires scholars of Fanon to revisit Kojève's lectures on the *Phenomenology* in addition to Hegel's *Phenomenology*, as the former is where crucial themes from Fanon's work—like substitution, negating activity, and the relation between the human and the struggle to the death—originated.

The majority of the volume's focus concerns the dialectic of lordship and bondage—an emphasis that is warranted by its centrality to Fanon's conception of decolonial subjectivity. However, there are indirect connections to be made between Hegel and Fanon that remain under-theorized. For instance, though the revolutionary wars Fanon and Hegel address most prominently emerged from significantly different historical and political circumstances, as well as the fact that their critiques of these respective revolutions originate from opposite ends of the political spectrum, both Fanon and Hegel take revolutionary violence to be a necessary component of historical transformation: for Hegel, the bloody sacrifice of individuals during the Terror was a material consequence of the abstract universal logic of Absolute Freedom, and for Fanon, the counter-violent sacrifice of the oppressor by the oppressed is the necessary means through which the colonized free themselves on both individual and collective levels. As Kistner notes in chapter three, engaging in conceptual, thematic, or “writerly readings” of Hegel and Fanon allows the philosophical relationship between the two figures to expand beyond the heavily theorized dialectic of lordship and bondage.¹¹

Overall, the chapters in *Violence, Slavery and Freedom between Hegel and Fanon* express a wide variety of original and vital claims about Fanon's philosophical relation to Hegel that clarify and ameliorate common misconceptions and hasty generalizations about the relation between the two thinkers. This volume proves essential for all Fanon pedagogy, but in particular, Continental Philosophical scholars of Hegel and Fanon would be remiss to disregard it.

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¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 25–50.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.