Fanon's 'The Negro and Hegel' or How to Appropriate the 'Miraculous Weapons' Found in the Oppressor

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Abstract
Hegel is the thinker who has given one of the most decisive philosophical guarantees to Western domination. Yet, Fanon, known to be one of the greatest theorists and activists for the independence of colonised people, found the conceptual tools which enabled him to develop his theory of liberation of people enslaved by and to the West. By relying critically on the Hegelian analysis of domination and servitude popularised by Kojève under the name of master-slave dialectics, Fanon produced a theory of liberation adapted to the system of colonial dependence and, therefore, different in its prerequisites to that of Hegel. While the latter makes labour the main source of the emancipation of slaves, Fanon presented mental decolonisation of the colonised and the violent overthrow of the colonial and neocolonial system as prerequisites to the full liberation of people under Western domination and, in particular, Africans.

Keywords: Alienation, self-consciousness, decolonisation, domination, liberation, labour, servitude

Introduction
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Hegel is generally perceived by certain intellectual circles in societies that have been under colonial and neocolonial domination as the Western thinker who gave one of the most decisive ideological guarantees for Western domination; the one in whom the history and philosophy of all mankind have found themselves confused and reduced to those of Europe alone[1]. Therefore, it would not have been incoherent to expect from the thinkers and theorists of the liberation of people enslaved by and to the West, a rejection of this Eurocentric philosopher. When one is a victim of the horrors of imperialism and of the systematic dehumanisation that characterises it, it is only normal that one rejects the system of thought that endorses it or serves as its theoretical justification. Yet, liberation theorists and activists fighting for liberation from colonial dependence approached the official philosopher of Western imperialism, namely Hegel, differently.

To propose a possible path to liberation, Frantz Fanon, the least complacent towards the theories of imperialist domination, clearly relied on philosophical concepts forged by Hegel. Here, I aim to show that Fanon's theory of liberation springs from what I call a subordinate appropriation – *appropriation subalterne* – of Hegel's analysis on domination and servitude contained in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* that Kojève popularised as the name of the dialectic of master and slave.

It was on the basis of these Hegelian analyses that Fanon produced an original theory of liberation which continues to challenge us today as we are still not liberated from the Western imperialist system of domination. Contain-

[1] In his *Lessons on the Philosophy of History*, translated by J. Gibelin, Paris, 1965 and his *Lessons on the History of Philosophy*, translated by P. Garniron, Paris, Vrin, 1993, Hegel retraces a universal history and a history of philosophy which correspond simultaneously and which are both essentially dominated by the Western civilisation within which they culminate.

ing both the poison of Western imperialist domination and its antidote, Hegel's philosophical system lent itself perfectly to such revolutionary appropriation. Fanon, in line with the inferiorised or the colonised who 'brings into play all his resources, all his acquisitions, old and new, his and those of the occupier' (2001: 54) with a view to his total liberation, did not hesitate to extract from the enemy Hegel one of his most revolutionary philosophical ideas and turn it against the Western imperialist system of domination.

Domination and Servitude in Hegel

It was in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, that Hegel set forth one of his philosophical theories which had the most far-reaching influence. This theory refers to the figure of consciousness corresponding to the phenomena of domination and servitude. The Hegelian Phenomenology is understood perhaps to be defined as the science of experiences or of the experience of consciousness. It is therefore the path taken by consciousness to gain access to truth, to science[2].

In its journey to gain access to truth or absolute knowledge, the spirit goes through three great moments. The first great moment (sub-divided into three sub-parts – sensitive certainty, perception and understanding) is that of the primacy of the object over the subject; the second moment, manifesting itself in the form of desire, domination and servitude and pure thought is that of the primacy of the subject over the object; and finally, the third moment or reason subdivided into subjective reason, objective reason and religion is that of equalisation or coincidence between subject and object.

Fanon was inspired by the second sub-moment of the second part of the work, one that Kojève advertised as the dialectical expression of master and slave. What is it all about? After the impasse of desire where no one was satisfied with being recognised simply on the basis of their sex, that is to say strictly as male or female, there followed the aspiration to be recognised abstractly or metaphysically as true consciousness of oneself, that is to say as a human being whose dignity is above any consideration of a physical or carnal order.

[2] This approach of Hegel makes his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by Jean Hyppolite, Paris, Aubier, 1941 a propaedeutic or an introduction to science, that is to say in its philosophical system to its *Science of Logic*, trad. Bernard Bourgeois, Paris, Vrin, 2015.

But for Hegel, this desire for abstract or metaphysical recognition as self-consciousness finds satisfaction only in the individual who has put his or her life and that of their counterpart at stake, posing to them a threat of death, physical existence and that of others. This is what he writes about (1939: 159 - 160):

> The individual who has not put his life on the line may well be recognised as a person; but he did not attain the truth of this recognition as recognition of an independent self-awareness. Likewise, each individual must strive for the death of the other when he risks his own life; because the other is not worth more to him than himself ....

By bringing into play its own life and that of the other, self-consciousness proves that it is beyond all naturalness, all exclusive concern for biological preservation, all subservience to the flesh and the body. But if the relationship of combat, of struggle to the death for recognition is carried to the end, the result is not the recognition to which the two opposing consciousnesses aspired but their death. This definitively rules out any possibility of recognition because only a living being can be recognised as having self-consciousness. For there to be recognition, it is necessary that the fight does not go to the end, that is to say that one of the protagonists says to himself at a time that even a servile life is preferable to death and gives up the fight. This is how the relationship of mastery and slave is established; the master being the one who was not afraid of dying in combat, who assumed the risk on his life and that of his protagonist until the end; the slave, on the other hand, being the one who was afraid of dying, the one who did not go through with the risk, the one who begged the master to save his life in exchange for his service. Regarding this way in which the relationship of mastery and slavery came into being, Hegel writes (1939: 161):

> By this experience are [is] posed on the one hand a pure consciousness of self (that of the master, who has been the furthest, closest to death) and, on the other hand, a consciousness which is not purely for – so, but which is for another consciousness, that is to say a consciousness in the element of being or in the form of thingity (Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*).

At the end of the fight, the one who braved death, i.e. the master, is recognized as possessing pure self-consciousness. The slave, who preferred life to death is not a consciousness of oneself strictly speaking but a consciousness for another. But the slave is consciousness for another only in a purely external way. Through his experience of the fear of death, the slave discovers himself, in his interiority, as authentic self-consciousness. The experience of the fear of death is what Hegel says will confer on the vanquished, on the slave, superiority over the master. In reality, the fear of death is the result of extreme courage: that of not dodging but of fixing and facing this terrible reality which ends up causing everything that is stable in us to waver.

This exceptional experience of the vanquished in the face of death and which leads him to gain genuine self-awareness is linked to the fact that she has:

> …. Precisely felt the anguish not about this or that thing, not during this or that moment, but she felt the anguish about the entirety of her essence because she felt the fear of death, the absolute master. In this anguish, she was dissolved intimately, trembled in the depths of herself, and all that was fixed wavered within her. But such a movement, pure and universal, such an absolute fluidification of all subsistence, this is the simple essence of self-consciousness, the absolute negativity, the pure being-for-itself, which is therefore in this consciousness. This moment of pure being-for-itself is also for her, because, in the master, this moment is his object (Hegel 1939: 164).

This terrible face to face between the vanquished, that is to say the slave and death marks a decisive turning point in the dialectic of master and slave. Contrary to what one might think, the slave who was afraid of death and who was not as far in staking his life as the master, in reality had a deeper experience than the master. If the slave was afraid of death, it was because he did not avoid it; he faced it. And through this experience, his whole being vacillated, bringing him to an inner awareness of himself. Authentically therefore, being for oneself is not the master but the slave. The other factor that ensures the slave superiority over the one who apparently dominates him and that therefore gives him a decisive advantage in the process of self-consciousness, is that he works, he transforms the world, he imprints on it the mark of his mind by giving it a human and technical form; while the master, on the other hand, only enjoys,

consumes and destroys the products of his laborious activity. The master and the slave have different relationships with nature, with the world. For the master, negativity consists of enjoying and therefore immediately suppressing the object about which he knows nothing, from the process of transformation; whereas in the working slave it always takes the form of a deferred negation. The negative character of *jouissance* (contentment) differs from that of work insofar as the latter,

> … on the contrary [of *jouissance*], is restrained desire, delayed disappearance: work forms. The negative relation to the object becomes the form of this very object, it becomes something permanent, since precisely, with regard to the worker, the object has an independence (Hegel 1939: 165).

In work, negation does not consist of immediately suppressing and making the object disappear, but in transforming it. It is through this form of negation – fundamentally different from that of *jouissance* – that the human world was born, which is according to Hegel a technical world.

Having transformed the world which now bears the mark of his mind, the slave cannot be presented as totally alien to the products of his labour. Strictly, the alienation that we tend to attach to him is only relative because he recognises himself in his products, in his creations. In this respect, his situation may seem fundamentally more enviable than that of his master. The latter, having its content only in the slave, will neither find itself nor recognise itself in the world which now bears the imprint of that which it had subjected to its domination. In fact, a stranger to the world, the master now has only two possible outcomes: recognise that he is dependent on his slave and draw the consequence of accepting the role reversal that is, placing him under the latter's tutelage; or not accept to recognise this real dependence by renouncing to enjoy anything in the world and to commit suicide. Placed in this untenable situation, the master is obliged either to carry the sacrifice to the limit and kill himself or continue to live a life in slavery because he is dependent on the slave. The Hegelian dialectic of master and slave therefore does indeed lead to an inversion of roles and positions. The lesson to be drawn from the causes of this reversal is that the aristocratic but idle master does not progress while the slave evolves by working. Unable to progress, 'idle mastery' ends up being 'a dead end' while 'laborious servitude' asserts itself as 'the only source of progress'

(Kojève 1939: 113).

This is how the phenomenological moment of domination and servitude in Hegel ends, the end of which coincides with the disappearance of the figures of master and slave. With the fainting or disappearance of these figures, only the inner life, only thought, remains. This Hegelian dialectic, the outcome of which was, as we have seen, the disappearance of the figures of domination (master) and servitude (slave), had a flourishing posterity because it was regularly mobilised in the service of the causes of the emancipation of humans. Moreover, it is on this dialectic that a thinker and activist for the emancipation of people under colonial and neocolonial Western domination, such as Fanon in his theory of liberation, relied.

Fanon's Relationship to Hegel or the Art of Using the Enemy's Weapons to Break Free

Fanon's relationship to Hegel is an ambivalent relationship, made both of rupture and of appropriation, as attested to by his critique of Western colonial domination, which draws from the source of the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave. Having come into contact with Hegel through the mediation of Kojève's reading-interpretation, Fanon found in the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave an adequate conceptual framework for not only analysing the relations of domination in the colonial system, but also proposing a possible way of liberation.

There is still an important point of clarification at this level: unlike Hegel who inserted it into the global course of consciousness where it corresponds to a precise moment, Kojève, for his part, disinserted the dialectic of the master and the slave of the phenomenological process by making it a moment independent of the rest of the Hegelian narrative. Kojève's way of proceeding still has an advantage even if it also departs from Hegel's authentic approach in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: by empowering it from the other moments of the course of consciousness, Kojève has conferred on the dialectic of master and slave the most adequate form possible for its mobilisation in the service of theories of emancipation and liberation. This is exactly the reason for which it was used by Fanon.

Given its power of 'formalisation' of the relations of domination which occur between humans, as a conceptual framework, Hegel's dialectic of master and slave compelled Fanon to articulate a theory of liberation to be opposed to

Western imperialism. The Hegelian abstraction of the figures of the master and the slave was therefore not an obstacle for him but rather an opportunity to think about the relations of domination and servitude in a colonial context fundamentally different to firstly, feudal Europe and then Hegel's revolutionary Europe[3]. Fanon's relation to Hegel consists, on the part of the West Indian revolutionary, of applying an abstract general scheme of intersubjectivity – the Hegelian scheme in this case – to a particular colonial situation where the relation between master and slave is translated into the relationship between 'White and Black'.

Taking up again, in the chapter 'The Negro and Hegel' in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the Hegelian analysis of the relations of domination and servitude, Fanon insists on the unprecedented way with which they are experienced in colonial societies. Within these, the dehumanisation and alienation of the colonised are beyond measure. They are total and systematic. Moreover, their magnitude is such that it introduces a real difference between the situation of the Hegelian slave and that of the colonised black Fanonian. For this reason, refraining from completely confusing them in the same situation, Fanon writes ([1952] 1971: 217): 'work the source of his liberation ...'. In Hegel, the slave turns away from the master and turns towards the object. Here the slave turns to the master and abandons the object. If dehumanisation is something common to both the Hegelian slave and the Fanonian colonised subject, it must be recognised that the prospect of liberation, that is to say of a reconquest of their humanity does not appear the same to both. The alienation of the Hegelian slave, we had seen, was only relative inasmuch as his reconquest of himself as self-consciousness was promised to him anyway through his work. On the other hand, such a prospect is not open to the colonised 'negro' of Fanon. A victim of systematic dehumanisation and concretely reduced to non-human status, he can neither hope nor consider freeing himself through work. Access to self-consciousness through work is

[3] In her book *Hegel, Haiti and Universal history*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009, Susan Buck-Morss defends the idea that it was the Saint Domingue Slave Revolution of 1791 that inspired Hegel's analysis of the phenomena of domination and bondage. This idea seems impossible because it is rather the history of feudal Europe and the French Revolution that seems to form the background of Hegelian analyses of the relationship between domination and servitude.

therefore not valid for all the oppressed. It is only for the Hegelian slave, and not for the colonised Fanonian black person, that work plays a decisive role in the process of awakening self-consciousness. The situation of systematic dehumanisation in which the colonised black person lives, in any case closes off any possibility of awakening self-awareness.

In a colonial context, it is not work that leads to the liberation of the oppressed but rather the violent overthrow of the system of domination in place. In the colonies, Fanon writes 'the Negro is not a human' ([1952] 1971: 179). What Hegel therefore considers as 'surrender to the object' on the part of the working slave is nothing more than pathological desubjectification projected onto the colonised by colonial society. For Fanon, a free subjective experience is not possible in all situations. When Hegel affirms the reality of such an experience by writing 'to embed this freedom in the content, to let this content move according to its own nature (...) and to contemplate this movement' (1939: 36), he seems to just ignore or omit what makes this possible only if the agent of this movement is himself unconstrained. In reality, there is a great contrast between the formal Hegelian context of the emergence of self-awareness and that of societies under Western colonial rule. In the context of West Indian colonialism, for example, the subject – unlike the Hegelian slave – is systematically alienated: language, culture, economy, politics, etc. He cannot therefore, for this reason, recognise the objective world as the product of his own labour. In a colonial context, the reversal of roles between the dominant and the dominated cannot be achieved through work as was the case in the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave. If work had enabled the Hegelian slave to free himself from the domination of his master, it must be recognised that he is not in a position to play such an emancipatory role among colonised blacks. In the latter, the breadth and depth of alienation is such that it is only through a revolution resulting from total disalienation that it is possible to break free. *Black Skin, White Masks* reveals, through the critique of ideology, the extent of this alienation by analysing the blockages, both psychological and material, that a dominant colonial society projects on its subjects.

If, for Hegel, the relation to the other can be either a relation of domination and servitude or a relation of equal and reciprocal recognition, for Fanon such an alternative does not exist in colonial societies. In a colonial context, the relationship to others is exclusively a relationship of domination and servitude. For the colonised black person says Fanon ([1952] 1971: 112),

'the White is not only the Other but the master'. There is nothing abstract about the relationship of domination and servitude in colonial societies. It is not only massive but it is also experienced concretely and daily by billions of natives as Sartre already indicated in his preface to the *Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 1961, 1991: 17). Fanon could not therefore, like Sartre interpreting Hegel in *Being and Nothingness*, adhere to the idea that the relation to the other is fundamentally a relation of servitude (Sartre 1996: 307). It matters little whether Sartre interprets Hegel correctly or not on this particular point: such an idea has the particularity of presenting a phenomenon like slavery not as 'a historical result capable of being 'overcome' but as 'a fundamental condition of human existence' (Sartre 1996: 412). To this dehistoricising approach of Sartre, which he rightly or wrongly imputes to Hegel, Fanon opposes a rehistoricising approach of the dialectic of the master and the slave which in no way consists of reproducing Hegel who projected the entire responsibility of his situation on the slave but to present this dialectic differently by adapting it to the system of domination at work in the colonies. If the dialectic of master and slave has been the subject of variations between Hegel and Fanon, its end is however the same with both thinkers: it is recognition. It is useful to remember that for Fanon ([1961] 1991: 66), it is the negrophobe who makes the 'negro'; it is 'the colonist who made and continues to make the colonised.' It is therefore the negrophobe and the colonist who deprive the black person and the colonised person of recognition. By fixing the negro in his 'race' while 'the fate of man is not to be fixed but to be let go' (Fanon [1952] 1971: 228) colonial society condemns him to be not for himself but for the white person. The white person's 'other absolute' presented as an absolute standard and reference, the black person is not only deprived of recognition but is also judged as naturally incapable of fighting for it. The Hegelian slave, even when he was not yet recognised, was nonetheless engaged in a process of recognition. The Hegelian slave's engagement in a process of recognition contrasts with the situation of the colonised Fanonian black person, totally excluded from the field of white subjectivity-otherness. When Fanon writes: 'We hope we have shown that the master here differs essentially from that described by Hegel. With Hegel, there is reciprocity, here the master makes fun of the slave's 'conscience'', he does nothing other than highlight the fact that, structurally, the colonial system excludes the colonised black [person] from the field of mutual and reciprocal recognition of self-consciousness (Fanon [1952] 1971: 179, note 9).

Reserved exclusively for white people, the reality of recognition as self-consciousness in the colonies departs from the universal vocation conferred on it by Hegel. In a passage from *Black Skin, White Masks* cited above, Fanon expresses himself on the corollary induced by a situation where recognition is not granted to all but only to white people. If 'in Hegel, the slave turns away from the master and turns to the object', in a colonial context it is rather the reverse which occurs because 'the slave turns to the master and abandons the object' ([1952] 1971: 217). What explains this different attitude of the 'negro' is that he 'wants to be like the white master' ([1952] 1971: 217). Detecting among the colonised a very strong desire to identify with white people and aware that this desire for assimilation is the main obstacle to any serious project of liberation struggle, Fanon draws the consequence by working to deconstruct the alienated perception that the colonised have of themselves. The latter, incapable of judging for themselves because mentally enslaved to the idea that the colonist has on them and on himself, deprived of his own and autonomous point of view because having adopted that which the colonist makes for himself of them and of himself, can only undertake a struggle to reconquer their denied humanity if they are completely free from the prejudices which have long dominated them. As long as the colonised (dominated) identifies with the colonist (dominator) and feels love for him, he will not perceive him as an enemy and therefore will do nothing to break the colonial and neocolonial system that keeps him under domination. While it is obvious that there is a need for a violent liberation struggle in Fanon, it cannot but be preceded or carried out at the same time as a mental decolonisation of the colonised. It is only after this mental decolonisation followed by the necessary violent struggle founded in Hegel as the relations of domination, which will lead, in Fanon's view, to the total liberation of the oppressed, *the damned of the earth*.

As a Conclusion

Fanon's work, which we can situate from a 'decolonisation of knowledge' perspective preceding and leading to the true emancipation of people under Western imperialist domination, has borrowed some of its theoretical weapons from European philosophers who nevertheless strived to theoretically justify the hegemony of their continent over other parts of the world and particularly over Africa. Such an approach, clearly attested to in his report to Hegel, consisted of his part in mobilising the dialectic of master and slave in the

service of the struggle against Western colonialism. But this critical appropriation of Hegelian philosophical concepts was not an abstract nor an out-of-context appropriation. By appropriating them, Fanon transformed them somewhat by articulating them in the colonial context, the mechanisms of which had to be understood and unravelled in order to lead to an emancipatory revolution of the colonised people. If Fanon relied on concepts from Hegel, he refrained from reproducing the identical Hegelian diagramthat led to the disappearance of the figures of domination (master) and servitude (slave).

In Hegel, the liberation of the enslaved individual necessarily requires work, while in Fanon it first requires a mental decolonisation by the colonised and a violent overthrow of the colonial system of European domination. The Fanonian theory of liberation therefore boils down to the mental revolution of the alienated colonised and the violent and revolutionary overthrow of the system of oppression put in place by colonialism. But what has been the political impact, especially in Africa, of this Fanonian theory of liberation? A simple observation of the current situation in Africa allows us to say that this African continent has still not yet freed itself from Western imperialist domination. Perhaps the cause of such prolonged dependence on Africa is to be found in the recurrent attitude of its leaders to always postpone radical and perhaps painful choices capable of freeing them/us from Western imperialist domination. Analysing the notion of crisis and extending it to the political field in an interview with Hourya Bentouhami in 'Fanon, critique of 'methodological fetishism', Lewis Gordon states (2014: 50):

> Likewise, when we talk about ... 'political crises', it points to the fact that many of us try to escape these vital decisions. There then occurs a futile effort to postpone the timing of the decision, which maintains the state of crisis. Taking responsibility, making a decision, is a way out of this critical state.

What can we take away from these words of Lewis Gordon if we interpret them in the light of Africa's prolonged dependence? Basically, the idea that the indecision of African leaders would be the main obstacle to the African revolution and therefore to the independence of the continent. Hence the urgency to return to Fanon and his revolutionary project to complete the process of total decolonisation of Africa. As this does not accommodate the slightest indecision, you must immediately resolve to:

• Continue the Fanonian work of building a decolonised subject who is truly aware of him/ herself and of the issues of the moment;

• Rebuild, on revolutionary bases, a strong Africa capable of defending its children on the continent and in the diaspora; and

• Be ready to defend and protect at all times the revolution that will bring this project against the inevitable assaults of the current system of domination and exploitation.

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