



Hegel, Haiti, and the Anti-dialectic

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Conceptual Paper

Volume 6 Issue 1

Received Date: January 10, 2023

Published Date: February 14, 2023

DOI: [10.23880/phij-16000285](https://doi.org/10.23880/phij-16000285)

Abstract

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 accept death and 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.

Keywords: African-Americanization; Phenomenological Structuralism; Vodou; Religiosity; Black Diaspora; Dialectical; Anti-dialectical; Haitian Epistemology; Vilokan/Haitian Idealism

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 [1-3]. 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 Africans of the Haitian Revolution, positions Paul C. Mocombe's [4] theory of antidialectic within Hegel's dialectical reasoning to argue against this classic liberal reading of the Affranchis and white bourgeois scholars. Mocombe posits that the non-circular

and antidialectical position in Hegel's dialectic is the position of 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, in the logic of Kojève [5], remains in this non-circular and 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 represents 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, and is the only instance in recorded history where the slaves chose death (and continues to do so in Haiti's mountains and provinces), contrary to Kojève's reading of Hegel and the French Revolution, in order to eliminate (rendering it non-circular) the dialectical and negative dialectical relation that is the master/slave dialectic.

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 [6] 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 has Hegel Scholars Failed to Answer this Question; They have failed, for the past two hundred years, even to ask it [7].

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 non-circular and antidialectical position, by choosing death, 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. In fact, the case of the Africans of Haiti, who met at Bois Caïman and continued their fighting against the whites and the Affranchis for their Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism, which they exercised through lakouism in the mountains and the provinces of the island, is the only case in history where the slaves successfully chose death in order to render the master/slave dialectic non-circular and returning on to itself as posited by Kojève [5]. Morss's and James's reading of the Haitian Revolution overlook this phenomenon by interpreting it through the point of view of the Affranchis who did not choose death, but instead chose life in order to be like the master. This position of the Affranchis, rendered the master/slave dialectic circular and returning on to itself wherein the Affranchis, and their descendants, now are the new masters on the island seeking to subjugate the Africans in the mountains and provinces where they seek to implement their Vodou Ethic and spirit of communism via the lakou system against the capitalism of the Affranchis. This work highlights the non-circular and 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 (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 antidiagonal 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, by choosing death, their already determining independent African self-consciousness (the antidiagonal 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 antidiagonal position, and the Affranchis the dialectical and negative dialectical ones of Hegel’s master/slave position and the Frankfurt school’s, respectively. The former, antidiagonal 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 antidiagonal 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. The latter position rendered the master/slave position circular, with the Affranchis, mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks, seeking to be masters, like the whites, over the Africans; and the former non-circular, wherein the Africans chose, and continue to choose, death against being slaves of either the whites or the Affranchis.

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 [1,6,8]. 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 antidiagonal 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 embourgeoisied 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 [1]. This position, I posit here, is not an accurate representation for the Africans, and their leadership, who met at Bois Caïman, the originating moments of the Haitian Revolution, who were and remained in their original non-circular and antidiagonal position of

their encountering with the white French and Affranchis, and were choosing and chose death over the master/slave dialectic as instituted by either the French or the 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 negative 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.

The meeting at Bois Caïman commenced with Boukman's prayer, Bon Dje ki fè la tè. Ki fè soley ki klere nou enro. Bon Dje ki souleve lanmè. Ki fè gronde loray. Bon Dje nou ki gen zorey pou tande. Ou ki kache nan niaj. Kap gade nou kote ou ye la. Ou we tout sa blan fè nou sibi. Dje blan yo mande krim. Bon Dje ki nan nou an vle byen fè. Bon Dje nou an ki si bon, ki si jis, li ordone vanjans. Se li kap kondui branou pou nou ranpote la viktwa. Se li kap ba nou asistans. Nou tout fet pou nou jete potre dje Blan yo ki swaf dlo lan zye. Koute vwa la libète k ap chante lan kè nou.

The god who created the sun which gives us light, who rouses the waves and rules the storm, though hidden in the

clouds, he watches us. He sees all that the white man does. The god of the white man inspires him with crime, but our god calls upon us to do good works. Our god who is good to us orders us to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us. Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites who has so often caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty, which speaks in the hearts of us all.

At Bois Caïman, the African nations, through 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 Affranchis; and embrace their language and culture against that of the whites and Affranchis. In essence, they (the Africans) sought, by choosing death, 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 [2,3,9-13]. This fight continues today as many of the descendants of the Africans in the mountains and provinces continue their fight against the circularity of the master/slave dialectic as promulgated by the descendants of the Affranchis, which serve as a comprador bourgeoisie for the white capitalist elites of the capitalist world-system under American hegemony.

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 and circular 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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