

EXPLORING THE ATLANTIC SPIRIT. COLONIZATION, SLAVERY, AND REVOLUTION IN HEGEL'S PHILOSOPHY OF WORLD-HISTORY

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Abstract. *While historians today agree on its importance in the formation of the modern world, Hegel's treatment of the Atlantic area in his philosophy of world history seems rather marginal. Hegel's Euro-centric and even racist perspectives notwithstanding, we hypothesize in this article that his philosophy of history contains sufficient material to explore the Atlantic world and highlight its significance in the constitution of modernity. By examining the way in which Hegel envisaged European colonial expansion, the allegedly 'state of nature' situation in Africa, and slave revolts in the Americas, we attempt to show how the 'Atlantic spirit' carries with it a discontinuous, properly dialectical conception of what it means to achieve freedom and thus to 'make history'.*

Keywords: *Hegel; Philosophy of World History; Atlantic; Colonization; Slavery; Bildung; Emancipation*

1. Introduction: From the Mediterranean to the Atlantic

While it is widely accepted among contemporary historians that the modern world was born and shaped in the Atlantic area, as a complex result of Europe's colonization of the Americas and the slave trade with Africa¹, its place in Hegel's philosophy of history looks rather marginal, to say the least. Even if Hegel occasionally

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¹ C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World (1780-1914)*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2004.

evokes an «Atlantic land»², it is often to downplay its historical importance compared to the Mediterranean basin. First because, unlike the Mediterranean Sea, an ocean such as the Atlantic, by virtue of its vastness, separates peoples instead of connecting them³. To this geographical reason to undermine the Atlantic space in world history, Hegel adds a cultural one. Whereas the Mediterranean has been a «midpoint» (*Mittelpunkt*) fostering different peoples who achieved to create a sense of political community based on the consciousness of individual freedom (the Greek *polis*), the Atlantic has been the ground for such violent processes and asymmetrical relations that it seems hard to see how a commonly shared «spirit» could have arose from it⁴.

The cultural reason Hegel has to «exclude» (*ausschliessen*)⁵ the Atlantic space from the scene of universal history concentrates the ambiguities carried by his treatment of its potential role in the birth of the modern world. European merchants and colonists, enslaved Africans, colonized Native Americans: these peoples appear in his view not only too diverse, but also too unequal to form a spiritual principle that could count in the overall picture of world history. Such inequality is primarily «spiritual», since it has been historically

² G.W.F. Hegel, *Die Philosophie der Geschichte. Vorlesungsmitschrift Heimann (Winter 1830/1831)*, München, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005 (henceforth cited as PG), p. 58. German editions of Hegel's works are henceforth cited as following: G.W.F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke*, Hamburg, Meiner, 1968-2025, as GW, followed by the number of the corresponding volume; G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. by K. M. Michel and E. Moldenhau, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1970, as TW, followed by the number of the corresponding volume.

³ GW 18, p. 96; G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Manuscripts of the Introduction and the Lectures of 1822-3*, trans. by R. F. Brown and P. C. Hodgson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011 (henceforth cited as LPWH), p. 195.

⁴ GW 18, p. 335; LPWH, p. 385. On the importance of the Mediterranean in Hegel's philosophy of history, see J.-B. Vuillerod, *Hegel. L'histoire du monde et la conquête des mers*, «Archives de philosophie», LXXXIV, 2021, pp. 153-169.

⁵ PG, p. 57.

instituted by slavery and colonialism. But Hegel sometimes tends to assign it a natural and racial basis. The «dying out» of the Native Americans in the face of the Spanish and Portuguese conquerors and their subsequent replacement by European settlers show evidence of their congenital «feebleness»⁶. By contrast, the physical «strength» of the Africans predisposes them to be deported to the Americas in order to replace the withering of the native workforce⁷. Finally, only the «Creoles», because they are «descendants of Europeans with European blood», demonstrate a «higher need for independence» likely to give birth to a new Atlantic culture⁸. Considering these Eurocentric and even racist arguments⁹, it is tempting to conclude that there is nothing left to rescue from Hegel's world-historical treatment of the Atlantic connections of Europe, Africa and America. However, we would like here to hypothesize that his philosophy of history does furnish some materials of thought for exploring the Atlantic world and for highlighting its significance in modern history.

We propose to examine how Hegel has covered modern colonization and chattel slavery as well as the slave revolts that occurred

⁶ GW 18, pp. 93-94; LPWH, pp. 192-193. See also G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit. Volume 2 Anthropology*, trans. by M. J. Petry, Dordrecht, Reidel Publishing, 1978, § 393 A (henceforth cited as PSS 2), p. 49; TW 10, p. 63.

⁷ PG, p. 59.

⁸ *Ibidem*. See also GW 18, p. 94; LPWH, p. 193.

⁹ On Hegel's eurocentrism, see E. Dussel, *Eurocentrism and Modernity*, «Boundary», XX (3), 1993, pp. 65-76; T. Tibebu, *Hegel and the Third World. The Making of Eurocentrism in World History*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2011; A. Stone, *Hegel and Colonialism*, «Hegel Bulletin», ILI (2), 2020, pp. 247-270. On Hegel's racism, see R. Bernasconi, *With what must the philosophy of world history begin? On the racial basis of Hegel's eurocentrism*, «Nineteenth-Century Contexts», XXII (2), 2000, pp. 171-201; M. Hoffheimer, *Hegel, Race, Genocide*, «Southern Journal of Philosophy», 39 (1), 2001, pp. 35-62. Some Hegel scholars have tried to mitigate the charges of Eurocentrism and 'cultural imperialism'. See for example J. McCarney, *Hegel on History*, London and New-York, Routledge, 2000; A. Buchwalter, *Is Hegel's Philosophy of History Eurocentric?*, in *Hegel and History*, ed. by W. Dudley, Albany, SUNY, 2010, pp. 87-110.

in oversea colonies during his lifetime. These three closely related phenomena have been at the very core of the modern Atlantic world, to which Hegel assisted and which he commented on, although only allusively. From these passages it appears that the way to achieve universal freedom, i.e., the equal recognition of freedom to all human beings, has been a central albeit much disputed issue during the constitution of the New World. These passages also suggest that the philosophical task of doing world-history does not necessarily come to describe the progressive, all too linear universalization of the European principle of freedom. For if there is – as we suppose here – an «Atlantic spirit» to be found in Hegel's philosophy of history, it must be a conflicting rather than a unifying one. Shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic space, world history reveals itself as a process marked by conflicts opposing not only supposedly «superior» people and «inferior» ones, colonizers and colonized, masters and slaves, but also different conceptions of what it means for human beings to realize freedom and thus to «make history».

In order to show how Hegel sketched some of the spiritual features of the modern Atlantic world, we shall emphasize the intellectual and broader historical and political context that has framed his thoughts but also some of the impasses he has been led to when trying to grasp the conflicting figures of freedom that emerged around the Atlantic Ocean in the course of modernity. These Atlantic figures of freedom arise from the historical connections between European colonization overseas (1), a supposed «state of nature» in Africa that ultimately grounds Hegel's justification of the institution of colonial slavery (2), and the various conceptions and practices of ending slavery in the Americas and especially in the Caribbean that culminated with the Haitian revolution (3).

2. Europe: «Civilizing the World» through Colonization

In the well-known paragraphs from the *Philosophy of Right* dealing with modern colonization, Hegel speaks of an «inner dialectic» to describe how European civil society is driven «to go beyond its own confines» in order to remedy to the persisting problem of

pauperization¹⁰. On the European continent, civil society is confronted with recurrent crises of overproduction leading to unemployment and mass poverty. Insofar as «despite an *excess of wealth*, civil society is *not wealthy enough* to prevent an excess of poverty»¹¹, colonizing overseas territories offers a practical two-fold solution¹². Colonization serves European market-based societies to send their laborious overpopulation «in a new land» where they will find the opportunity to exercise their «assiduity to work» (*Arbeitsfleiß*)¹³. On the other hand, as a solution for Europe's congested markets, colonization creates new outlets where the commodities produced in the homeland can be sold, so that the New World «displays itself as a dumping ground [*Ablagerungsplatz*] for the nations of Europe»¹⁴.

Colonization for Hegel is not limited to an economical phenomenon of capitalist expansion. It also entails a «world-historical significance»¹⁵ that resides in the overall spread of the contract principle and the idea of legal personhood. Hegel depicts the colonial encounter as resting on trading activities whose partners equally recognize one another as bearers of rights, freely exchanging their properties to their mutual advantage. Despite appearances, it would be misleading however to conclude that Hegel offers but an idealized picture of colonialism as a «gentle commerce» between different people around the globe. A closer look at the texts suggests that he actually exposes what can be labelled the *cunning of imperial reason*. The «world-historical significance» of colonial trade results from the «pursuit of gain» (*Gewinnsucht*) that animate European capitalist merchants and industrialists in their imperial conquests of

¹⁰ TW 7, § 246, p. 391; G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. by H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991 (henceforth cited as EPR), p. 267.

¹¹ TW 7, p. 390, § 245, p. 390; EPR, p. 267.

¹² J. Mascot, *Hegel, Colonialism, and Postcolonial Hegelianism*, «Hegel Bulletin», XLV (1), 2024, pp. 120-143.

¹³ TW 7, § 248, p. 392; EPR, p. 269.

¹⁴ TW 10, § 393 A (Griesheim notes), p. 63; PSS 2, p. 63.

¹⁵ TW 7, § 247, p. 391; EPR, p. 268.

new lands and markets, eventually subjugating and destroying in their wake local cultures and conditions of living. Hegel allows himself to be lyrical as he notes that those who have the «courage» to risk their life for the sake of overseas trading express the «poetry» of adventurous capitalism¹⁶.

Rather than liberal capitalism and free trade among people, it is an adventurous form of capitalism in which the spirit of commerce went hand in hand with a spirit of conquest, that has been paramount for the rise of a global connection between the three continents. Still, the combination of trade and warfare was also substantiated by the humanist thinking of modern civil society¹⁷. The case of the English colonial enterprise shows in this respect exemplary to Hegel. While the Spanish, the Portuguese and the Dutch estimated that the people they colonized were «worse» than them, the English grounded their imperial conquests on the universalist idea of a common humanity: «Only with the English, who started from man as a thought, was the whole world universally connected. [...] With needs and trade emerges a world interest [*ein Weltinteresse*]; world history shows the aspects of an ethical whole, world trade shows the aspects of a relationship as such»¹⁸. Through the cunning of imperial reason, the particular interests of the adventurous capitalists *in* the oversea world reverse into a «world interest», a universal interest *of* the world at large as an interconnected «ethical whole».

Under modern colonization, Hegel draws the portrait of the maritime hegemony the British empire had won at the expense of the other European imperial powers after the Seven Years' War. Aided by its «sea armies», British imperialism shows at its best – or at its worst – the «inner dialectic» of modern colonization: «It is the great destiny of the English nation, that the more civil-bourgeois life flourishes among the people, the more they gain. Their

¹⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Die Philosophie des Rechts. Vorlesung von 1821/22*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2005, § 247, p. 224.

¹⁷ TW 7, § 209 R, p. 360; EPR, p. 240.

¹⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophie des Rechts. Die Vorlesung von 1819/20 in einer Nachschrift*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1983, p. 201.

advantage is linked to the civilization of the world»¹⁹. A more specialized division of labor, a work discipline, the refinement of material needs, commerce based on contract law, new techniques of production, «the whole treasure of European culture»²⁰ exported through the colonial trade partakes in the imperial process of civilizing the world. Such worldwide civilization process was once launched and is still made vivid by the particular material interests of capitalists inspired by humanist and universalist ideas. The new maritime roads that have been blazed since the fifteenth century by European nations crossing the Atlantic have connected territories that were until then geographically isolated. Hence, the Atlantic Ocean does not impose any «natural boundaries» between people. It works instead as the «greatest medium of binding» the continents and their inhabitants²¹. In the course of modernity, the Atlantic has exhibited all the potentialities of the maritime element as a «means of culture» (*Bildungsmittel*)²².

Next to his depiction of how the colonial expansion of modern Europe «civilized the world» both materially and culturally, Hegel makes some recommendations about the best colonial policy to adopt²³. Even though the nature of the territories to be colonized pertains to a mere contingent and empirical question, he recommends that the settlers occupy «unused» lands in order to fully exercise their assiduity to work²⁴. «Systematic colonization» is therefore privileged over «sporadic colonization»²⁵. Rather than being based on voluntary and isolated emigration, the colonial enterprise should be driven by a rational state that plans the population of the settlements. Hegel adds that settlers should benefit from the same civil rights as the citizens of the motherland to avoid

¹⁹ Id., *Die Philosophie des Rechts. Vorlesung von 1821/22*, § 247, p. 225.

²⁰ GW 18, p. 94; LPWH, p. 193.

²¹ TW 7, § 247, p. 391; EPR, p. 268.

²² G.W.F. Hegel, *Die Philosophie des Rechts. Vorlesung von 1821/22*, § 247, p. 225.

²³ Ivi, § 248, p. 225.

²⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft. Heidelberg 1817/18*, Hamburg, Meiner, 1983, p. 167.

²⁵ TW 7, § 248 A, p. 392; EPR, p. 269.

conflicts between the local colonies and the metropolitan powers. He goes as far as to advocate for the colonies' independence in the mid or long term, arguing that «[t]he liberation of colonies proves to be of the greatest advantage to the mother state just as the emancipation of slaves is of the greatest advantage to the master»²⁶. Colonial emancipation implies, on the one hand, the «liberalization» of overseas trade from existing state monopolies and, on the other, the creation of local institutions of political representation apart from the existing national assemblies. The colonial policy adopted by Britain serves again as a model. After the thirteen continental colonies had in 1783 won their independence from British rule, the autonomous development of a civil society in North America and its demographic boom have turned out to be of the «greatest advantage to the motherland»: «The fact that North America has become independent was at first seen as a harm. But it is rather a tremendous benefit, and England has gained a tremendous market»²⁷.

The comparison between the liberation of the colonies and slave emancipation confronts us with some points of tension in Hegel's treatment of the Atlantic world. In pleading in favor of equal civil rights for settlers of the colonies, he seems *de facto* to exclude the colonized and enslaved people who constituted an important part – if not the large majority – of the American populations at that time, especially in the Caribbean area (where throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries nearly 90% of the population were Afro-descendants). In his appeal to equalize the conditions between the colonies and the metropolises, he implicitly draws a line between the white masters and the racialized working people of the New World.

Moreover, even though he somehow tempers the idealized picture of colonization as a «gentle commerce» by showing how conquest spirit and trade spirit are intertwined, Hegel barely utters a word about the slave trade. While he was teaching on world history

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie des Rechts*. Berlin 1819/20, Hamburg, Meiner, 2000, p. 147.

in Berlin, the Atlantic slave trade was reaching its peak at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century before starting a slow decline. In the sole year 1829, more than 108.000 captives were deported from Africa²⁸.

The establishment of a traffic in human beings across the Atlantic violated as it were the idea of free personhood laying at the very core of the contract principle that was supposed to spread over every continent. Like some of his contemporaries, Hegel was confident that chattel slavery would sooner or later disappear as «civil-bourgeois life was flourishing among the people». It would just be a matter of time before the «civilization of the world» fulfilled its perennial labor. Hegel must in any case have been informed of the official attempts to outlaw the transatlantic slave trade. Under the pressure of Britain, most of the imperial powers involved in the «infamous trade» had solemnly condemned it at the 1815 Vienna Congress. As another evidence of the intricate relationship between humanist thinking and material interests, the worldwide abolitionist campaign led by Britain was meant to undermine the influence of the other European nations active in the Atlantic area. But whereas the slave trade seemed to be slowly on its way to legal abolishment, the fate of slave labor in the colonies became a hot debated issue among European elites and public opinions²⁹.

3. *Africa: Bildung through Slavery*

While the transatlantic slave trade remains under-theorized in his philosophy of world-history, Hegel incidentally notes that Africa's «only further connection with history is that in darker days its inhabitants have been enslaved»³⁰. As seen above, Hegel's explanation for the European merchants and colonists having recourse to

²⁸ Estimates from the Internet transatlantic slave trade database: www.slavevoyages.org (last access on 10 June 2025).

²⁹ S. Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment. Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

³⁰ GW 18, p. 100; LPWH, p. 197.

servile workforces from Africa relies on the assumption of the «feebleness» of the Native Americans. But in order to further grasp the world-historical connections between Europe, Africa and America around the Atlantic, one needs to go back to the philosophical arguments Hegel provides concerning the «peculiar institution» of slavery. There are plenty of remarks in his work on something which had become a burning topic at that time³¹.

Hegel seems at first to fully endorse the universal moral principle asserting that slavery is «intrinsically unjust in terms of its very concept»³². Even when he considers Europeans and Africans as belonging to different races, he refuses to draw from their natural origins «any reason to justify or invalidate the freedom and domination» of some human groups over others³³. However, rejecting slavery solely on moral universal grounds is insufficient, for it merely brings out further the gap between an abstract ideal of freedom and the concreteness of historical and ethical life. Recalling his well-known critique of moral categories in the name of ethical life, Hegel claims that «what this deficient ‘ought’ regarding slavery lacks is substantial ethicality, the rationality of a political state in which it can have reality»³⁴. Debates about the wrongness or rightness of slavery start to make sense if one appeals to the rational knowledge that «the idea of freedom is truly present only as *the state*»³⁵. The morally unjust institution of slavery will be properly overcome under the concrete circumstances of a rational ethical life, i.e., in the context of an organized state where the fundamental rights of its citizens in terms of freedom and equality are recognized and embedded in its institutions. True abolition of slavery for the sake of human freedom supposes the concrete existence of a political community that institutionalizes equal and free citizenship for all its members.

³¹ D.B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution (1770-1823)*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

³² GW 18, p. 100; LPWH, p. 197.

³³ TW 10, § 393 A, p. 57; PSS 2, p. 45.

³⁴ GW 18, p. 100; LPWH, p. 197.

³⁵ TW 7, § 57 R, p. 124; EPR, p. 88.

While sticking to the overall idea of an ethical necessity for freedom to be truly institutionalized in and through a rational state, Hegel develops a paradoxical justification of slavery that is neither purely moral nor strictly historical but world-historical and anthropological. The positive reasons in favor of slavery are as much untenable as those abstract ones usually advanced against it. Justifying slavery because its abolition would infringe the property rights of the slave-owners or disturb the plantations economy is firmly dismissed by Hegel on reason's grounds: «Notwithstanding this justification, reason must maintain that the slavery of the Negroes is a wholly unjust institution, contrary to true human and divine rights, and is to be rejected»³⁶.

Neither morally abstract nor historically contingent, Hegel's justification of slavery relies on the level of the world-historical realization of spirit's freedom. The institution of slavery although irrational and profoundly unjust in itself fulfills the world-historical role of «an element in the transition to a higher stage»³⁷, i.e., the transition from a state of unfreedom and arbitrariness to a state of actual and rational freedom. On an anthropological level, slavery partakes in a process of culture (*Bildung*) through which human beings become gradually aware of the universal character of their spiritual freedom. While essentially free as spiritual beings, human beings are not immediately conscious to act freely but need first to be educated for it. Cultivating their sense of freedom passes through the stage of learning the «hard work» of ethical self-discipline³⁸. *Bildung* therefore implies to refrain one's natural needs by confronting them to the materiality of the external world and to obey the orders of another rational will³⁹. Whereas morally abstract

³⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Rechtsphilosophie (1818-1831)*. *Philosophie des Rechts nach der Vorlesungsnachschrift Griesbeims 1824/25*, Stuttgart, Frommann-Holzboog, 1974, p. 89. See also TW 7, § 3 R, p. 35-36; EPR, p. 29.

³⁷ GW 18, p. 100; LPWH, p. 197.

³⁸ TW 7, § 187 R, p. 345; EPR, p. 225.

³⁹ TW 10, § 435 A, p. 225; G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, vol. 3 *Phenomenology and Psychology*, translated by M.J. Petry, Dordrecht, Reidel Publishing, 1978 (henceforth cited as PSS 3), p. 67.

arguments that reject slavery fail to recognize it as a necessary condition for attaining true freedom, historically contingent arguments in favor of slavery caution its mere positive existence without taking it as a step towards a higher stage.

Hegel's justification of slavery as part of the course of human history is particularly at stake in his treatment of Africa, a continent where a quasi-state of nature prevails that requires to be overcome⁴⁰. While never denying to African people their fundamental «capacity for culture» (*die Fähigkeit zur Bildung*) as human beings⁴¹, Hegel observes that there are in «Africa proper» – as distinctive from its Northern part that geographically and culturally belongs to the European area – natural as well as social and political conditions impeding their freedom's full actualization⁴². As to the firsts, he describes the inner lands of Africa being «surrounded by high mountains close to the coast»⁴³. Whereas European nations made use of their immediate access to the sea to discover new territories and cultures, geographical enclosure has condemned most African societies to remain landlocked and deprived of contacts with other cultures⁴⁴. Their spatial restriction explains their historical stagnation through time.

As to the spiritual conditions, «the most shocking despotism prevails» in the Sub-Saharan part of the continent⁴⁵. Being

⁴⁰ S. Mercier-Josa, *Hegel et l'état de nature*, in *Hegel aujourd'hui*, ed. by P. Verstraeten, Paris, Vrin, 1995, pp. 197-223.

⁴¹ TW 10, § 393 A, p. 60; PSS 2, p. 53.

⁴² S. Mussett, *On the Threshold of History: The Role of Nature and Africa in Hegel's Philosophy*, «APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience», III (1), 2003, pp. 39-46.

⁴³ TW 10, § 394 A, p. 64; PSS 2, p. 69.

⁴⁴ Hegel's idea of «Africa proper» being geographically isolated from the other continents is directly borrowed from Carl Ritter's comparative geography: «Its coast-line, proportioned to its area, being the shortest on the globe, gives Africa the least contact with the ocean of all the continents, and subjects it to the least amount of oceanic influences» (C. Ritter, *Comparative Geography*, Philadelphia, American Book, 1865 [1817-1818], p. 188).

⁴⁵ TW 10, § 393 A, p. 60; PSS 2, p. 55.

established on arbitrary violence, African kingdoms lack any form of strong and stable rational legitimacy, so that kings are easily deposed by their subjects as soon as their domination weakens. Additionally, family relations are based on polygamy and fulfill the function of providing a sufficient number of children to be later sold as slaves⁴⁶. The fact that social and political institutions are connoted by arbitrariness and immediate sensuality is taken as the main reason why slavery has been so largely adopted among African people. Hegel's covering of the African continent is definitely biased by the idea of the absolute centrality of the institution of slavery, be it in its political (despotic) or domestic (polygamous) forms. Slavery became so habitual that people «are sold and allow themselves to be sold» without showing any moral concerns about its wrongness⁴⁷. The alleged centrality of the institution of the slave trade constitutes for Hegel evidence that, while still being free in themselves as human beings, Africans have remained unable to reflect the universal principle of human freedom and to enact it accordingly in their ethical institutions.

The circumstances that impede the people of the African continent to fully develop their «capacity for culture» are yet relatively, not absolutely prohibitive. In the background of Hegel's racist statements about African people lays the idea commonly shared in his time that their natural environments predispose human groups to lesser or higher degrees of cultural advancement. If restraints to access true freedom are related to natural habitats rather than strictly biologically determined, then changing one's environment might in some cases have liberating effects upon the *Bildung* process. Hegel's «geocultural» racism⁴⁸ leaves indeed open the possibility of liberation from the situation of unfreedom. When speaking of the slave trade as the «only further connection» Africa has had with world-history, Hegel suggests that the «Middle Passage» represents for enslaved people an ultimately emancipating transition from an unlawful and arbitrary state of nature to a potentially higher and

⁴⁶ TW 12, p. 125.

⁴⁷ TW 10, § 393 A, p. 59; PSS 2, p. 53.

⁴⁸ T. Tibebe, *Hegel and the Third World*, p. 181.

more developed historical stage. His infamous remarks about the «betterment» of the slaves in the New World's colonies in comparison with their birthplaces have therefore not to be understood in terms of material conditions and well-being but in terms of changes occurring in their cultural worlds⁴⁹. Being potentially emancipated from the «spiritual servitude» (*Geistesknechtschaft*)⁵⁰ that was impeding their «capacity for culture» in their homeland, the deported African slaves make the experience of being acculturated into a culture that values the universality of freedom.

Parallel to the way European colonization «civilizes the world», chattel slavery gains in this regard a «world-historical significance» from having brutally forced African deportees to become conscious of the wrongness of being deprived of their freedom. Their consciousness could only arise within a cultural context where human freedom is thought in universal terms. Hegel's observations that African people throughout their long and supposedly stagnant history have shown no «inner drive towards culture» (*innere Trieb zur Kultur*)⁵¹ means that the emancipation for which they are considered capable of must depend on being confronted to circumstances that exceed the initial conditions in which they have been until then «immersed» (*versunken*)⁵². Paradoxically, the «civilization of the world» carried by European imperialism has thrown the enslaved African people into a process of emancipation which «they occasionally received with the greatest thankfulness»⁵³. Insofar as «only through slavery are they connected with Europe»⁵⁴, their historical

⁴⁹ «But they are no worse off in America than they are in their homeland. They do not possess the consciousness that man is intrinsically free» (PG, p. 69).

⁵⁰ TW 10, p. 60; PSS 2, p. 55.

⁵¹ TW 10, § 393 A, p. 60; PSS 2, p. 53.

⁵² Hegel joins anew one of Ritter's statements about Africa: «A mere sporadic coast-culture gives rise to mere exceptions here and there, and these are generally the result, *not of inward progress, but of imported foreign conditions*» (C. Ritter, *Comparative Geography*, p. 189, our emphasis).

⁵³ TW 10, § 393 A, p. 60; PSS 2, p. 53.

⁵⁴ PG, p. 69.

path towards actual freedom needed to go through their contacts with European civil society and its culture⁵⁵.

Reading these passages today, one cannot but notice how much Hegel trivializes the vicious brutality of the transatlantic slave trade as if it had been but a continuation of the domestic trade on the African continent. When speaking of people allowed to sell slaves and to be sold as slaves, he projects on local forms of slavery a commodification logic that was only later implemented and exacerbated on an unseen scale by the European merchants, whose determinant role he hardly mentions⁵⁶. On the other hand, Hegel is prone to suggest that the abolition of the transatlantic trade was ongoing, as measures were adopted by the colonial powers at the turn of the century. Although progressively outlawed, the «infamous trade» will subsist in practice until the end of the nineteenth century⁵⁷.

During Hegel's lifetime intellectual and political debates in Europe around slavery slightly shifted from the issue of slave *trade* to that of slave *labor* in the colonies. In the British empire, the trade had been abolished in its dominions since 1808, colonial slavery had to wait until 1833 to be formally (and very progressively) abandoned. The question that riddled the European imperial powers was then how to properly manage the transition from servile to 'free' labor in the colonies. This especially implied the experimentation with ways of preparing slaves to the proper 'civilized' use of their 'new' freedom during an intermediary period⁵⁸. In a transitional

⁵⁵ As pointed by Mussett, «[i]n [...] the burgeoning, expansionist promise of the New World lays Hegel's hope that Africans will be brought into history» (Mussett, *On the Threshold of History*, p. 44).

⁵⁶ One exception is a passage from the 1830/1831 lessons: «The Negroes were sold by the Europeans as slaves to America as things and were condemned to work» (PG, p. 69).

⁵⁷ R. Blackburn, *The American Crucible. Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights*, London, Verso, 2011.

⁵⁸ Drescher summarizes the British parliamentary debates on the Slave Trade Abolition Bill (1807) as follows: «Slaves as a group required a long transition to absorb proper work habits, religion, and civilization. Free labor would be superior [to

phase of apprenticeship, slaves were supposed to learn how to make a wise use of their emancipation by still working on the plantations under the supervision of their former holders⁵⁹. The measure was intended to guarantee the profitable recovery of the plantation colonies into a wage labor economy as well as the gradual transformation of the juridical status of the slaves into 'freemen'.

It is in this political and intellectual context that one has to understand why Hegel, like nearly all the other European and North-American abolitionist thinkers of his time, pleads in favor of the «gradual abolition» (*allmähliche Abschaffung*) of slavery instead of its «sudden removal» (*plötzliche Aufhebung*)⁶⁰. Anticipating the later implemented British policy of apprenticeship, gradual abolition reflects Hegel's own transitory justification of slavery as a means to progressively acquire the «European sense of freedom»⁶¹. Were it removed too abruptly, slavery in the colonies would fail to accomplish its pedagogical role of elevating natural needs to their true cultivated form. Hegel contrasts the «more adequate and equitable» option privileged by Britain with the case of the French colonies. In 1793-1794, at the end of the «terror» phase of the French revolution and during wartime against Britain, slavery had been suppressed by decree, without delay and no financial compensation for slave holders, first on the territory of Saint-Domingue, then to all the other colonies, leading to the legal emancipation of circa 700.000 people⁶².

servile work] when and only when the slow-growing plant of 'true liberty' overcame, through gradual 'amelioration', the slave's indolence and licentiousness. [...] Free labor superiority could be tested only by 'truly' free men» (Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, p. 108).

⁵⁹ Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, p. 128.

⁶⁰ TW 12, p. 129. For a discussion of «immediatism» and «gradualism» in Western abolitionist thought during the first half of the nineteenth century, see D. B. Davis, *The Emergence of Immediatism in British and American Antislavery Thought*, «The Mississippi Valley Historical Review», 49, 1962, pp. 209-230.

⁶¹ GW 20, § 503 R, p. 489 (our translation).

⁶² By decreeing in 1794 the abolition of «the slavery of Negroes in all the Colonies», the national Convention also stated that «men, without distinction of

Hegel disapproved the measure considering its further consequences: «If slavery is absolutely unlawful (*unrechtlich*), the slaves would be given their freedom immediately; but thereby the most terrible consequences arise, as in the French colonies»⁶³. Contrary to what the revolutionary advocates of its sudden removal argue, slavery proves to be relatively, not absolutely unjust, since it plays a necessary albeit limited role in the «transitional phase between natural human existence and the truly ethical condition»⁶⁴. Similar to the colonial trade and imperial conquest that have contributed to the spread of universal principles across the globe, colonial slavery works as a «means of culture». Its transient role in the achievement of true freedom should not be too hastily precipitated but implemented in a timely fashion⁶⁵.

4. *America: Self-emancipation through Revolt*

Hegel's reference to the «terrible consequences» that occurred in the revolutionary context of the French colonies shows that he knew of the existence of slave revolts on the other side of the Atlantic. In another allusion to contemporary slave rebellions in the «West Indies», he notices that, despite the fact of having to suffer from the «overall situation» of domination, «Negroes still can die free» in their fight against the conditions that are imposed on them⁶⁶. As a testimony of the revolutionary spirit that was blowing

color, domiciled in the colonies, are French citizens, and will enjoy all the rights assured by the Constitution».

⁶³ PG, p. 70.

⁶⁴ TW 7, § 57 A, p. 126; EPR, p. 88.

⁶⁵ A. Long Chu, *Black Infinity: Slavery and Freedom in Hegel's Africa*, «Journal of Speculative Philosophy», XXXII (3), pp. 414-425, p. 422.

⁶⁶ TW 7, § 57 N, p. 125. Between 1770 and 1840, nine major slave revolts occurred in the Caribbean area. The most important ones have taken place in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (1791) and in the British colonies of Guiana (1823) and Jamaica (1831-1832) (C. Vidal, *Révoltes*, in *Les mondes de l'esclavage. Une*

at that time across both sides of the Atlantic, «Liberty or death» (*Liberté ou la mort*) had been one of the leading mottos the insurgents of Saint-Domingue took over from the French *sans-culottes*. News arriving of the 1789 Declaration of Rights as well as the military experience some of them had previously gained by participating to the American War of Independence had led black slaves and «free of colors» (*gens de couleur libres*) of the French colonies to engage in a long-term struggle for racial equality and «universal freedom» (*liberté générale*)⁶⁷. After having defeated Spanish, British and French troops, their emancipatory struggle eventually led in 1804 to declare the «black republic» of Haiti⁶⁸.

If Hegel largely favors the gradual abolition of slavery over its sudden removal, some passages of his oeuvre seem to suggest exactly the opposite. There, he highlights the figure of the revolting slaves, as those who, instead of waiting to be emancipated, risk their life for the sake of freedom:

whoever lacks the courage to risk his life in order to obtain freedom deserves to remain a slave. What is more, once a people does not simply think of itself as wanting to be free, but actually possesses the energetic will of freedom, no human power will be able to hold it back in the servitude of its merely putting up with being governed⁶⁹.

Conceived as a two-sided pattern of domination (there are no masters without slaves and no slaves without masters), the institution of slavery is a relation based on arbitrary and unlawful violence. As such, it is subject to two opposite perspectives when it comes to

histoire comparée, ed. by P. Ismard, Paris, Seuil, 2021, p. 675). Hegel has clearly been aware of the situation «on the islands» as he further notes that «still now one reads every year and more often in the year of [slaves] conspiracies».

⁶⁷ J. Scott, *The Common Wind. Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution*, Verso, London, 2018.

⁶⁸ L. Dubois, *Avengers of the New World. The Story of the Haitian Revolution*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2004.

⁶⁹ TW 10, § 435 A p. 225; PSS 3, p. 69.

envisage emancipation: *either* the slave becomes gradually released by the master; *or* the slave «energetically» claims his freedom in front of the master through an act of revolt. These two perspectives on what free agency should mean are perfectly antithetical. Between being passively and progressively liberated on behalf of the master, and actively and immediately liberating oneself by way of rebellion, no common ground whatsoever seems possible.

If one admits with Hegel that «the idea of freedom is only truly present as *the state*», then the ethical conditions that are required for putting an effective end to slavery are presently lacking in the context of colonial slavocracy. Where the rational state seems to be missing as in the Atlantic slave societies, abolition must depend either on the arbitrariness of the master to free the slave or on the willingness of the slave to have the courage of emancipating himself. It follows that, compared to the «despotism» that allegedly reigns in continental Africa, the central institution of slavery in the American colonies must equally count as a pre-judicial and pre-historical «state of nature». In the absence of rational institutions based on legitimate modes of government, the unilateral domination of the masters (*Herrenschaft*) must be seen as «unlawful» (*unrecht*) as the slaves' uprisings against the colonial and racial order⁷⁰.

Significantly, Hegel characterizes the state of nature «on the one hand, [by] dull innocence, devoid of interest, and, on the other, [by] the courage of the formal struggle of recognition and revenge»⁷¹. Its two opposed sides, marked by «dull innocence» and the «courage» of fighting for freedom, fit with the contrasted pictures Hegel offers respectively of the situations in Africa and in the American colonies. Whereas people in Africa have remained throughout their stagnant history a «nation of children»⁷², their descendants in the Caribbean had the courage to emancipate themselves by leading a «formal struggle of recognition and

⁷⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, § 57 N, p. 124. On the revolutionary dialectic of «unlawfulness», see Ch. Menke, *Autonomie und Befreiung. Studien zu Hegel*, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2018, pp. 70-73.

⁷¹ TW 7, § 3 49 R, p. 507; EPR, p. 375.

⁷² TW 10, § 393 A, p. 60; PSS 2, p. 53.

revenge». The situation of «dull innocence, devoid of interest» in Africa presupposes a relative incapacity to liberate oneself. The lack of «impulse towards freedom» (*Freiheitstrieb*)⁷³ Hegel projects on Africans in their homeland requires to extend the «hard work» of *Bildung* in a paternalistic fashion. As its exact opposite, the «formal struggle of recognition» enacts a capacity to self-emancipation by those who engage themselves in a fight for freedom at the risk of their life. In the same passage where he paternalistically speaks of the educability of the Africans to a sense of freedom which «they occasionally received with the greatest thankfulness», Hegel crucially adds that «in Haiti they have even formed [*gebildet*] a state on Christian principles»⁷⁴.

In Hegelian terms, the political foundation of the Haitian republic corresponded to «the *right of heroes* to establish states»⁷⁵. By being deported across the Atlantic, slaves not merely gained a sense of freedom they were supposedly lacking in their homeland, they also started history afresh by forming a state «on Christian principles», which, for Hegel, means modern principles of freedom and equality⁷⁶. The state of nature they were forced to leave behind in crossing the Atlantic was originally reenacted in the colonies as they achieved to overthrow racial slavery *and* to declare an independent state. Their heroic foundation of a new political community was the outcome of their courageous fight against slavery⁷⁷. The Haitian revolution confirms Hegel's main claim that the true abolition of slavery can only result from «the reign of actualized freedom»⁷⁸, i.e.,

⁷³ Ivi, § 394 A, p. 64; p. 69.

⁷⁴ TW 10, § 393 A. p. 60; PSS 2, p. 55.

⁷⁵ TW 7, § 350, p. 507; EPR, p. 376.

⁷⁶ GW 20, § 482 R, p. 477 (our translation).

⁷⁷ The Haitian Declaration of Independence (1804) proclaimed in its preamble: «We must, with one last act of national authority, forever assure the empire of liberty in the country of our birth; we must take any hope of re-enslaving us away from the inhuman government that for so long kept us in the most humiliating torpor. In the end we must live independent or die».

⁷⁸ TW 7, § 4, p 46; EPR, p. 35.

the guarantee of free and equal citizenship for all the members of a political community.

If British imperialism was paradigmatic in its grasp of the «inner dialectic» of modern colonization, the Haitian revolution (1791-1804) is exemplary in its thinking through of the dialectic of the slaves' self-emancipation and de-colonization. Hegel seems to have shared with many of his European contemporaries a mixed feeling of fear and fascination when witnessing the events in Saint-Domingue/Haiti⁷⁹. The outcome of the Haitian revolution must have profoundly challenged the comparison he proposed between colonial and slave emancipation, which he considered both as turning out to the «greatest advantage» of the metropolitan powers and the masters. During that period, political demands emanating from the colonies in terms of self-government and equality of rights were initially carried by the white slave-holding planters, whose intention was thereby to maintain their racial privileges by appealing to the precedent of the United States. Their anti-colonial struggles against the metropolises aimed at more political autonomy in order to reinforce their racial domination against the «free of colors» and the black slaves⁸⁰. As Hegel put it with reference to the English and Spanish colonies, «[i]n more recent times, colonies have not been granted the same rights as the inhabitants of the mother country; and this situation has resulted in wars and eventual independence»⁸¹.

⁷⁹ On Hegel and Haiti, see P.F. Tavares, *Hegel et l'abbé Grégoire: question noire et révolution française*, «Annales historiques de la Révolution française», 1993, 293-294, pp. 491-509; S. Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009; N. Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation. The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2008. For an overview of the contemporary impacts of the Haitian revolution, see the contributions in D.P. Geggus (ed.), *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2002.

⁸⁰ D. Geggus, *Racial Equality, Slavery, and Colonial Secession during the Constituent Assembly*, «The American Historical Review», XCIV (5), 1989, pp. 1290-1308.

⁸¹ TW 7, § 248 A, p. 393; EPR, p. 269.

The historical sequence of Saint-Domingue/Haiti brings forth another story of the way slave emancipation has been coupled with national liberation. While first maintaining their loyalty to the over-sea authority of the king and later of the French republic against the racial power of the planters, the slave rebels of Saint-Domingue have in the course of the events transformed their rebellion into a revolutionary attempt to violently found the realm of right from the scratch. The insurrecting slaves were not aiming at the punctual and gradual betterment of their servile working conditions – be it by abandoning the use of the whip or by being granted three free days a week – but at the immediate and unconditional abolition of slavery in the name of «universal freedom».

Quiet anachronistically, when mentioning the «bloody» servile wars in ancient Rome, Hegel speaks of «the slaves [attempting] to free themselves – to achieve recognition of their eternal human rights»⁸². Beneath the obvious anachronism lays perhaps a due reference to the contemporary slave revolt of Saint-Domingue⁸³. The insurgents' original appeal to the «eternal human rights» proclaimed in 1789 resulted in creating the second modern independent state in the New World. After having defeated British troops under the leadership of Toussaint Louverture and after the military expedition sent by Napoleon to restore slavery failed due to the resistance opposed by their «indigenous army», declaring the national independence of Haiti appeared as the only way to «assure the empire of liberty» the insurgents had been struggling for. Instead of having turned out to the «greatest advantage» of the white masters and the metropolises, the «world-historical significance» of the Haitian revolution resides in having been the first successful anti-racial slavery *and* anti-colonial struggle in modern history.

⁸² TW 10, § 433 A, p. 224; PSS 3, p. 65.

⁸³ Hegel's anachronism might contain a hidden reference to the «prophecies» launched by radical Enlightenment thinkers Mercier and Raynal about the coming of a «black Spartacus» to avenge America. Some will retrospectively identify him with Toussaint Louverture (Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, p. 57, p. 203).

By stressing the «terrible consequences» that occurred during the revolutionary episode of Saint-Domingue, Hegel implicitly parallels the colonial situation with that of the French metropolis. The terror the «black Jacobins» have made reign over Saint-Domingue echoes that of the «white Jacobins» at the same time in France and on the European continent more generally⁸⁴. Both are also criticized by Hegel, whose contention is that their «fanatical» defense of «negative freedom» – be it mere liberation from the institution of slavery or from the *Ancien régime* – has come to destroy the patient and longstanding work of historical *Bildung*⁸⁵. In the highly contrasted histories of slaves' emancipations in the French and British colonies, Hegel's own political and philosophically informed attitude favors the reformist path taken by the latter against the terror he associates with the French and Haitian revolutions. Since it depends on a larger process of human *Bildung*, emancipation has not to be abrupt but takes time in order for culture to fulfill its rationalizing role.

Hegel's reformist stance with regard to abolition has probably been driven by contemporary debates in Europe about the Haitian revolution. The spectacle of the «terrible» and «bloody» events in Saint-Domingue/Haiti has been interpreted on European shores as showing the need to slow down rather than to precipitate the slaves' emancipation in the colonies⁸⁶. Still, Hegel's parallel between the French and the Haitian revolutions testifies that, for all its

⁸⁴ C.L.R. James will make the parallel famous in his 1938 classical work on the Haitian revolution (C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins. Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, New-York, Knopf Doubleday, 1989). But some of its contemporaries already suggested it, as for example the British prime minister Henry Addington who, in 1802, as the colonial French troops were sailing to Saint-Domingue, urged «to destroy Jacobinism, especially that of the blacks» (quoted in Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, p. 256).

⁸⁵ TW 7, § 5 R, p. 50; EPR, p. 38.

⁸⁶ D. Geggus, *Haiti and the Abolitionists: Opinion, Propaganda and International Politics in Britain and France, 1804-1838*, in *Abolition and Its Aftermath. The Historical Context (1790-1916)*, ed. by D. Richardson, London, Routledge, 1985, pp. 113-140.

Eurocentrism (or Mediterranean-centrism) and its underlying racial basis, his philosophy of world-history managed to capture some key aspects of the revolutionary spirit that was blowing above the Atlantic during the modern period.

5. *Conclusion: Exploring the Atlantic Spirit*

Connecting Europe, Africa and the Americas, the modern Atlantic world has been shaped by the «world-historical significance» of colonial expansion, the slave trade and the Haitian Revolution. Its emergence must have poised Hegel's mostly linear and dominantly Eurocentric narrative of the world-spirit gravitating around the «midpoint» of the Mediterranean⁸⁷. From an Atlantic perspective, nor were modern experiences of freedom limited to the geographical and racial boundaries of the Old World, neither were the «need for independence» only proper to the Euro-descendants of the New World. Universal freedom has been an equally crucial concern for those Afro-Caribbeans who exercised their «absolute right to free [themselves]»⁸⁸ from the chains of colonial and racial slavery. The new figures of freedom that arouse during his life-time on the other side of the Atlantic challenge Hegel's choice of focusing his philosophy of world-history on the sole rational institutions of freedom which the European continent gave birth to since the Greek *polis*. Speaking of the New World as the place where «the Old World establishes itself anew», Hegel fails to fully recognize how much the slave insurrection in Saint-Domingue and the political foundation of Haiti partook in the global age of the Atlantic revolutions, on

⁸⁷ Hegel's Eurocentric view on world-history is actually grounded in a Mediterranean-centrism as in the following passage: «Europe and the coasts of Africa are always in relation, Europe is connected with America and the East Indies by the sea, we have not yet penetrated into the interior of Africa and Asia. The water as river and sea is free to unification [*frei zu der Vereinigung*]. The Mediterranean therefore makes this midpoint [*Mittelpunkt*], and the fact that this midpoint is a sea is what made it a true midpoint, and made that course in world history possible» (PG, p. 65).

⁸⁸ TW 7, § 66 A, p. 144; EPR, p. 97.

equal footing with the North American and French Revolutions⁸⁹. In comparison with the latter, the Haitian Revolution extended and profoundly retransformed the content of the «European sense of freedom» towards racial equality and anti-colonialism⁹⁰.

If one considers the Atlantic not just as a geographical area but, similarly to the Mediterranean, as a world in the truly historical sense, its underlying spirit seems to both support and reframe Hegel's core idea that mundane history is pushed by the temporal and spatial developments of freedom's self-consciousness. Whereas in the Old World the scope of the idea of freedom has been progressively and continuously enlarged from the particular (only a few are free) to the universal (human beings as such are free), the New World has been the scene of *simultaneously* (not gradually) opposed conceptions concerning the ways to achieve universal freedom. The connections of the three continents around the Atlantic appears in retrospect as having been deeply conflicting. This not only because colonial trade had been accompanied by conquest and extermination⁹¹, not only because chattel slavery infringed the principle of

⁸⁹ D. Armitage and S. Subrahmanayam (eds.), *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context (1760-1840)*, London, Bloomsbury, 2010.

⁹⁰ As Blackburn remarks in the steps of C. L. R. James, «[t]he black Jacobins found something in the ideology of the French Revolution that helped them to elevate and generalize their struggle. Yet at the same time they brought experiences in a slave society and memories from Africa that radicalized the ideas they appropriated from and eventually defended against France itself. The travail of Africa's sons and daughters in the New World gave a new scope and meaning to the freedom they claimed» (Blackburn, *The American Crucible*, p. 664). Buck-Morss has also stressed the importance of African cultural components such as the Vodou in the rise of the Haitian revolution, to which Hegel's Eurocentrism must have remained blind (Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, pp. 124-133).

⁹¹ It is important to mention that, differently from his consideration of Afro-Caribbeans, Hegel seems to deny any forms of historical agency to the Native Americans (see Parekh, *Hegel's New World: History, Freedom, and Race*, in *Hegel and History*, pp. 111-131). While acknowledging the greatness of the pre-Columbian civilizations, he explains that the «withering» of the Native Americans soon after the Spanish and Portuguese invasions is due to technical (the absence of iron

personal autonomy, but also because different models of emancipation, in terms of «gradual abolition» and «sudden removal», have been concurring, the first reflecting the perspective of the white masters and imperial powers, the second that of the black insurgents and revolutionaries.

Still, for all the philosophical and political reasons Hegel has to favor the reformist path of «gradual abolition» against the revolutionary path of «sudden removal», the world-historical covering of the Atlantic does not yet leave us with two opposite and irreconcilable worlds, as if the Old and the New were exposing exclusive principles of freedom. Because of their simultaneity their connections are actually more ambivalent and dialectically intricate. Hegel's conception of modern slavery as being part of a gradual process to access universal freedom makes the idea and practice of self-emancipation both possible and impossible. Possible insofar as it accounts for the historical experiences of the slaves having been confronted to a culture that formally at least attributes equal freedom to all human beings. Impossible in that Hegel's idea of a progressive *Bildung* restrains in advance any act of *immediate* self-emancipation as the slaves' revolts in Saint-Domingue/Haiti.

That political ideas and practices of self-emancipation in the modern Atlantic area simultaneously occurred with their repression is one of the profound meanings one can still retain against *and* with Hegel from a properly dialectical, non-linear and discontinuous account of world-historical processes. What the «Atlantic spirit» teaches us is that world history is not the scene of ultimate unifications⁹². It is rather the place where the ways to realize universal freedom have been highly contested ever since the idea emerged. And for sure, even from a Hegelian perspective, the ways through which freedom actualizes itself in history, be it gradually or suddenly, cannot be kept separated from its idea.

weapons) and biological factors (the exposition to the diseases imported by the colonizers). To him, they underwent the process of colonization without opposing any sort of resistance (LPWH, pp. 192-193).

⁹² P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London-New York, Verso, 1993.