

Hegel's Master and Slave

Alain Badiou

Abstract: This article returns to and examines again Hegel's dialectic of master and slave. But it does so from a specific point of view, namely the view of actual existing slavery. The question being raised is: what does Hegel's account of the very constitution of the master-slave relation tell us about the constitution and practice of actual existing slavery, and what is it unable to conceptualize?

Keywords: Hegel, master, symmetry, dissymmetry, slave

Major texts dedicated to slavery are quite rare. This is especially because from the outset everything is in some sense, divided. One does not find simple strong, decided judgments, which one can anticipate. If one returns back to the Greek origins, one finds great societies that were contemporaries of slavery, which even developed it, and here one can make two elementary remarks. To start with Aristotle who ultimately legitimates slavery. He defines the slave as an “animated tool”: the slave is a matter of which only the master is the form, it exists only potentially as its act is in the master. This is to say that the thesis arises according to which the slave is only virtually, not actually or really, human. This will have a long history in different forms. The case of Plato is more complicated, because Plato defines humanity through thought and grants in a certain sense this humanity to the slave, since he shows in a famous scene of the *Menon* that the slave is able to start comprehending a complex mathematical problem and that, consequently, his thought, just as that of the great philosopher, is constituted by the reminiscence of the ideas. Contrary to Aristotle, Plato recognizes the full humanity of the slave. But similarly to Aristotle, Plato never does contest slavery as social and economic system.

In the modern world, it is certain that the most famous text in which (in French) the word “slave (*esclave*)” appears is found in Hegel, namely in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a book of which I remind you that has been absolutely significant for the whole of French philosophy, specifically between 1930 and 1970. One can thus have the feeling that we have here in the history of occidental philosophy a major text on the objective and subjective figure of the slave.

This text on slavery can be found in a strategic point of Hegel's book. The first half of this book is dedicated to a sort of history of consciousness, such that Hegel interprets it, passing through the constitutive figures of this history, and it is organized in the book into three stages: first consciousness, then self-consciousness and, thirdly, reason. We witness an ascension from animality, that is to say from

immediate life, the life on the level of needs, which Hegel calls the world of sense-certainty, to the summit of reason, which is in fact, ethical consciousness, the consciousness of the law.

In the beginning Hegel tells us that “consciousness is ‘I’, nothing more, a pure ‘This’.”¹ We thus start from an absolutely elementary given: an ‘I’ which knows a ‘This’. An ‘I’ which knows this in an immediate way, by means of its sensory organs as an undifferentiated thing of the world. Then, starting from this utterly elementary relation, Hegel constructs a general image of the whole of civilization. And in the end, after four hundred pages² of enormous difficulty, one finds the typical sentence which reads like this: “[T]he ethical substance has developed... into actual [l’essence de] self-consciousness....”³

A magnificent path, which goes from the humble link between an ‘I’ and a ‘This’ to the ethical substance, which is truly interiorized by self-consciousness as being its will and duty.

This is an immense path which entails numerous stages that one traditionally calls “shapes of consciousness”⁴, stages which stake out this progressive ascension. And in the midst of this immense path, truly in its midst, we have a section of ten pages called: “Lordship and Bondage (*Domination et servitude*)”. In this section here we encounter the shape of the relation of “master and slave” which in a certain way shifts the universe of consciousness from one region to another one. This is why this is an absolutely fundamental text.

Why? Because it deals with the appearance of the figure of the Other. This is the moment in which consciousness removes itself from the pure relation to itself, from its solitude, its solipsism, and realizes that it is partially dominated by the existence of other consciousnesses.

This point seems to be of great banality but it really is not. One can effectively say that we owe to Hegel the explicit introduction of the other into the construction of subjectivity. Consciousness is not reducible to the *Cogito* of Descartes, it is not identical with self-consciousness. It must traverse the recognition by the other and in this recognition one encounters the figure of the mastery and of servitude.

It is interesting to locate exactly the moment where the figures of the master and the slave emerge. For the section dedicated to the apparition of the Other entails three movements whose titles are:

.....
1 Hegel 1979, 59.

2Translator’s remark: This only holds for the French edition.

3 Hegel 1979, 266.

4 Ibid., 21.

“Redoubled Self-Consciousness”, “The Struggle of Opposing Self-consciousnesses” and “Master and Slave”, the third moment.⁵

Hegel’s text is particularly difficult to understand and even more so to be made comprehensible, but the major difficulty is that I am not persuaded that it really deals with slavery, despite the titles and sub-titles.

Let’s begin with a very simple thing: consider what an individual is. One can very simply consider it in three ways: Firstly, as a simple object in the world, a thing of the world which must be absolutely analysed as any other thing. It is a body, a package of organs, a set of cells, finally a package of atoms, and ultimately a senseless movement of a billion of particles. This is what Hegel calls *the in-itself*. Secondly, one can regard the individual as knowing itself, not simply as a known thing, but as having the reflective capacity to know itself and consequently as being what Hegel calls a “self-consciousness.” The individual exists in-itself but also *for-itself*, that is to say in an effective relation to itself. And then, thirdly, one can consider that this individual exists as an individual that can be recognized as the individual that it is by an other, particularly by an other individual. This is the figure of the other, that Sartre will call the *for-other*. On an elementary descriptive level one very nicely finds again the Hegelian triplicity of in-itself, for itself and for the other. This will give us the key to Hegel’s dialectical development.

Starting from here the first sentence of the section about which we are speaking clarifies a famous sentence in which one hears, if I may call it so, the Hegelian clatter, the sonority of the concepts: “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another.”⁶ This sentence means that consciousness hangs, in its very being, on the recognition by the other.

This is a very strong thesis. There is not the individual and then another individual. Rather, there is an individual which, in its very individuality, integrates the judgment of the other. Thus the whole problem will be that consciousness as self-consciousness does only exist insofar as it is recognized as such by another self-consciousness. It absolutely needs this recognition to be constituted in the universe which is both its own and is always a collective and cultural universe. Self-consciousness is only born insofar as it is recognized. This is both fundamental and a new and profound idea: there is not what now

.....
5Translator’s remark: These titles are additions by Jean Hyppolite, the translator, to the French edition of Hegel’s text.

6 Hegel 1979, 111. Translator’s remark: The French rendition of this sentence makes the sonority Badiou is referring to more apparent: “La conscience de soi est en soi et pour soi quand et parce qu’elle est en-soi et pour-soi pour une autre conscience de soi.”

exists and then afterwards, the other, no, the other is present in the very constitution of self-consciousness.

We can thus anticipate the problem of the master and the slave, starting from the fact that there are three terms: a self-consciousness, another self-consciousness which recognizes the first, and between the two that which is not consciousness, that which simply put is: the thing in itself. Between the master and the slave there will always be this third term, the thing. And what Hegel will try to deduce is that the master and the slave differ *in relation to the thing*. Everyone has the consciousness that the other is also a consciousness, but what produces their difference is the thing. And why? Because the master wants to enjoy the thing while the slave has to work on the thing so that the master enjoys it. This fundamental dissymmetry that is constitutive of this relation will therefore emerge that the master is tilting to the side of enjoyment, whereas the slave is tilting to the side of labour. However, both labour and enjoyment suppose the thing in their midst on which the slave works so that the master enjoys it.

What Hegel in fact desires, his most fundamental project, is to arrive by philosophical, conceptual means from the simple existence of the other – from the simple fact that every self-consciousness proves that there is another consciousness and ultimately another self-consciousness – at a dialectic, which is the dialectic of enjoyment and of labour. Hegel's gamble is that starting from this simple encounter – one self-consciousness encounters another self-consciousness – one can accomplish the deduction of culture as the cement of collectivity.

Let's try to make our way with Hegel. The simple occurrence of the other self-consciousness presents itself at the beginning as coming from the outside: I am a self-consciousness and I see another self-consciousness; it is outside. In this sense, it is an other, absolutely, since it comes from the outside. The paradox is that in the very moment when I see that it is absolutely other than me, I also see at the same time, that it is absolutely the same as me, since it is another self-consciousness.

We have here an extremely tight dialectic of the other and the same, which will organize the whole procedure. Since the other is also a self-consciousness it is in a certain sense identical to me. In addition, this relation is a relation of pure reciprocity. We have in fact a structure that makes each consciousness conscious of the fact that the other is also a consciousness, a consciousness that also has a consciousness of the fact that the other is a consciousness. All this creates a sort of absolutely primitive reciprocity which is the pure encounter of two self-consciousnesses such that they both immediately identify one with the other.

To put this in more anthropological language: You encounter someone and even before you know anything about him, there is one thing that you know: that he belongs to humanity like you do. Thus, he is other, another human, but at the same time he is just human. And the relationship with the other represents a paradoxical synthesis between absolute difference and absolute identity.

Oddly, here is the point located which brings us to the historical and anthropological consideration about slavery. The great problem is in fact that we are dealing with a pure symmetry: in this analysis, the two terms are indistinguishable; each term is defined as a self-consciousness which encounter another self-consciousness, as other and same. This is what Hegel calls redoubled self-consciousness. We are thus in a logic of the double, a logic which has had many consequences, particularly aesthetic ones (the use of the twin; the fascinating theme of the doubling, of the double). But the double is a symmetry, a symmetrical identity. If I stay with the double, nothing is produced: it is a closed and static structure, since we have a primitive reciprocity where everyone recognizes the other as it is recognized by the other. We are apparently in an impasse of the dialectical process which seems to have stagnated in this primitive reciprocity.

The whole problem is that humanity as we know it can constitute itself beyond this primitive recognition only if there is a dissymmetry. This is the most delicate point, and as we will see Hegel does not fully appreciate this. He certainly knows perfectly well that if one wants to move beyond the mirror effects of reciprocity and of the stagnation it causes, one must introduce dissymmetry. He himself says that the process "at first,... will exhibit the side of the inequality of the two [self-consciousnesses, F.R.], or the splitting-up [...]."⁷ In the moment when one obtains an absolute symmetry, the process must present us with the inequality of the two consciousnesses, which will then present this rupture. But where does this rupture, this inequality come from? At the point where we are, the other is also at the same time, the same.

I think that Hegel produces what I would call a forcing: he will in fact describe the dissymmetry but without having the means to legitimate it. He will also assume and decide that there is a dissymmetry; he will tell us what it consists of, but he will not be able to deduce it, to construct it by starting from what precedes it.

This forcing is, as always with Hegel, quite magnificent and one must understand its nature well. What he tells us is that everyone will engage the other, who is also the same, in a struggle in which the stakes

.....
⁷ Hegel 1979, 112f.

for each is to be recognized by the other, without being obliged to recognize the other. "I" will get the other into a struggle, into a life and death conflict as such that the other is forced to recognize my humanity in the form of an identity that is not only different from his, but in fact, superior to his. This is to say that the other will be forced to recognize me as more other than he is other: recognize me as an other of a nature other than the inaugurally given symmetrical alterity.

However, one cannot see, how this should result from the procedure itself. The struggle for recognition introduces from the outside a dissymmetry into the relation between the other and the same. The struggle, in fact, unfolds as such that the other recognizes that he is not really the same as me: that is to say, that I am superior to him. One sees here on the one side how we orient ourselves towards slavery, and on the other, that we have a principle of rupture which does not probably draw its legitimacy from the dialectic which precedes it, that of the symmetrical encounter of two self-consciousnesses.

If one introduces a dissymmetry this amounts to saying that in it there is one more human than the other. Here, there is no alternative. And this is exactly what Hegel says in a different language. Here we have the necessarily abstract genesis of racism in its most general sense, of racism whose thesis is that there exist individuals that are certainly human, but of a lesser degree than others. From where the terms of master and slave are derived that name this presumption of inferiority.

How does this struggle for recognition unfold if one admits to the stroke of force that institutes it? To understand this one must recall that behind the self-consciousness of the individual there is animal life, organic life. Before being self-consciousness consciousness must exist, live, as natural body, in sensuous immediacy. The dissymmetry will therefore be constructed in the following manner: in the struggle for recognition one of the self-consciousnesses will accept the risk of death and the other will shrink away in face of the risk of death. In reality, the self-consciousness through fighting in the deadly struggle for recognition is led to accept that the risk of death will fundamentally place the recognition of self-consciousness above animal and organic life. It will declare in the name of the pure recognition of its being human as self-consciousness that it is ready to risk its life, its animal life, since what it defends is pure self-consciousness. In turn, the other will in the fight shrink back in the face of risk of death and will thus not affirm self-consciousness but rather the power of life. One of the combatants will accept that one deals with self-consciousness all the way, accepting to put its organic existence in the struggle for recognition in danger,

whereas the other will remember that organic life is the condition of consciousness and will thus protect it from the risk of death brought about by the struggle of the consciousnesses.

Hegel puts this as follows: "[O]ne is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is the lord, the other is the bondsman [in the French rendering: the slave, F.R.]"⁸ One of the consciousnesses affirms that a consciousness is ultimately independent from life and must be recognized precisely in this independence; and for consciousness as superiority over life to be recognized all the way it will have to take up the risk of death. And this will be the independence of self-consciousness, self-consciousness as essence. The other consciousness will assume that ultimately the real of self-consciousness is life after all, since without life there is no consciousness and thus it will protect life, but will at the same time accept its inferiority in relation to self-consciousness.

There is a point that I want to underline here because it is often forgotten. One must understand that for Hegel this all has two reasons. One here does not deal with a conflict where one could state that the master is right and the slave wrong because it is correct that self-consciousness is superior to life as well as it is correct that life is the condition of self-consciousness. The master will recognize self-consciousness at the expense of life, accepting the risk of death, but this is an abstraction, because this detaches self-consciousness from life itself. And the slave will abandon the principle of self-recognition in the name of life, however this is also an abstraction, for he renounces the singular progress that is represented by self-consciousness in relation to simple organic life.

As one can see, the genesis of the categories of master and slave in Hegel represent a passionate attempt to deduce the fact of domination from the simple encounter with the other. To be honest, I think that this does not work for the following reason: from the pure encounter one can eventually deduce a symmetrical structure. But the dissymmetry must be introduced from the outside, because fundamentally one does not know why there is one who shrinks away in the face of death while the other accepts it. There is an obscure contingency. One could very easily imagine that in the name of the pure for-oneself, that in a general manner, everyone accepts the risk of death. Or conversely, that everyone refuses it. The dissymmetry is simply the dissymmetry of two possibilities, but the deduction of the fact that these

.....
⁸ Ibid., 115.

two possibilities really constitute the fundamental relation of civilization from its beginnings, that of the master and the slave, is not really established.

This means that it is true that the deadly struggle for recognition makes us, in its consequences, pass from one process to the other. In terms of the first process, the master is in the position of domination over the slave. But what will be the content, the exercise of this domination? We find here again the fundamental role of the third term, of the thing. The master, being he who affirms the pure self-consciousness, must live independently from the thing. Since it is he who took the risk of death and has thus affirmed the purity of self-consciousness, detached from the needs of life, he cannot be dependent on the thing anymore. The master is thus he who must be able to enjoy that thing without being preoccupied with it. This is his position. Consequently, he will command the slave, for he has chosen the side of material life, to occupy himself with material life to the master's advantage. He will ask him to produce the things that he desires, without engaging himself in the vital quagmire, if one can say so. The task to occupy oneself with the vital quagmire is returned to the slave to furnish the master with the things that he needs. In this sense, the master is immediate enjoyment, whereas the slave cannot enjoy the thing, because it is destined for the master. The slave must work and form the thing for the enjoyment of the master. While he took sides with life in the fight for recognition, he is thus the one who paradoxically finds himself in the impossibility of satisfying his immediate vital needs, and is thus forced to defer his enjoyment, since he works for the master.

We have here an utterly extraordinary shape insofar as it initiates a reversal. Compelled to defer his immediate satisfaction, to work, to form and cultivate the object independently from his own desire, for the desire of the other, the slave will in the end be the inventor of culture because he is the inventor of a desire that is dispatched from the formation of the thing, in the adornment of the thing, in the aesthetic of the thing. One must here appeal to the language of Freud that is so close to all this and state that the slave is the man of sublimation, the man of repressed pleasure, for the benefit of working on the thing. Ergo, he is the one who creates the human civilization.

One witnesses here, as Hegel will tell us, a complete reversal. The master who had affirmed self-consciousness at the expense of life has become the one who is content with immediate enjoyment, whereas the slave is led to defer the satisfaction of his immediate desire for the sake of culture, of the invention of more and more beautiful, more and more extraordinary and creative objects. It is thus the slave who will become

the creator of sublimated culture, whereas the master will ultimately remain an enjoyer without any creativity.

So, we have in the second section a spectacular reversal that in the end makes it clear that human history is the history of the slaves and not that of the masters, who are nothing but the history of successive enjoyment, and never the history of creative and productive culture. This dialectical reversal allows us to understand in which sense certain depths of Hegel have oriented Marxism: in the bosom of History the fundamental creativity is on the side of the dominated and not on that of the dominating. Hegel tries to give an explicit account of this in a passage that I quote before commenting on it:

“But just as lordship showed that its essential nature is the reverse of what it wants to be, so too servitude in its consummation will really turn into the opposite of what it immediately is; as a consciousness forced back into itself, it will withdraw into itself and be transformed into a truly independent consciousness.”⁹

Let us recapitulate. Faced with the risk of death the master renounces the immediacy of life but only to fall into the immediacy of enjoyment that is enchained to a thing whose true master is the slave. In this sense the master becomes the slave of the slave. On his side, the slave has on the contrary accepted, out of fear of death, the primacy of immediate survival. But forced to work and accept the mediation of labor, he has created culture, becoming in this way a future master of the master. In the incapacity to live otherwise than in the present, the master becomes the slave of the slave, in turn, the slave devoted to the future becomes the master of the master.

Now, can we draw any clarification from all of this concerning historical slavery? To a certain degree, yes: it is from the perspective of the last thesis according to which the most important historical work is accomplished as production, as creation by those who are in the position of servitude and not by those who are in the position of mastery. But I nonetheless think that three objections subsist. And this is even apart from a more formal and non-negotiable objection, namely that the German word “Knecht” – translated into French as “esclave / slave” – means “servant” or “knave”, and that one thus deals with more universal dialectic than those which clarify the anthropological phenomenon of slavery.

First objection: The dissymmetry remains unexplainable, it is not really deduced and consequently the historical phenomenon of slavery

.....
9 Ibid., 117.

is missed, precisely because it requires a contingent dissymmetry, that between human groups that are on the levels of – technical, scientific or military – development presenting an objective, historical dissymmetry. The material possibility to organize something as vast and as terrifying as the great transatlantic slave Treaty cannot be explained without mentioning the material instruments and the wills of domination that one camp, that of the powerful imperialists, disposed of. There is an acquired superiority that cannot be explained as a consequence of this pure encounter: in the moment of this encounter a major dissymmetry is already effectively constituted. This is a point that Hegel does not let enter into the account of the dialectical configuration of master and slave, simply because he remains faithful to his program which consists in deducing the dialectic from the encounter.

From here arises a second objection. One can say that real, historical slavery could be rather described as a point of impasse of the Hegelian dialectic. An impasse that one can very clearly situate in the moment of the second time: the thing mediates the relation between enjoyment and labour. Its principle is very simple: by means of his labour, the slave furnishes the master with what his enjoyment obtains. Yet, historical slavery is not limited to this mediating position of the slave, between the thing and the master. The historical slave is nonetheless partially *the attempt to subjectively identify the slave with a thing*. The real slave is not simply he who can work the thing to offer it to the master; he is himself thing-ified, treated like, sold as, bought as a thing. Even if one knows very well that there is always a zone of impossibility of this radical treatment, it is nonetheless true that slavery in the strictest sense is different from the servitude that Hegel describes. From this point of view one could say that real slavery is the moment where the second moment of the Hegelian dialectic finds itself in some sort of blockage, paralyzed by the fact that one does not really recognize in this figure of slavery the distinction between thing and labour. Certainly, what one awaits from the slave is labour, but this labour is itself like an emanation from the thing, since the slave himself is a thing. And thus the triple of enjoyment, the thing and labour, that certainly exists in the real, since for example the slave will fabricate the sugar for the markets of the masters, this dialectic is not the subjective dialectic of real slavery. In real slavery, the slave is lowered to the thing he handles, he is a thing amongst things. One thus must recognize that in this precise point historical slavery does not enter the Hegelian schema.

Finally, the third objection: In the Hegelian frame it becomes impossible to access the proper political subjectivity of the slave with regards to slavery. What I mean by this is that while at the same time the

emancipation attempts of the slaves is contained by themselves, it is also in the revolt of the slaves under the lead of Spartacus in the Roman Empire or in the revolt of the slaves at St. Domingo under the lead of Toussaint-Louverture. This does not enter into the schema because the slave sees himself as confined by Hegel to the register of the cultural production of the thing, and thus nothing allows for him to be able to invent a particular political subjectivity. The figure of the political revolt from the slave origin is a figure that is absent, not simply out of contempt or ignorance but due to the very structure of the Hegelian development.

For my part I think – and I conclude with this point – that Hegel refers with his complete dialectical unfolding to the aristocratic world. The world of enjoyment of the master remains nonetheless, for him, a world of nobility and the world of the slave, of the inferior classes, does in the end, include the bourgeoisie. The inferior classes comprise also of the intellectual class, that is to say the class that is formative of culture, certainly in the state of servitude in relation to monarchic nobility, in the state of abatement and servitude, but this nonetheless is in the end the true motor of History. Even though, in exaggerating a bit, one could say that the slave is Hegel himself, considered in the last resort as small professor, who is insignificant with regard to the politico-monarchical establishment of Prussia at that time. It is Hegel, who attributes to himself or endows himself, in the heart of the consciousness of relative servitude that is those of the small public servant in the ending 18th century with real historical greatness. This otherwise can be resumed in saying: “All this is nice, but one will remember me, Hegel, I will exist eternally, while one will not remember the Count So-and-So, who certainly has enjoyed in his life more than I did, but who in view of universal history is nothing at all.” To my mind, Hegel is much closer to this than to the producers of cans of sugar on the Caribbean Islands.

I would thus say that the dialectic of master and slave in Hegel is an interesting, passionate figure, even from the point of view of the theory of the other and its introduction into philosophy. It is interesting to the degree in which it brings with it the theory of enjoyment and of labour, as much as the function of sublimation and repressed desire in this affair; it is also interesting from the point of view of the manner in which the dominated classes can represent themselves in the moment of ending Aristocratism, in the hinges of the 18th and 19th centuries. But it certainly does not really touch the real of slavery. For this to be the case, one would have needed without any doubt a different entry, because, once again, this theory presupposes the quasi eventual givenness of a first dissymmetry, a factor that Hegel has not integrated

in his development because his development must obey to the laws of dialectical genesis. Consequently, and this is my last word, I would say that the dialectic of master and slave, and I believe I have somehow elucidated it, is a magnificent philosophical anticipation whose relation to real History remains however indirect and metaphorical.

Translation: Frank Ruda

C
R
I
S
I
S

&

C
R
I
T
I
Q
U
E

/

Volume 4 /
Issue 1

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Hegel, G.W.F. 1979, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

C
R
I
S
I
S

&

C
R
I
T
I
Q
U
E

/

Volume 4 /
Issue 1