

# Hegel's racism for radicals

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Contemporary societies are not the first to confuse their desires not to be racist with their desires to minimise the scope of race. A few years ago, for instance, the University of California Humanities Research Institute summer workshop, 'Archives of the Non-Racial' (2014), noted that

by the nineteenth century, the 'non-racial' emerged as an intellectual, political, and ethical category, assuming a variety of interpretations. Indexed to different intellectual, social, and political contexts, at times the non-racial has stood for the idea of 'a shared human nature.' At others, it has gestured toward the idea of 'abolition.' Sometimes it has meant the erasure of 'difference' and its substitution by 'sameness' alongside the commitment to a set of universal moral principles.<sup>1</sup>

This institutional description presents the 'non-racial' as divided into good, bad and neutral-sounding forms. At best, the 'non-racial' belongs to a vision of social relations beyond abolition; at worst, it is postracial in the cynical sense, a vision of sameness that disavows difference and, with it, racism.

Racial thinking, by contrast, is not ordinarily accorded a similar ambiguity and proximity; being unwelcome, it is presumed to belong to others, who are tasked with moving on from it. For oneself, it is an object of critique only. This presumption is held in common by the radical vision of heterogeneous social relations and the liberal vision of placid human sameness.

In this essay I will argue, in conversation with ongoing work in black studies, that this idea that racial thinking merely belongs to others is contradictory, that it is inherent to any deployment of the category of the 'non-racial', that it is characteristic of both liberalism and radicalism, and, further, that it is embedded deep in the philosophical sources of post-Enlightenment politics. In those sources racially subordinated people, especially black people, are called on to abjure a racial thinking that

operates as a foil for proper political thought. This pattern continues today, as works from Paul Gilroy to Asad Haider exemplify; for Gilroy, racial thinking is the other of 'the goal of authentic democracy', while for Haider, it divides revolutionary black radicalism from 'expressions of racial ideology'.<sup>2</sup> Rather than being only a post-civil rights era symptom,<sup>3</sup> however, I want to argue that postraciality for this purpose of shoring up an 'authentic' politics has itself been with us for a long time: it arose alongside florid scientific racism and complements it.

The arrival of the 'non-racial' shows that the procedure of ascribing the 'non-racial' can itself only be postracial. It is postracial in two senses: in the pejorative sense, indicating the rhetorical erasure of an actually existing and persisting racial violence; and *postracial in a logical sense*, in that 'non-raciality' must carry assumptions about what 'race' is, and a responsibility for deciding what it looks like, in order to testify to its absence. In the postracial view, those assumptions always belong to other people, but such ascription does not hold up under examination. Rather, the idea that racial thinking is only something that comes from outside is part of the problem.

Postraciality depends on the availability of the concept of non-raciality, while the concept of non-raciality depends on the prior existence and identifiability of race. Otherwise, there's no way to tell the racial from the 'non-racial'. Postracial thinking exists wherever 'non-racial', in other words, postracial, in other words, conventionally racialising, categories are in use. In what follows, I'll explore this question within Hegel, taking the most radical interpretation of Hegel to be foundational for post-enlightenment politics. I will consider Hegel's criticism of both India and Africa for their supposed racialism; as we'll see the logic throughout is anti-black.

## Radical negativity and the 'racial thinking' of others

As work in black studies has demonstrated, the major works of Kant and Hegel set the current terms of race.<sup>4</sup> They do so not only by playing race against a falsely transparent humanity, but by constructing what counts as real. One effect among many is that the real becomes aligned with the non-racial. In Hegel, historical relation functions as a medium of reality that entails that properly historical societies appear as 'non-racial' in their self-understanding, while non-historical societies, located in the medium of reality but without opening themselves to it, now appear as 'racial' in their self-understanding. A crucial characteristic that people now have, in this view, one that is symptomatic of their relation to historical reality, is their supposed practice of raciality and/or their incapacity to desire to be non-racial. Assigning non-raciality to historicity reassigns racial characteristics elsewhere – in fact, exactly where they are in systems of scientific racism, and to the same degrees. It also continues to be the case that blackness is placed inside and outside ethnic categories, as a kind of exemplary pure raciality that is more and less than Africanness. As we will see, Hegel attributes racialisation primarily to racialised people themselves. This line of thought terminates in the *political priority* of the non-racial.

These implications bear upon the radical, negative, non-teleological, 'left' Hegel specifically, and are for that reason especially pertinent as a matter for radical self-examination. The problem with the critical consensus that Hegel's dialectical subtlety triggers 'right' and 'left' interpretations is that left Hegelians often assume that anti-Hegelians are objecting to the rightist Hegel and that their own task is therefore to explain the resources that Hegel still offers to the left. This leaves no room for left criticism of left Hegelianism, and more to the point, threatens to close the logical space for racism in radical thought. At the most, as modelled by postracialism, radical thought finds left racism in other leftists making mistakes of conceptual exclusion. My goal here isn't to rehearse right/left arguments, and so I start with the following understandings:

(1) Hegel is radically historical rather than dogmatic. He is opposed to nature and essence, even as he preserves

the extent to which communities may require some ideas of nature and essence. Further, his vision of history is neither progressive nor simply teleological, because

(2) Hegelian subjectivity and historicity centre self-division, aporia, disarticulation and negativity, and are radically non-identitarian;

(3) Hegel promotes radical openness to history as a structural necessity of relation; relation and speculation should be understood as the media of openness, and themselves incomplete and open;

(4) the speculative proposition is the container of relation in flux, and the model for all Hegelian propositions;

(5) relation in Hegel is grounded in non-relation, the Absolute of the system, and this Absolute is absolutely the opposite of the 'given.'

It is *in these philosophical choices* that I find Hegel's specific contribution to racial capitalism. They matter particularly much because they continue to characterise the preferences of left political theory. Despite their inadequacies, I cannot help preserving the ambiguity of the terms 'progressive', 'left' and 'radical' for the time being, not only because it is as difficult to say whether Hegel was radical or liberal as it is to say whether he was right or left, but because the structure of (post)racial thinking consolidated in Enlightenment philosophy affects the range of 'progressive' views from liberal to radical. I am concerned to make the point that radicals cannot distinguish themselves from liberals in this regard. The racism of radical circles is not a matter of inconsistency, but of the values affirmed above, which are often shared by positions that agree on little else.

Prosaic philosophical settings chosen by Hegel, Kant and others make it difficult to perceive the operation of race in radical circles; radical enlightenment philosophy integrally cultivates and encourages these difficulties. When instead we grasp that 'racial thinking' is not only used to subordinate others in open racism, but also projected, in a way that is itself racist, in order to cast them as *less political*, we may see more clearly that the set of radical Hegelian values can't be relied on to ensure its own enlightenment. Efforts to devote radical politics to anti-racism in general are likely to be recuperated into the idea that this will make anti-racism more properly political in comparison to the practice of other groups who are still stuck in racial thinking and its errors of ex-



clusion. Since such a radical stance is perfectly consistent with anti-blackness, a specific address to anti-blackness needs to become a radical platform in its own right.

### Hegel's colonial opening

The frantic anti-blackness of Hegel's depiction of sub-Saharan Africa in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* is well-known. Building on that knowledge, we might explore Hegel's curious use of postracial ideals of relation there and in the less-discussed *Philosophy of Religion*. If Africa is 'savage', after all, it is because 'Africa proper' is 'self-enclosed'.<sup>5</sup> According to Hegel, North Africa, being coastal and oriented toward Europe, 'is not independent on its own account. ... Spain is said to belong to Africa. But it is just as correct to say that this part of Africa belongs to Europe.' Egypt, meanwhile, is riparian and associates with the Mediterranean.<sup>6</sup> Coastal rims, blue states of openness, 'benefit from the connecting aspect

of the sea'; indeed, water 'makes communication possible', 'enlivens' 'relations to the external world ... and for the ties of the soil and the limited circles of civil life with its pleasures and desires, it substitutes the element of fluidity, danger, and destruction.'<sup>7</sup> Quite explicitly, Hegel treats the sea as an embodiment of global relation as 'medium':

through this supreme medium of communication, it also creates trading links between distant countries, a legal [*rechtlichen*] relationship which gives rise to contracts; and at the same time, such trade [*Verkehr*] is the greatest educational asset [*Bildungsmittel*], and the source from which commerce derives its world-historical significance.<sup>8</sup>

Offering humans access to one another, ocean channels accelerate the projects of 'all great and enterprising nations' and so, we can add in this mercantile context, enhances the values of relation and access themselves as properties of anything.<sup>9</sup> Thus, although North Africa

remains African because it does not yet 'stand on its own two feet', Hegel opines that it has access to influences that are likely to allow it to do so, as previous civilisations also did before they became historical.<sup>10</sup> Sub-Saharan Africa, in contrast, has no such access to relation, not even to other parts of Africa, such that the continent as a whole suffers from poor interrelation between its geographical regions. African sparsity of relation is explicitly the obverse of Europe's frustrated access to Africa: 'the Europeans ... have not yet penetrated into the highland, where riches are to be found in the most inaccessible conditions.'<sup>11</sup> Such is Africa's geographical destiny as a 'highland' region.

If Hegel's geographical materialism predicts cultural backwardness for Africa, his theory of historical realisation, and particularly its emphasis on openness and negativity, predicts his geographical materialism. In order for Hegel's account of Africa to be what it is, it has to be able to indict African societies for being racial. That is, 'racial' practices are already a benchmark of the non-political. The key element of African societies' inferiority is their self-enclosure and 'government ... patriarchal in character', by which Hegel means their reliance on kinship structures, or what he assumes are kinship structures.<sup>12</sup> Self-enclosure and kinship-centredness collapse into one: Hegel's causal logic here is that African societies, having no access to the foreign influences that would expand their scope, fall back into themselves and reproduce the prehistoric family unit.<sup>13</sup> Insofar as kinship structures are blood ties (Hegel does not explore the possibility of a difference between the two), Hegel's African societies are cast as racial in the way that later political science would criticise them for being 'tribal'. The series abstract-non-racial-open and familial-racial-closed renews the model of race that it finds in travel literature, not despite but through its greater abstraction.

Hegel's preference for open relationality, and use of it to reproduce racist accounts of Africans, is writ large in his philosophy altogether. Uncannily, it locates racial thinking in general in order to embody it in blackness specifically. The uncanniness is lost if Hegel is seen instead as conflicted or as merely excluding Africa. What if, instead, the anti-blackness of Hegel's imagination and enclosure of sub-Saharan Africa requires his postraialism? Hegel mentions, for example, that 'the original organisation that created social distinctions' in India 'im-

mediately became set in stone as natural determinations (the castes).' In Hegel's account of India, 'distinctions imposed by nature' trap consciousness of social relations at the first available moment, the moment that locates value in natural origin. Such periods of entrapment, he explains, may occur whenever 'peoples may have had a long life without a state before they finally reach their destination.'<sup>14</sup>

In Hegel's account of Africa, by contrast, no impulse ever arises to make what is happening into a conscious social system, so that 'even the family ethos is lacking in strength.'<sup>15</sup> What Hegel imagines to precede incipient social organisation is a reproductive primal horde that, if it were to be systematised, would generate a natural order, as in the example of Hegel's imagination of caste; but Hegel's sub-Saharan Africa does not even get that far. These imaginations function as justifications for colonisation. Yet, Hegel's disapproval of 'natural' orders is taken to be something he gets right and as evidence for the extent to which he is not racist. As Joseph McCarney writes, defending Hegel from Robert Bernasconi's explanations of his racism, 'history is precisely, in one aspect at least, the escape of spirit from nature, its overcoming of all natural determinants such as common descent or blood relationship.'<sup>16</sup>

What is usually discussed as Hegel's development of abstract polity out of negativity, then, calls for the development of systems that promote access to racialized bodies, first in the name of stimulation and ultimately in the name of the objectively political. Philosophical relation after Hegel is not just interaction, but interaction valued in this way that bridges humanism and posthumanism (and therefore their opposed lines of left politics). A value on 'disaccustoming'<sup>17</sup> suggests customary racial locations as surely as myths of modernity suggest locations of the primitive, and representations of custom that one finds in contemporary political discourse are not conceivable outside it.<sup>18</sup>

## Relation as coercion

In the informal pedagogy of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, which, readers are constantly reminded, are university lectures that were never published, prescribed relationality can take on the trivial appeal of breadth requirements. Relation must be affirmed in or-

der to cultivate human potential.<sup>19</sup> But although the register and sophistication of arguments changes from text to lecture (e.g., from *Logic* to *World History*), Hegel's posthumanist and humanist ideas of relation are shaped by his radical negativity. Diverging political uses of Hegel are made possible by this speculative destabilisation of identity. At the same time, negativity generates the historical subject and, along with it, the nonhistorical actor, as nonraciality advances by saddling nonhistorical societies with racial practices whose 'depth' appears as the ambiguity of blackness. Negativity is especially able to legitimate the historical subject because the historical subject is shattered in it, displaying the objectivity of historical process. Not primarily a recognition of an other, it is more fundamentally a capacity to be dismembered, and therefore formed, by the Absolute. This capacity, it turns out, cannot be taken for granted. The negativity of the historical life that ensues affords a position from which to dismiss nonhistorical life.

From this perspective, the well-known stages of Hegel's argument appear as follows. As *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* points out, at first relation is both built on top of 'natural or necessary connection' and qualitatively distinct from it.<sup>20</sup> Even 'natural organisms' split internally before they 'engage with other things and thereby undergo a process of change.'<sup>21</sup> So, as mentioned above, for Hegel Indian society recognises natural or necessary connection only; relations can occur and be helpful for development, but they will remain incomplete. 'The precocious development of language and the progress and diffusion of nations [may] have acquired their significance and interest for concrete reasons, partly in so far as the nations in question have had contact with other states, and partly as they have begun to form constitutions of their own',<sup>22</sup> but no amount of linguistic and mercantile finesse will make them historical if they fail to be disturbed by non-relation that alienates the self. In qualitative distinction, something 'must be perceived as a non-given, something that holds itself back, something "foreign" to which spirit entertains no "positive" relation, and that means an absence of any determinate relation of positing: no positing relation at all. The relation to the "natural" is thus at first the aporetic relation to the relationless.'<sup>23</sup> Action begins with the non-given; what happens there is historically real, indeed the real movement of history. Equally crucially, the historical

subject has to discover and internalise the disarticulation of non-relation: 'What has been reflection on our part must arise in the mind of the subject of this discipline [of the world] in the form of a consciousness that in himself he is miserable and null.'<sup>24</sup>

*Non-relation*, taken into the self as its negativity, connects the humanistic Hegel of organic growth to the radically anti-identitarian Hegel, the *Lectures* to the *Logic*. Internalised disturbance never stops and remains the live element of subsequent relationality and so of history. Exposure to non-relation, by definition an 'education' or 'discipline' in the historical real, a continuous disarticulation of the subject, is singularly catalytic, as its exposition in the vocabulary of the Absolute indicates. If Absolute non-relation itself lies beyond value, alienation by non-relation, with its monopoly on creating historical consciousness, is of maximal value. Since it exists only through contact with the "foreign" to which spirit entertains no "positive" relation', non-relation must be accessible;<sup>25</sup> such contact must be accessible. Ideally, it is available at any moment whatever. Yet, it is clear enough in Hegel's comparative history that not just any perceiver can actually perceive it. Not scarce as opportunity, still 'feel[ing oneself] as the negation of [one]self' remains precious, like 'thinking' in Heidegger and Arendt.<sup>26</sup> Non-relation that is not received as laceration of self isn't really received at all. The non-given mustn't be missed, it can't not be concerning, it can't be understood (which must be understood), and it can't be left entirely alone.<sup>27</sup> When the non-given is so received, spirit has started to work on 'the relation to the "natural"'.<sup>28</sup>

Here, non-relation taken up as such makes access possible to demand because the genuine abrasion of exposure to the Absolute pays for it. Immediately, the authenticity of non-relation is difficult to separate from the acquired taste for non-relation. A radically anti-identitarian movement of subjective undoing often walks in the tracks of subject-building, as Gayatri Spivak pointed out in her criticism of Deleuze in 1988.<sup>29</sup> They are two kinds of 'training',<sup>30</sup> humanist and posthumanist; yet also not even two, because while it's clear what posthumanists are fleeing, it's not clear where they can go. Contemporary criticism flees the identitarian moment of substituting an object of representation for the anorientation of non-relation – and why not? For example, it's problematic that Hegel substitutes pulp fiction im-

ages of Africa for something that he states he cannot comprehend ('because it is so totally different from our own culture, and so remote and alien in relation to our own mode of consciousness').<sup>31</sup> It can seem obviously better for Hegel to stay in non-relation, and in his famous formulations Hegel calls precisely for staying with the negative, which renews itself at every moment. Yet, Hegel also makes the 'openness' of the negative into the measure of authentic development *and then uses it to generate racist images of Africans who 'lack' it.*

Do we want to say here that Hegel is insincere, that he doesn't 'really' open up to non-relation, at least as soon as sub-Saharan Africa enters the picture? Or that there is a moment when insight does not yet turn into use, and that it might be extended indefinitely? Or can we say, more inconveniently, that there is a problem altogether with valuing exposure to non-relation in the way he does – namely, by making the perception of it criterial to reality as such, reality in general, however negatively understood? Can a measure of reality *not* be a weapon? For Hegel's conclusion is literally that, be-

cause within their own societies Africans supposedly do not experience the dismemberment of alienation, and rather encounter non-relation everywhere *but without being disturbed by it*, so then they remain at an irrational stage of racialism. This reasoning is more than a problem in Hegel and more than a matter of Eurocentrism, or of stereotypes. It's a specifically postracial Enlightenment technology that imputes racism elsewhere to demand colonial access (which figures as non-racial because it demands opening) to, and disposition over, the racial human. For radical philosophy, racism is *a priori* elsewhere. That's why the defence of racial hierarchisation by 'mention' – the criteria are not the radical writer's criteria – *redoubles* the contradiction of attributing raciality by postracial praise of the non-racial. Postracial reasoning as such creates racial elsewherees through complaints about over-valuation of kinship, attachment, and so forth on the part of the others of Europe: their lack of openness, their lack of access to and/or disinterest in relation, their failure to be properly disturbed by non-relation.



As part of the same train of thought, Hegel complains that Africans 'see nothing unbecoming' in being connected to Europeans only through slavery.<sup>32</sup> 'There is no slavery in the state that is rational; slavery is found only where spirit has not yet attained this point.'<sup>33</sup> Quite literally, for Hegel this lack of connection and its ill effect, blackness, is why Africans have to remain enslaved for a while longer.

Hegel's strong endorsement of radical negativity – for him the capacity to be torn within by non-relation, foundational of relational capacity – figures as black Africans' liminality to relation and imperviousness to non-relation. As Donna Jones suggests, this imputed imperviousness to disarticulation (historical subjectivity) entails that 'black people are not thought to die.'<sup>34</sup> Much as they can only merit the full force of slavery by proving to be slaveholders, what Hegel believes is African indifference to foreign stimulation allows them to be the objects of a peculiarly postracial racism. In this sense, I'm not sure that blacks are being correlated to the Real of the system, in which case their non-given status would have the history-authenticating function of non-relation itself. Postracially, they are lined up before the Real along with others, and singularly fail to notice it. Thus, life in sub-Saharan Africa 'consists of a series of contingent happenings and surprises' – by which fact itself, however, Africans in particular cannot, according to Hegel, be surprised.<sup>35</sup>

Hegel's deployment of non-relation and relation to verify the historicity of the globalised world adds a progressive twist to the more common idea, descending from the open admissions policy of Pauline Christianity, that persistent obstacles to relation must be resolved or classified as perverse. 'The Jewish religion', as recent anti-political theology tracks very well, lacks the 'latitudinarian tolerance' of international modernity.<sup>36</sup> As the historian of time Vanessa Ogle points out, nineteenth-century coordinators of time schemes, building global capital, quickly came to perceive 'peoples who do not partake' in the global effort as 'guilty of the crime of opposing it.'<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Christianity not only moralises, but invents particularity by offering itself as freedom from it.<sup>38</sup> Hegel stresses that he judges Judaism only by its lack of commitment to access: 'it is only a limitation in this respect and not a limitation of the religion [as such]'<sup>39</sup> – necessarily, or it would otherwise be Christianity! In this

way Judaic 'particularity', Muslim 'excarnation'<sup>40</sup> and the provinciality of certain forms of Christianity are born only together with their vaunted open alternative, the historical real of global relation. The Christian structure of Hegel's anti-identitarianism is as well-known as his hostility to certain actually existing forms of Christianity *for still not being open enough*.

Radical philosophy might now re-read Hegel's history of religion and the nineteenth-century secularisation movements of which it is part for their contribution to a politics with both domestic European and transnational implications. On the domestic front, the 'latitudinarian tolerance' of religion at its best sharpens into 'political union', passage from nation to people.<sup>41</sup> From here on, 'political' joins the growing list of hierarchising terms, as Cedric Robinson argues.<sup>42</sup> From here on, there are political (modern, historical, ultimately statist) societies and nonpolitical (primitive/past, nonhistorical, national at most) societies, or more accurately, in Robinson's phrase, 'political societies ... and those societies in which the question did not come up.'<sup>43</sup> Hegel aligns them with nonraciality and raciality, the political of course being nonracial. Political consciousness may now order more and less mature fractions of citizenry against the background of groups not sufficiently political, as were the racial societies of the past.

As practiced, the union of political citizens resembles the 'common participation' of the church whose inner relations are regulated by Spirit's 'authority for the truth and for the relation of each individual to the truth.'<sup>44</sup> Translated into political vocabulary, this means that social totality is regulated through each relation to the reality of history as evidenced in the real abstraction of global relations – individual, colonial and transnational. Notably, social relation maintains (sublates) individuality to get to a reflective version of collectivity. 'Independent subjectivity', Hegel specifies, is 'the soil on which grows the True';<sup>45</sup> in a more proverbial formulation, 'only what is free can have its determinations over against it as free.'<sup>46</sup> *Non-relation concerns being; but social relation assumes the existence of individuals*, even if in a local instance specific persons are not at issue. Otherwise, it would be difficult to discriminate communities organised without universal exchange from modern historical societies.

*Collectivity* is not at issue in my analysis of ‘relation’, and from Hegel’s perspective it is never enough; *Hegel’s theory of relation*, a particular theory of collectivity, is the issue, and in it relation accompanies the establishment of the individual unit and vice versa. For its part, the individual degrades into barbarism, Hegel writes, if relation does not occur. Complementarily, every time Hegel specifies that collectivity is not enough, is not yet political, he is acknowledging that societies can have every other kind of coordination and interest and still not be relational, historical or political. If, in view of the tendency for ‘authentic’ politicality to project the raciality of the insufficiently political, the political loses some lustre, that loss can enhance a radical view of the capacity of other ways of inhabiting well-being and justice. (In the last section, coming up, I’d like to contemplate these unintended acknowledgments.)

At the height of Hegel’s secularisation of Christianity, ‘the attributes of God are God’s relation to the world’,<sup>47</sup> and so, understood secularly, the attributes of human beings are social relations in the world in Hegel’s by now quite specific sense:

The way in which one human being is related to another – that is just what is human, that is human nature itself. When we are cognisant of how an object is related [to everything else], then we are cognisant of its very nature. To distinguish between the two [i.e., relation and nature] is to make misguided distinctions that collapse straight-away because they are productions of an understanding that does not know what it is doing.<sup>48</sup>

In a memorable footnote, Hegel compares the entity in relation to an element in chemical reaction: ‘the acid is nothing else than the specific mode of its relation to the base – that is the nature of the acid itself.’<sup>49</sup>

The metaphor of acid is a fine articulation of how entities within social relation are not yet congealed into objects, a view that wholly avoids reification. A lot of radical philosophy is linked to this sentence; everyone will like it – I like it. And indeed maintaining a relational view of the world is for Hegel what it is for contemporary theory, a safeguard against reification. In the name of this safety, however, the relation becomes utter, and the entities in relation ‘nothing else than’ the relation. ‘Nothing else’ lays all attachments down at the door at considerable expense, so no complaint of easiness-on-the-self can be made. Inside the door, then, is the political, and it

sounds well-earned. But an outside, and exterior interiors, have now come into being. There, myriad phenomena, *which look from within relation like attachments and identities, but may be anything* from agricultural arts to diverting habits, now become evidence of nonpoliticality if they are really important to a community, i.e. if they happen to be preferred to the ‘discipline of the world’ in any friction between the two. This stigma of nonpoliticality, which can now be aimed, is, as a weapon, a kind of compensation for the historical subject’s sacrificial self-nullification. It is a place where the aggression that cannot be turned against history goes. A ‘progressive’ race discourse begins to appear here, backed up by the clarity and force of belief in the real movement of history. It could never be biologically racist; it could only speak of a nonracial alliance to which anyone could belong, if they only cared to or knew how.

## Blank reflections

Obviously, Hegel’s view of ‘racial’ peoples isn’t based on familiarity with non-European societies. He assumes that their practices are what his travel reading sounds like to him. Unlike Rousseau, he doesn’t consider how his ideas would be evaluated within African and Asian social systems, even as he observes their existence. The situation would not necessarily be improved if he did, and, notably, epistemic critique per se also cannot improve it even as, at the same time, I have not reached the end of it. The end of it is the fact that Hegel’s pejorative descriptions of imaginary societies indicate fictive alternative societies that Hegel also imagines in order to reject them. It is still merely studying what Hegel thinks to consider them, at the hallucinatory limit of his language. By gathering ideas that recur across his descriptions of various regions (reflecting the fact that the descriptions never describe actual regions), it is possible to piece together, as fantastic literature, what the societies of *World History* and *Philosophy of Religion* would look like if they were not being characterised as racial for not being statist. The blank pages of history aren’t completely blank: this other fictional society is in Hegel’s lectures ephemerally, a second apparition reflected in their medium, and so it is also something to consider.

Again and again, Hegel imagines a landscape populated by many and various groups, ‘specialised in idiosyn-



crasies'.<sup>50</sup> The groups are polytheistic as an aggregate and also internally, which makes for a proliferation of values, powers and imaginations.<sup>51</sup> These polytheisms do not strive beyond the situations in which they find themselves, but seem to orient themselves with respect to a local environment and/or community, reflecting places and groups and, sometimes, particular persons. In general people inhabit societies of 'prosaic things' and 'understanding beings'.<sup>52</sup> Hegel supposes that there exists no further ordering of practices; 'hap and genius' account for what there is. These societies may have no arts, or may have merely 'beautiful' ones that stress sensory pleasures. They support themselves in subsistence economies, often nomadic ones; they live day to day without, as we have read, interpreting difficulty and radical contingency as discipline and disarticulation.<sup>53</sup> Their polities, as we have seen, Hegel imagines to be based on kinship structures. In these societies' idea of origin, springs of agency lie in objects. Hegel has read that in India the creation of the world involves 'going forth', meaning that agency lies in beings that go forth rather than in an original force that expresses them.<sup>54</sup> The gods themselves go forth, which implies that they are finite and that the origin is just any place at all.

This situation inhibits the development of value. Everything is 'special', so nothing is.<sup>55</sup> Instead, there is texture and variety to the point of incomprehensibility. Meaningfulness, one might say, exists instead of value. The sun and the mountains possess mentality and volition, and it becomes easy for people to 'relate themselves to the divine'.<sup>56</sup> Of this *accessibility*, which Hegel could be expected to admire if it were *facilitated by relation*, he remarks that it is 'an identity cheaply obtained. In fact it is everywhere'.<sup>57</sup> Crucially, and consistently with all the above, people in such societies 'let themselves be determined from without'<sup>58</sup> – even from without the human. Their authorities are themselves aleatory. Hegel is particularly fascinated by the 'oracles' that, he reads, were used in both Indian and Greek societies to 'allow the decision to be given from without':

here no articulated answer was given. Their [oracles'] manifestation is some sort of external transformation, metallic forms, the rustling of trees, the blowing of the wind, visions, examinations of sacrificial animals, and contingencies of that sort. People needed such things in order to reach decisions.<sup>59</sup>

The societies he peripherally imagines are contradictorily long-lasting and slow to change and fragile and ephemeral. They may not leave much trace.

The story is problematic logically and politically, even as fiction; it is the negated, not entirely negated other of Hegel's philosophy of history in particular, which is to say that it is primitivist – the inside-out of what he organises, in ambiguous implication. Hegel's incidental images of other societies are able to do no more than raise the question of what he stands against. As such, whether such societies exist is not the main question to ask, but why, regardless of whether they exist or not, Hegel is so concerned to overcome these features of *possible* societies, and, moreover, what it means that the principles of radical history that he develops espouse their subordination as desirable, and their elimination as possible, practices. For this set of *principles* is racialised through and through in terms that black studies scholarship of the last thirty years makes amply available.

It is not simply that the values placed on characteristics of development and 'tradition', consciousness and 'immediacy', and so on down the line could be different, but that terms like tradition and immediacy come to be in the process of consolidating the historical in the first place, and do not function non-circularly at all. That's why translation into any terminology other than Hegel's own – 'prosaic activity' instead of 'immediacy', for example – illuminates the circularity of his assumptions even though there is no non-racist language to use instead. The momentary and unsatisfactory shift is enough to underline, with the disappearance of the non-racial, that it is not hunter-gatherer societies that need to be restored to Hegel's analysis, but the specialness of prescribed relation within it that needs to be understood as rendering *any* other principle and practice impossible, most of all future ones.

It is the vastness and unspecialness of the set {not-relation} that Hegel waves off. Christianity levels it once and for all, according to him. In his story the landscape (this too will have been an invention) in which everything matters is replaced with a thrilling sense that indeed – as exchange value allows – none of it needs to mean anything. Then there come the fatal moves of which capitalism is so fond, in which the fact that, indeed, none of it *needs* to mean anything means that none of it 'really' does mean anything. 'Nowhere are to be found such re-



volutionary utterances as in the Gospels; for everything that had been respected, is treated as a matter of indifference – as worthy of no regard.<sup>60</sup>

Hegel breathlessly fetishises the radicality of this gesture in and of itself, focused on its power rather than its function. The same ecstasis greets the torn and disarticulated historical subject; its dismemberment is told and retold as a graphic dazzle. The ‘severe’ edge of the lines that caricature it mimic the ‘discipline of the world’.<sup>61</sup> No one is a stranger to the elation of the gesture, and it can be a fine thing – for instance, to put it to work toward the destruction of all, under the name of racial capitalism, that made it possible to eliminate ‘nonhistorical’ life. But the gesture, and more than gesture, the strategies that align with it cannot but apotheosise historical mentality at the expense of something that then is not properly political. In its recurrent pattern, that something has been: the supposed racialism of ‘primitive’ societies, then racialised people’s interest in racial identity, then critical conviction about the scope of a critique of antiblackness. Because the social forms that appear as essential, provincial, and so on – the contem-

porary ones as much as the antique – appear so within a set of values controlled by the global open, they are something else apart from that control. What they then are isn’t necessarily better, but does have to be otherwise than what they seem to be in the grammar of their totalised antagonist. Like Hegel’s unwittingly *possible* snapshots of polytheism and of Africans undisturbed by non-relation, the foils of political authenticity necessarily bear more possibilities, for better and worse, than can be seen from a postracial horizon.

Hegel’s philosophy of history has appeal because it makes contingency and negativity into badges of honour, but it may look different if it is thought through that, in doing so, he makes them powerfully normative of political reality for all. Dismemberment’s power to legitimate the historical subject is visible in the frequency with which contemporary Hegelians point to it, as though to say that no one would invent a subjectivity based on dismemberment. Rebecca Comay, for example, and Lacanian Marxism generally, endorses historical dislocation as Hegel’s way of being ‘dead right’, and pathologises demurrals from its affirmation.<sup>62</sup> These negative forms of

historical legitimation, too, are forms of 'free association' that use a functionally postracial horizon to leave race shaped in the usual way in the middle ground. Because anyone can affirm historical dislocation, everyone who is anyone must.

In this way, contemporary historical subjectivity, too, no less than Hegel, selects a political society with a nonracial (postracial; conventionally racialised) horizon, whether or not that horizon is thought of as actually attainable. The complex that Hegel refines is not the only way to organise race in the early nineteenth century or now. It is the *progressive's* way of organising it and a key to radical racism thereafter, for, unlike reaction, radical political thought needs its racism to be postracial.

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*The images in this article are by the artist Christina McPhee, and are reproduced here with her kind permission. McPhee's work moves from within a matrix of abstraction, shadowing figures and contingent effects. Her images emulate potential forms of life, in various systems and territories, and in real and imagined ecologies. (See [www.christinamcphee.net](http://www.christinamcphee.net)) In sequence, the three images are: Second Person in Motion, 2016, ink, graphite, and watercolor on Rives BFK paper, 57.7 x 76.2 cm; Persons of Interest, 2016, ink on Takefu washi paper, 63.5 x 96.5 cm; Play of Context, 2016, ink on Takefu washi paper, 63.5 x 96.5 cm.*

## Notes

1. UC Humanities Research Institute, accessed 10 August 2018, <http://sect.uchri.org/apply/>
2. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002), 12; Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (London: Verso Books, 2018), 21. The rhetorical twist of Haider's recent book is that his exemplary radicals are black, and his main targets, those who take anti-blackness seriously, are multiracial. Only an antiracism that placed its faith in demographics, however, and hence really was identitarian, would be impressed by this. The pattern remains the same: focus on anti-blackness supposedly exemplifies racial thinking, and racial thinking is the foil to the authentically political.
3. See Barnor Hesse, 'Im/plausible deniability: racism's concep-

tual double bind', *Social Identities* 10 (2004), 9–29.

4. On Kant, see especially R.A. Judy, *(Dis)forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Fred Moten, 'Black Kant (Pronounced Chant): A Theorizing Lecture', Kelly Writers House, 27 February 2007 (<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Moten.php#2-27-07>) and 'Knowledge of Freedom', *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4 (2004); and Denise Ferreira da Silva, '1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value', *E-flux* 79 (2017) (unpaginated). Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze's 'The Color of Reason: The Idea of "Race" in Kant's *Anthropology*', in *Postcolonial Philosophy: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), J. Kameron Carter's discussion in *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), and Robert Bernasconi's 'Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism', in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, ed. Julia K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 145–66, show how Kant's construction of the human and of teleology position black people as unable to survive. Eze and Bernasconi, however, preserve the value of "moving beyond" race, Eze explicitly so. See Eze, *Achieving Our Humanity: The Idea of the Postracial Future* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

On Hegel, see especially Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). Hegel's racialisation is dialectical whereas Kant's is transcendental, and inclusive whereas Kant's emphasises limits. Kant's contribution ends in the 'void', absolutely alien space reserved to the noumenal; Hegel begins by confronting Absolute non-relation to set in motion a concrete, historically produced postracial reality, behind which (self-)racialised peoples lag. The Kant/Hegel opposition is a lose/lose situation. Hegel's role in the double bind can be seen in dialectics' treatment of its objects of analysis as racial or not. Although my focus in these pages is on the Hegelian-postracial strategy of inclusion, made possible by mandatory relation, in order to talk about it I'll sometimes need to describe its interaction with exclusion.

5. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Robert F. Brown and Peter C. Hodgson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 196. Henceforward *PWH*. As usual, the question of which translation to use of Hegel's necessarily contested lectures, assembled from sets of student notes, is not really solvable. John Sibree's 1858 translation of the Introduction and Lectures together is still the only place to find English versions of certain material. See Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree [Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche Books, 2001]. I use Brown and Hodgson, the most recent translation, where possible and fall back on Sibree as necessary; references to Sibree's edition are cited as Sibree, *PH*. Hugh Nisbet's less apologetic edition of the Introduction is sometimes indispensable. See Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), cited as Nisbet, *PWH*. As Nicholas Walker observes, Brown and Hodgson's claims to modernisation are problematic and 'in the last analysis most of the old and many of the new problems associated with this controversial work remain largely impervious to such textual and editorial changes and revisions' (Nicholas

- Walker, review of Brown and Hodgson, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 14 December 2011, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/lectures-on-the-philosophy-of-world-history-vol-i-manuscripts-of-the-introduction-and-the-lectures-of-1822-3/>. I find Brown and Hodgson's translation anodyne, but use it as a control.
6. Brown and Hodgson, *PWH*, 197.
  7. Brown and Hodgson, *PWH*, 204, 194; G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, ed. Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §247.
  8. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §247.
  9. *Ibid.*, §247.
  10. Brown and Hodgson, *PWH*, 197; Nisbet, *PWH*, 174.
  11. Brown and Hodgson, *PWH*, 196–7; Nisbet, *PWH*, 173.
  12. Nisbet, *PWH*, 185.
  13. At this moment Hegel fails to extend to sub-Saharan Africans the dynamism he attributes to 'natural organisms' whose 'existence is not simply an immediate one which can be altered only by external influences' (Brown and Hodgson, *PWH*, 108).
  14. Brown and Hodgson, *PWH*, 116, 114.
  15. Nisbet, *PWH*, 184–5.
  16. Joseph McCarney, 'Hegel's Racism? A Response to Bernasconi', *Radical Philosophy* 119 (2003), 32–5, 33.
  17. Sibree, *PH*, 339.
  18. To say so does not entail a pre-contact plenitude, a necessarily better society, as Hegel thinks Schlegel assumes in his writing on India (Nisbet, *PWH*, 132). Rather, it entails that while not every advocacy of liberation has to be political, history does. A political reply to the construction of caste that Hegel uses, and that is still in use, is Congress parliamentarian Shashi Tharoor's argument that the British regime codified caste out of scattered heterogeneous practices and solidified the term 'Hindu'. See Shashi Tharoor, *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2016).
  19. For typical apologetics on this point, see Timothy Brennan, *Borrowed Light: Hegel, Vico, and the Colonies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 98, 103.
  20. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 2, *Determinate Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R.F. Brown, P.C. Hodgson, and J.M. Stewart (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 364. Henceforward *LPR*.
  21. Brown and Hodgson, *PWH*, 109.
  22. Nisbet, *PWH*, 138; see Brown and Hodgson, *PWH*, 117.
  23. Werner Hamacher, *Premises: Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan*, trans. Peter Fenves (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 6–7.
  24. Sibree, *PH*, 339.
  25. Hamacher, *Premises*, 6.
  26. Sibree, *PH*, 339.
  27. In Kant this series would run: it can't not be thought, it can't be perceived, it can't not be limiting, it isn't really disturbing, the 'I' cannot but leave it alone. Both Fanon and Levinas transform this set of strictures by interpreting it from the perspective of the racial nonsubject. It then describes a set of impositions. I am pointing out the asymmetry of their readings with readings from the focal point of a subject confronting the racial other or that of the retrospect of historical subjectivity itself.
  28. Hamacher, *Premises*, 7.
  29. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–314.
  30. Hegel adds the etymology '[*trainés*, dragged]', recalling Adorno's complaint about being 'dragged along' by history (Sibree, *PH*, 339).
  31. Nisbet, *PWH*, 176.
  32. Sibree, *PH*, 116.
  33. Brown and Hodgson, *PWH*, 197.
  34. Donna Jones, 'Inheritance and Finitude: Toward a Literary Phenomenology of Time', *ELH* 85 (2018), 289–303, 300.
  35. Nisbet, *PWH*, 176.
  36. Sibree, *PH*, 215. See Brown and Hodgson, *LPR*, 372–374; a nationalisation of God is not exclusive to Judaism, but paradigmatic in it; when Christians act this way they are unnecessarily restricting Christianity (372).
  37. Vanessa Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 24.
  38. Kathleen Biddick connects the consequences of supercession trenchantly to its contemporary legacies for anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in *Make and Let Die* (New York: Punctum Books, 2016), 81–105.
  39. Brown and Hodgson, *LPR*, 374.
  40. Biddick, *Make and Let Die*, 81–105.
  41. Sibree, *PH*, 216.
  42. Cedric Robinson, *Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).
  43. Robinson, *Terms of Order*, 3.
  44. Sibree, *PH*, 349, 350.
  45. *Ibid.*, 352.
  46. Brown and Hodgson, *LPR*, 163.
  47. *Ibid.*, 326.
  48. *Ibid.*, 160.
  49. *Ibid.*, 162.
  50. Sibree, *PH*, 338.
  51. Brown and Hodgson, *LPR*, 366.
  52. Sibree, *PH*, 216, 364.
  53. *Ibid.*, 352, 216.
  54. Brown and Hodgson, *LPR*, 360.
  55. In his comments on Hegel's account of pantheism, Peter Park notes that Hegel feels obliged to distinguish his own totalisation from pantheism. See Peter Park, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon, 1780–1830* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 146).
  56. Sibree, *PH*, 215; Brown and Hodgson, *LPR*, 364.
  57. Brown and Hodgson, *LPR*, 364.
  58. *Ibid.*, 356.
  59. *Ibid.*, 356.
  60. Sibree, *PH*, 345.
  61. On severity, see Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* [1981] (London: Verso, 2009), 55–62, 160–65.
  62. Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), e.g. 116.