

FANON AND RECOGNITION:
FINDING HEGELIAN
SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS
THROUGH STRUGGLE



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ABSTRACT

This paper applies Hegel's master-slave dialectic to Fanon's issue of pseudo-recognition discussed in the essay, "The Negro and Recognition," as a way of establishing a form of self-consciousness. I begin the paper by arguing that in the Hegelian dialectic establishing a self-consciousness is an essential prerequisite to Fanon's goal of mutual subject-recognition. I then argue that given the position of black people as slaves within the master-slave dialectic, they are denied the recognition required to attain being in-itself for-itself, which in reality can only be obtained if black people establish self-consciousness on their own terms. I then make the case that this required self-consciousness can only be obtained through struggle, essentially reversing the stages of the dialectic to create a new master/slave relation. In particular, I argue that this moment of struggle provides a moment of proto-recognition which can be used to build a new mutual subject-recognition. I then theorize on what form this new relation must take, making the case that it must be a relation where the categories of master and slave are made irrelevant, and where all subjects are capable of mutual recognition.



I. INTRODUCTION

Fundamental to any self-consciousness is the desire for recognition, for without recognition self-consciousness can never truly be completed. What makes the desire for recognition even more crucial is the fact that it inherently depends upon the other, who must be reckoned with in order to attain recognition. Naturally, the fact that recognition is both so desired and inherently intersubjective leads to conflict. For Georg Hegel, this took the form of the master/slave dialectic, a struggle for control over the other which forces one subject, the slave, to engage in a one-way recognition of the other subject, the master. By the end of this dialectic, the slave's desire for recognition—the key component of establishing a self-consciousness—is left unsatisfied. It is the slave's situation that Frantz Fanon applies to the condition of black people in his time. Unlike Hegel's analysis of its formation, Fanon's analysis focuses on the already-established master/slave relation, wherein black people have been forced into a one-way recognition of white people. Fanon finds that the current situation is devoid of the life or death struggle mentioned by Hegel, seemingly resolved by the recognition of the black slave by the white master. Yet, as Fanon notes, this form of recognition is insincere. It lacks the kind of struggle that allows for true self-consciousness to be formed, a prerequisite for Fanon's ultimate goal of mutual subject-recognition. While Hegel's account might lack Fanon's conception of pseudo-recognition, his analysis of how the master/slave dialectic is established provides insight into this issue of struggle and building a self-consciousness. I argue that with a Hegelian historical view of the dialectic, it becomes clear that self-consciousness can be built through struggle, thereby solving Fanon's problem of mutual recognition.

II. THE CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY FOR MUTUAL RECOGNITION

As essential as recognition is, without a true self-consciousness it can only be achieved on white people's terms (i.e. pseudo-recognition), as opposed to something truly free and independent. Thus, in order to achieve recognition, one must first achieve a self-consciousness. For both Fanon and Hegel, this involves an intersubjective struggle, something that Fanon argues did not occur with white pseudo-recognition. Rather, as Fanon describes, "One day the White Master, *without conflict*, recognized the Negro slave."¹ This lack of conflict gives all the power of recognition to the white master, never giving the black

1 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (Pluto Press, 1986), 169.

slave a chance to define the specifics of the relation. This one-sidedness makes the recognition ultimately insufficient, as it is not within the power of the master to unilaterally grant essentiality to the slave. Essentiality for both parties is something that can only come through a truly reciprocal recognition. It is not merely an issue of one side granting recognition to the other. Rather, as Fanon says, “the former slave wants to *make himself recognized*.”² It is only through the self-assertion of both parties that true mutual recognition can arise.

Similarly, any recognition of the slave in which the category of master still exists is ultimately illusory. The two classes would not exist in a relation truly built out of mutual recognition, as there would be no distinction between the one who provides recognition (the slave) and the one who receives it (the master). While it might seem as though white people see black people as fellow members of the master class, such a statement is contradictory. The very concept of a master depends wholly on the existence of a slave. As it stands, white pseudo-recognition is not based on a recognition of black people as full beings in and of themselves. Such recognition cannot exist as long as black people are held as slaves within the relation, since slaves are denied self-consciousness in favor of negating themselves for the master. In doing so, the slaves are left as mere subjects, incapable of mutual subject recognition. While subjecthood might be a prerequisite for self-consciousness, it is not the crucial aspect that one distinguishes when recognizing the other. Recognition specifically entails recognizing the other as a fellow self-consciousness, as opposed to another subject. Hegel explains that self-consciousness comes “*out of itself*.”³ Upon reaching the initial, incomplete stage of self-consciousness—which is truthfully more a self-certainty made “uncertain” by an intersubjective encounter than anything else—one sees parallels of themselves in the other, and vice versa. Crucially, this process is only possible through reference to one’s own self-consciousness, hence why a self-consciousness loses itself in seeing the similarities of the other. Therefore, in order to both recognize and be recognized in Hegel’s view of the dialectic, one requires self-consciousness. For black people, true being in and of itself will only be possible if they can establish self-consciousness on their own terms. Mere subjecthood is not enough.

III. THE HISTORICAL-METAPHORICAL DIALECTIC

Given the intractability of recognition on white terms, I maintain that the only solution is to build a self-consciousness through struggle. Specifically, struggle in the sense of the initial battle for dominance

2 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 169.

3 G.W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 1977), 111.



between the two subjects in the master/slave dialectic. To engage this form of struggle, we must go back to the stage that precedes the establishment of the master/slave relation, thereby undoing the relation as established. It is important to note that this conception of the master/slave relation is quite different from that of Fanon's. Fanon saw the master/slave dialectic as something non-historical, instead of the present and immediate interactions between individuals. In contrast, Hegel viewed the master/slave dialectic as something historical in nature—in that it is part of a dialectical procession of history—with the end goal of full and mutual recognition (the same goal as Fanon's). Thus, I believe the notion of revisiting the point prior to the establishment of the master/slave dialectic should be taken in both a metaphorical and historical sense. It is historical in the sense that the current relation is one built upon a struggle since decided, providing a historical context to the master/slave relation as it is. A purely immediate dialectic—without context as to why and how the relation developed the way it did—would imply an ongoing life-or-death struggle between the various individuals encountering each other. Naturally, such a thing would be impossible since the very relation is only established through one side eventually surrendering and agreeing to negate themselves in exchange for keeping their life. Meanwhile, as Fanon himself shows, there is very strict master/slave relation ingrained in society, an implication that the struggle has already ended. Given this historical context, I mean “struggle” in a metaphorical sense; it does not literally involve going back and changing history.

The goal of this metaphorical-historical analysis of the dialectic is not to specifically answer how and why the original relation arose, which is what a purely historical analysis would imply. This is not to say that I think a historical analysis of the oppression inflicted on black people would not be interesting or fruitful. Indeed, such a historical account could prove useful in strategizing how to correct the various injustices of racism and colonialism. However, a historical analysis is nonetheless a distinct task from the struggle to gain recognition. It cannot serve as a substitute for action, which must be rooted in the present. The fact that the master/slave dialectic carries into the present is exactly why the “turning back” is metaphorical. It does not involve going back in time to prevent the relation from forming, but rather relates to moving backwards in the dialectic. Such a movement merely requires knowledge of how the relation exists in the present, as struggle comes before the establishment of relations. Thus, by initiating struggle through undermining these relations, one returns to the prior stage of the dialectic, metaphorically “before” the establishment of the historical relation.

IV. THE AIM OF STRUGGLE

This strategy of struggle and subversion might seem strange, given how I have already established that self-consciousness is only possible through mutual recognition, whereas a struggle would seem to be inherently one-sided. However, the truth of the matter is that a form of recognition between both parties does occur during the stage of struggle. In essence, an unstable form of proto-recognition exists for a fleeting moment during the initial struggle—born from the meeting of the subjects—where in Hegel’s view, they “recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another.”⁴ Thus, the aim of reversing the stages of the dialectic via struggle is to revisit this moment, seizing upon this form of self-consciousness as a means of forcing the master to recognize the slave. This form of self-consciousness (i.e. a self-certainty which has encountered another and all the desire for recognition that comes with it) might be unresolved, especially given that rests in the midst of life-or-death struggle. However, I would argue that it remains a self-consciousness independent from white self-consciousness or pseudo-recognition. This form of self-consciousness is also not purely defined through the master class, nor does it depend on the adoption of master class characteristics or practices. It thereby avoids the problem of constant hierarchy (where individuals of the slave class constantly struggle to prove that they are superior or more master-like than each other, and thereby above others in the hierarchy) that Fanon observes in Antillean society. In abandoning this dependence, a new self-consciousness based on a metaphorical-historical reversal demolishes the false recognition that Fanon criticizes and instead creates a recognition based upon a life-or-death struggle for freedom. Through this struggle, the existing categories of master and slave are dissolved to reset the relations altogether, thereby eliminating any need to assimilate into the master class.

While Fanon does not have a metaphorical historical view of the dialectic, he nonetheless recognizes the merits of this struggle. Fanon argues that black people in America who still face explicit political, economic, and social oppression are more likely to achieve true freedom in the future than French black people, who are ostensibly equal. Because French black people are in a sense lulled into acceptance of their unequal position through pseudo-recognition by whites, they have a self-consciousness defined on white terms. In contrast, American black people have a self-consciousness of themselves as slaves, and thereby of themselves as strugglers against oppression.⁵ In this

4 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 112.

5 Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, 177.



distinction, the importance of holding a self-consciousness becomes clear. The lack of self-consciousness and struggle is, in a sense, the main obstruction to French black people achieving recognition through liberation. Black people need not depend upon whites for their self-consciousness. Black Americans have been able to develop a strong self-consciousness, even in the face—or indeed as a consequence—of immense and explicit discrimination. Fanon’s comments here also provide insight into the material form that a struggle to achieve self-consciousness and mutual recognition might take, a point that Hegel’s account of the master/slave dialectic does not explore. Based on Fanon’s examples, it seems that struggle must involve a conscious and organized political element, as is the case with the ongoing civil rights movement in America. Such a form of struggle would seem to provide a chance for the slave to determine their own actions and force the master to confront the slave as another self-consciousness. Whatever its form, the purpose of struggle must be to build a self-consciousness capable of asserting itself, forcing the master to recognize the slave.

V. THE MASTER CLASS AS A DEAD-END AND INDEPENDENT CONSCIOUSNESS

Some might argue that this struggle for recognition is not the best recourse for black people. This line of reasoning argues that black people would benefit from avoiding the countless injustices from their slave-hood, which Fanon notes are present in even ostensibly equal countries, such as France, and bring very real physical and mental harm. At the same time, however, I find it highly questionable that ascending into the master class would solve the problems of recognition and self-consciousness in a satisfactory manner. Perhaps the most pressing issue is that if there is no subject to act as a standing negation, then achieving being would be seemingly impossible. Yet, even if being was somehow gained, there is still the fact that the master role is a dead-end, dialectically speaking. While this argument is correct in observing this role as a dead-end for consciousness, it misunderstands the aim of struggle. The goal is not to become recognized as fellow members of the master class. Indeed, as this line of reasoning rightfully points out, ascension into the master class is an inherently contradictory project, as masters cannot exist without slaves. Furthermore, supposed ascension into the master class is the very situation French black people experienced when awarded full rights, a situation that Fanon clearly argues does not provide any actual recognition. No, the true goal of the metaphorical-historical analysis I advance in this paper is to permanently demolish the relation altogether, and instead establish a system of true full recognition, one without masters and slaves.

How such a system might be organized is hard to predict, but it is clear that self-consciousness will be needed to form a base for recognition, something which can only be done satisfactorily through struggle. The master class being a dead-end only further indicates that dependence upon them (in the sense of consciousness) is illusory, and that struggle is the only way forward. Struggle has the capacity to be successful because slaves are the ones who truly hold the capacity to dialectically advance through an independent self-consciousness, unlike the master who will forever be dependent upon the self-negation of the slave. However, even if Fanon's problem was avoided and black people were able to ascend into the master class without issue, I believe this development would still be counterproductive. While they do not face the same gross injustices and oppression of the slave class, the master class is an inherently limited, dead-end form of self-consciousness. In assimilation into the master class, the slave loses their status as a truly independent consciousness, which Hegel identifies as crucial for dialectical progression. Rather, Hegel argues that it is the slave's forced inwardness that allows them to become an independent consciousness.⁶ For the purposes of universal recognition, master-hood is not a desirable position. Rather, the goal should be to make the categories of master and slave entirely irrelevant, so that each individual's self-consciousness may be fully recognized.

Of course, if the slave is the one who gains an independent consciousness via fear and work, then one must wonder why black people have not already utilized this independence to establish themselves as fully recognized subjects. After all, independence would naturally seem to imply a capacity to control one's place in the world. However, black people have not demolished the master/slave relation and Fanon's goal system of mutual recognition has not been established, because it is hard to utilize this independence. For example, one could mistakenly see this independent consciousness as some form of return to a prelapsarian "pure" black identity. Fanon uses the example of drawing from great black civilizations of the past as one of the potential reactions to this lack of self-consciousness. However, Fanon rightfully notes that this form of self-consciousness is essentially meaningless. As great as those civilizations might have been, they have no real continuity with black people today, who are more a product of centuries of colonialism and colonial imposition of values than any ancient empires.⁷ Furthermore, independent consciousness is not the same thing as self-consciousness. It is only through being for another that independent consciousness can exist, as it is something which arises only in the slave, who is by definition,

6 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 117.

7 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 99-100.

for another. Independent consciousness in that sense can only exist in conditions that are antithetical to self-consciousness. Independence alone is ultimately insufficient for developing a self-consciousness, as it is only through struggle that independence can be redirected to the construction of self-consciousness.

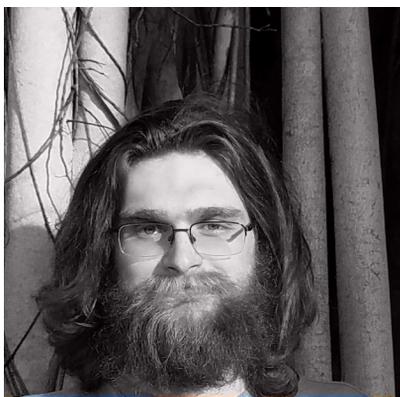
VI. STRUGGLE AND UNDOING HISTORY

This issue of the black subject as a product of historical colonialism is potentially problematic for a liberating struggle which seeks to demolish existing social relations and establish an entirely new black self-consciousness. Indeed, so many centuries of colonialism cannot simply be erased. Some might argue that even a consciousness formed through struggle is, in a sense, defined through white terms, as the act of struggle itself is only possible due to the historical context that birthed the very categories of black and white. Furthermore, although those who struggle might want to demolish the relations of history, the fact remains that all individual consciousness, regardless of position within the relation, has been intrinsically shaped by the existing relation by virtue of living in it. Therefore, it seems any attempt to create a new self-consciousness would require its subjects to be ahistorical. Such a project, especially in relation to a historical dialectic, would likely fail since it would sever any continuity of subjects, much in the way the white pseudo-recognition critiqued by Fanon does. Struggle involves building a new “we” identity that recognizes the past and seeks to change it, throwing off the imposed values of the colonizers in order to provide room for the new independent self-consciousness. It does not sever the continuity but rather uses the past relation as a foundation for improvement.

VII. CONCLUSION

It is true that developing this self-consciousness will be difficult. Overturning centuries of oppression has not been and will never be easy. While it might be challenging to demolish such a massive legacy, that is all the more reason to do so. If given the choice between continued slavery for all eternity or a chance at freedom, it seems more than reasonable to take the risk. After all, it is through conflict and risk that one can achieve what Fanon calls “human reality in and of itself,” a concept which I would consider inherently intertwined with a mutual subject-recognition.⁸ Hegel also follows a similar line of thinking, arguing that one who has not risked their life may be a person, but has not fully attained the truth of their self-consciousness. In any case, it is only through struggle can the dialectic be advanced and true mutual recognition achieved.

8 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 170.



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