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Colonial Slavery, the Lord-Bondsman Dialectic, and the St Louis Hegelians

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Abstract

Hegel's lord-bondsman dialectic has been of especially great interest to progressive and radical Hegelians—broadly speaking, politically left-leaning interpreters of Hegel who object to certain social hierarchies and demand their abolition. They read Hegel as giving an account of how 'lordship' over others is an inherently unstable and unsatisfying social formation, even for its supposed beneficiaries. Marxists, feminists and post-colonial theorists have all found inspiration in Hegel's analysis of the lord and bondsman by applying it to concrete relations of oppression, such as capitalism, patriarchy, or racism. In contrast, recent scholarship on Hegel's views on race and colonialism has cast doubt on whether his systematic political philosophy and philosophy of history can be of similar use to progressives. Hegel was undeniably a Eurocentric thinker, but philosophers like Robert Bernasconi and Alison Stone have convincingly shown that he was also a racist and a defender of colonialism. Crucially, however, few of the scholars who write on Hegel's pro-colonialism have analysed this feature of Hegel's thought in connection with the lord-bondsman dialectic. In this article, I argue for two connected theses. First, I argue that contrary to the hopes of some progressive defenders of Hegel, we cannot easily separate the lord-bondsman dialectic from Hegel's pro-colonialism. This is because Hegel himself appealed to the lord-bondsman dialectic to argue that colonial slavery educated its victims, and could therefore be temporarily justified. Second, I argue that this pro-colonial reading of the dialectic, though largely ignored by contemporary interpreters, was in fact recognized and embraced by a group of Hegelians in North America known as the St Louis Hegelians. They used the lord-bondsman dialectic as a basis for a qualified defence of pre-Civil War American slavery.

I. Introduction

The dialectic of the lord and bondsman is arguably the most celebrated argument in G.W.F. Hegel's corpus. In it, Hegel describes a primitive consciousness

becoming the 'bondsman' of a 'lord' who compels him to labour. In a dramatic reversal, Hegel claims that each party of this relationship is the opposite of what he thinks he is. The lord, Hegel argues, is made into a sad and dependent figure, while the bondsman's experience of serving the lord sets the stage for his eventually becoming a 'truly independent consciousness' (*PhG*: ¶193).[1]

The lord-bondsman dialectic has been of especially great interest to progressive and radical Hegelians—broadly speaking, politically left-leaning interpreters of Hegel who object to certain social hierarchies and demand their abolition. They read Hegel as giving an account of how 'lordship' over others is an inherently unstable and unsatisfying social formation, even for its supposed beneficiaries. Marxists (Kojève 1947/1980; Lukács 1948/1975), feminists (Beauvoir 1949/2011), and post-colonial theorists (Fanon 1952; Buck-Morss 2000) have all found inspiration in Hegel's analysis of the lord and bondsman by applying it to concrete relations of oppression, such as capitalism, patriarchy or colonialism.

In contrast, recent scholarship on Hegel's views on race and colonialism has cast doubt on whether his systematic political philosophy and philosophy of history can be of similar use to progressives. Hegel was undeniably a Eurocentric thinker, but philosophers like Robert Bernasconi (1998) and Alison Stone (2020) have convincingly shown that he was also a racist and a defender of colonialism. Crucially, however, few of the scholars who write on Hegel's pro-colonialism have analysed this feature of Hegel's thought in connection with the lord-bondsman dialectic. Most of the existing treatments of this topic are brief. Daniel James and Franz Knappik (2021, 2023: 22–23) briefly suggest that the lord-bondsman dialectic may be connected to Hegel's pro-colonialism, and while Stone also considers this possibility in a footnote, she leaves it unexplored (2020: 267, n. 9). Thus, while progressive Hegelians may concede that Hegel's views on race and colonialism were misguided, they may still argue that the lord-bondsman dialectic remains uncontaminated by his racism and pro-colonialism.

In this essay, I will argue for two connected theses. First, I will show that contrary to the hopes of some progressive defenders of Hegel, we cannot easily separate the lord-bondsman dialectic from Hegel's pro-colonialism. Hegel himself appealed to the lord-bondsman dialectic to argue that colonial slavery *educated* its victims, and could therefore be temporarily justified. Second, I will argue that this pro-colonial reading of the dialectic, though largely ignored by contemporary interpreters, was in fact recognized and embraced by a group of Hegelians in North America. They used the lord-bondsman dialectic as a basis for a qualified defence of pre-Civil War American slavery.

For my first thesis, I will show that Hegel used the arguments of the lord-bondsman dialectic to defend colonial slavery. By specifically *colonial* slavery, I mean slavery perpetrated by Europeans and people of European descent in the modern era.[2] Hegel held, at least in his later writings, that one lesson of the lord-

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bondsman dialectic was that though lordship was a social formation inconsistent with the highest forms of civilization, the bondage of 'primitive' peoples was still necessary for spiritual education. Hegel, I will argue, believed both that lordship has shortcomings, but also that bondage has immense benefits—and he applied this argument to defend colonial slavery.

For my second thesis, I will show that the pro-colonial use of the lord-bondsman dialectic did not die with Hegel: it was taken up by Hegel's early followers in the United States. The St Louis Hegelians, a group of American intellectuals writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, correctly identified Hegel as a fellow apologist for slavery on the basis of the lord-bondsman dialectic, and applied his defence of slavery to the American context. It is easy for progressives to focus on Hegel's influence on, for example, post-colonial or Marxist philosophy when evaluating his intellectual legacy. But if my argument is successful, we must recognize a darker strand to the reception of the lord-bondsman dialectic: his contribution to American apologetics for slavery.

My hope is that this two-part argument will contribute to the study of Hegel's philosophical account of slavery and colonialism, but also to its reception. If I am right, Hegel himself was led to his apologia for colonial slavery through the lord-bondsman dialectic; and this apologia was picked up by Hegel's early American followers, influencing the politics of slavery and abolitionism long after his death. I suggest, then, that neither Hegel's own account of the lord-bondsman dialectic nor its intellectual legacy can be read as unmarred by Hegel's pro-colonialism.

In section II, I give an overview of the central arguments of the lord-bondsman dialectic. In section III, I present the dominant 'progressive' reading of the political implications of the dialectic. In section IV, I argue for my first thesis: that Hegel himself used the dialectic as a part of his apologia for colonial slavery. In section V, I argue for my second thesis: that Hegel's pro-colonial treatment of the lord-bondsman dialectic was picked up by his early American followers.

II. Lordship and bondage

To understand the lord-bondsman dialectic, we must first understand the general project of the book in which it first appears: the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The project of the *Phenomenology* is to detail the development of human consciousness toward the 'standpoint of true Science' (*PhG*: ¶5). Hegel believes this standpoint can only come into being as 'the product of a widespread upheaval in various forms of culture, the prize at the end of a complicated, tortuous path' (*PhG*: ¶12). This 'tortuous path' must first pass through a variety of flawed 'patterns of consciousness' (*PhG*: ¶89), each of which is a necessary step in the ultimate realization of the standpoint of true science.[3] Hegel calls these patterns of consciousness of a human

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community its 'Spirit' (*Geist*). By imposing such a vindicatory narrative on patterns of consciousness in our past, Hegel hopes that we can reconcile ourselves with the (apparent) missteps and irrationalities of history and come to see them as necessary steps on the way to the standpoint of 'true science'.

The lord-bondsman dialectic is an early phase in Hegel's narrative of the developing human Spirit. At this stage in the *Phenomenology*, the consciousness that Hegel's narrative follows has tried and failed to gain secure knowledge of the external world. In response to this failure, he turns his attention to self-consciousness: knowledge of what he, as a thinking subject, is truly like. Hegel believes self-consciousness to require external validation of one's status as a free and independent agent—and achieving this validation will require practical engagement with the world.

In the beginning of the struggle for self-consciousness, consciousness desires the negation of external objects, and seeks to destroy them to prove its independence (*PhG*: ¶¶168–75); when he realizes the shortcomings of desire, he engages in a life-and-death struggle with another consciousness to gain recognition (*PhG*: ¶¶185–89); finally, the victor of the struggle becomes lord, the loser bondsman (*PhG*: ¶¶190–96). This third phase will be my focus here.

'Bondage', for Hegel, is a peculiar form of oppression defined by two features: it involves *unequal recognition* and *forced labour*. Recognition, for Hegel, requires the acknowledgement of another's subjectivity as a limiting factor on one's practical reasoning. The bondsman recognizes the lord as something that he 'cannot utilise for its own purposes, if that object does not of its own accord do what the first does to it' (*PhG*: ¶182). But the lord uses the bondsman entirely 'for his own purposes'. Thus, the recognition between him and the bondsman is necessarily 'one-sided and unequal' (*PhG*: ¶191).

The lord specifically uses the bondsman by forcing him to labour. By winning the life-and-death struggle, the lord has made the bondsman fear death, and uses this fear to compel him to labour on his behalf. The bondsman, as a consequence, experiences three things that the lord does not: he learns to fear death, to obey external discipline, and to express himself through labouring on objects in the external world.[4]

Hegel argues that the relationship between lord and bondsman involves a dramatic reversal of fortunes: it is the lord who is stuck in a spiritual dead end, while the bondsman is now poised to become a 'truly independent consciousness' (*PhG*: ¶193). We may, then, distinguish two theses Hegel argues for: one about the shortcomings of lordship (which I will call the *Lord-Thesis*), and another about the benefits of bondage (which I will call the *Bondsman-Thesis*).

First, consider Hegel's analysis of the lord. He suggests that because bondage necessarily involves unequal recognition, it will not grant the lord true self-consciousness. Without seeing his servant as a subject capable of making his

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own choices, the 'recognition' the lord receives will be unsatisfying: recognition, to be valuable, must be freely given (*PhG*: ¶¶191–92). He concludes that the lord must set the bondsman free and recognize him in order to achieve self-consciousness. Hegel further generalizes this conclusion and claims that self-consciousness will finally be satisfied only in a community of *mutual recognition*, where no relations of lordship and bondage remain (*PhG*: ¶177). Hegel's full account of the shortcomings of lordship is more complex than the sketch I have presented here; but we can simplify his key claim about the lord into the following thesis:

> Lord-Thesis: If the lord retains his power over the bondsman, then he cannot reach self-consciousness.

Now, consider the bondsman. Hegel argues that the bondsman being seized by 'the feeling of absolute power' marks the 'beginning of wisdom' (*PhG*: ¶195). Being forced to labour by the lord, Hegel suggests, functions as an (unintentional) education.

Labouring under the lord, Hegel argues, is 'desire held in check'—and he celebrates the fact that it prevents the bondsman from merely following his 'self-will'. Self-will, as Hegel briefly defines it, is a 'freedom which entrenches itself in some particularity' (*PhG*: ¶199) defined by the consciousness having a 'mind of [his] own' (*PhG*: ¶195). Such a conception of freedom, according to Hegel, remains 'enmeshed in servitude' (*PhG*: ¶195). Hegel's lectures on the lord-bondsman relation clarify his critique of the self-will:

> Through obedience one learns to command. This means to acquire power over the contingency of one's desires, and the true command consists in what is just and rational […] [In this obedience] there is a negation of inner self-seeking, and with this negation of particularity the will emerges as a universal.[5] (*SG* [1827/28, Erdmann]: 192)

As this passage shows, part of the value of bondage for Hegel follows from the fact that it breaks the bondsman's ability to pursue what he happens to desire, and thus allows him to develop 'power over the contingency' of his immediate inclinations. Following the external will of the lord trains the bondsman in constraining his self-will; and this training will become useful when he must eventually follow the dictates of reason and justice. We may call this a kind of *education* (*Bildung*) in Hegel's sense, since it is a step toward the full development of the human Spirit. For bondage to be educative, however, some additional conditions have to be met. Exactly what these conditions are is not always clear: but Hegel seems to believe that educative bondage must involve fear of death, external discipline, and labour on the external world. For now, I will simply refer to any relation of unequal recognition and forced labour that Hegel recognizes as educative (for whatever reason) as

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adequate bondage. Again, we can simplify Hegel's central claim about the bondsman into the following thesis:

> Bondsman-Thesis: If the bondsman has not experienced adequate bondage, then he is unable to reach self-consciousness.

The Bondsman-Thesis states that not only is the experience of adequate bondage contingently helpful for the education of the bondsman, but that it is *necessary* for such growth. As I will show, Hegel used this thesis to defend colonial slavery, and it inspired his American followers to do the same.

III. Progressive interpretations of the dialectic

Perhaps the dominant readings of Hegel's argument, at least since Alexandre Kojève's (1947/1980) influential lectures on Hegel, have been given by progressives. In addition to Marxists like Kojève and György Lukács (1948/1975), feminists (Beauvoir 1949/2011: 90) and post-colonial thinkers (Fanon 1952; Buck-Morss 2000) have all found inspiration in Hegel's argument.

These progressive readings differ from one another in various ways. However, they tend to share at least two aspects. First, they emphasize Hegel's Lord-Thesis and the related ideal of mutual recognition. Second, they argue that modern Western society is still marked by lordship and bondage, and apply Hegel's argument even to these 'advanced' civilizations. Since universal self-consciousness (and consequently, universal freedom) is inconsistent with the persistence of lordship, they argue for its abolition; and since they believe that modern Western society is still marked by such lordship, they argue that radical change is necessary to make our society one of mutual recognition.

Some brief examples should suffice to show the ubiquity of this type of interpretation. Alexandre Kojéve claims that 'man can be fully realised and revealed' only through 'realising a universal Recognition' (1947/1980: 40), but believes that capitalism is incompatible with such recognition (1947/1980: 60). Simone de Beauvoir argues that the lord-bondsman dialectic applies 'much better to the relation of man and woman', and argues that the demands of feminism are demands to be 'recognized as existents by the same right as men' (1949/2011: 90). Finally, Frantz Fanon, though he rejects aspects of the lord-bondsman dialectic as an adequate description of colonialism, argues that the injustice faced by racialized minorities can be explained as a failure of mutual recognition, for the black man is 'unable ever to be sure whether the white man considers him consciousness in-itself-for-itself' (1952: 173). Frederick Beiser captures the spirit of such progressive readings when he argues that 'the entire dialectic' of the lord

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and bondsman is 'really *only* an elaborate defense' of Rousseau's famous dictum 'He who believes himself a master of others is more slave than they' (2005: 190, my emphasis).

Of course, despite their focus on the shortcomings of lordship, the progressive Hegelians have not entirely ignored the Bondsman-Thesis.[6] Since they apply the lord-bondsman dialectic to modern relations of oppression, the Bondsman-Thesis takes on a revolutionary meaning. According to this reading, the bondage of oppressed groups in modern Western society (proletarians, women, racialized minorities, etc.) educates them to a state of consciousness inaccessible to their oppressors, and thereby paves the way for an overthrow of the existing system. On this reading, the Bondsman-Thesis serves as a prediction of how bondage will eventually come to an end: not through the benevolence of lords, but through the developed consciousness of bondsmen.

It should be noted that many of the progressives writing on the lord-bondsman dialectic do not take themselves to be presenting interpretations of Hegel's own full position, but making arguments inspired by aspects of the dialectic.[7] But due to the influence of these progressive utilizations of Hegel's argument, it is commonly assumed that Hegel himself wrote the Lord-Bondsman dialectic with progressive intentions.[8] Some have gone as far as attributing an attitude of 'revolutionary radicalism' as the central motivation driving Hegel into writing the dialectic.[9]

I will argue that the picture of the dialectic we receive from Hegel's progressive interpreters is one-sided. Such interpretations are not *entirely* mistaken. The Lord-Thesis does lead Hegel to conclude that various forms of bondage are inconsistent with higher levels of human development. But though Hegel was indeed a critic of lordship in certain contexts, he also believed bondage to be a necessary phase in the development of all 'primitive' cultures: a conclusion he derived from the Bondsman-Thesis. Though Hegel believed all forms of unequal recognition should disappear eventually, he was a conservative regarding demands for their abolition; for he believed they could educate their victims.

IV. The lord-bondsman dialectic and colonial slavery

In this section I argue that Hegel accepted the premises and conclusion of something like the following argument:

> P1: If any culture has not experienced adequate bondage, then they are unable to reach self-consciousness.
>
> P2: If any culture is unable to reach self-consciousness and they lack adequate experience of bondage, then their bondage is temporarily desirable.

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P3: Africans belong to a culture that has not experienced adequate bondage.

C: The bondage of Africans is temporarily desirable. (From P1, P2, and P3)

P1 is a descriptive claim derived from the Bondsman-Thesis regarding the necessity of bondage as a component of education; P2 is a normative claim about the all-things-considered desirability of such an education; and P3 applies this logic specifically to African peoples.

It is important to note that the evidence I use to attribute each premise to Hegel is not from the *Phenomenology*. Instead, I draw mostly from Hegel's later writings, as well as transcripts of his lectures given after the publication of the *Phenomenology*. Though I do not believe there are compelling reasons for thinking that Hegel changed his mind, I will not tackle this question here. My conclusion, then, is limited: I will argue that Hegel at least *came to argue* that the lord-bondsman dialectic could show us why colonial slavery was desirable in certain times and places.

IV. i. P1

Note that P1 is just a version of the Bondsman-Thesis ('If the bondsman has not experienced adequate bondage, then he is unable to reach self-consciousness'), but where the bondsman is substituted for 'any culture'. By a 'culture', I take Hegel to mean any relatively cohesive social group with its own distinctive form of Spirit.[10] Attributing P1 to Hegel, then, relies on a *socio-historical* reading of the dialectic.[11] This kind of reading interprets the dialectic as a historical allegory, the characters of which correspond roughly to actually existing human groups. The progressive interpreters of the dialectic, as well as many contemporary anglophone readers of the *Phenomenology,* tend to take up such a reading.[12] However, the socio-historical reading is controversial. There are at least two serious challenges to which any proponent of this reading must respond.

First, some interpreters argue that the various patterns of consciousness outlined in the *Phenomenology* should not be read as corresponding to any historical moments.[13] Instead, they argue, the movement Hegel describes is purely logical: that is, it is a description of the path which Spirit *should have* taken based solely on logical relations between different patterns of consciousness. Second, other interpreters may posit that Hegel never intended his argument to be applied to entire *cultures*.[14] It is difficult to see how Hegel might transpose his discussion of individual characters like the lord and bondsman to entire heterogenous communities. A more charitable reading, then, would apply the lessons of the lord-bondsman dialectic only to *individual* development.

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It is beyond the scope of this article to resolve the conflict between various interpretations of the overall project of the *Phenomenology*. It suffices for my purposes to show that Hegel came to see the section on Lordship and Bondage as having historical implications; and that he applied this argument to entire cultures, not just to individuals.

In the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, Hegel reasserts the Bondsman-Thesis in familiar terms: 'the bondsman works off his individual will and self-will in the service of the master' and thus 'makes a beginning of wisdom' (*PM*: §435). But his lectures on this section go into more detail about the socio-historical implications of the Bondsman-Thesis:

> True freedom does not mean that the arbitrary will is let loose or allowed free rein. The will in the determination of universality is now the other will, which self-consciousness obeys. […] To educate an individual means nothing other than to cultivate him through obedience, so that he no longer obeys any external will. […] Through obedience the particular will becomes this universal will. Likewise, peoples [*Völker*] must first pass through a great oppression until they acquire sufficient power and ability to free themselves. Then they know that they are inherently free. (*SG* [1827/28, Erdmann]: 192–93)

In this passage, Hegel reiterates his critique of the self-will (which he here refers to as the 'arbitrary will').[15] He then makes an explicitly socio-historical argument on the basis of this critique: the bondsman's predicament, he argues, corresponds to the development of 'peoples', all of whom must experience a 'great oppression' to achieve self-consciousness of their freedom. Hegel, then, treats the bondsman's predicament as corresponding to actual historical experience, not just of individuals but of cultures: his use of the word 'peoples [*Völker*]' confirms this.

A defender of Hegel might insist that his mention of a 'great oppression' does not necessarily refer to anything like slavery: it might refer, for example, only to feudalism.[16] I might be accused of relying on the common mistranslation of Hegel's lord and bondsman (*Herr* and *Knecht*) to 'master' and 'slave'.

However, Hegel himself makes the connection between bondsmen and slaves. In his 1822 lectures on Subjective Spirit, he makes the following claim about Ancient Greece:

> The Greeks had not yet come to this form of self-consciousness. Slavery [*Sclaverei*] belongs to this standpoint; the relationship of domination between lord and bondsman [*Herrn und Knecht*]. […] All peoples had to pass through the standpoint of servitude, and can only thank the rod of discipline

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> that a self-consciousness has awakened in them, a self-consciousness of more than their mere individuality. (*SG* [1822, Hotho]: §352, 114; *GW* 25.1; cf. *R* [1822/23, Hotho]: §57, 823; *GW* 26.2)

Here, Hegel is explicit about applying the logic of the lord and bondsman ('Herr' and 'Knecht') to slavery ('Sclaverei'). He then concludes that similarly, the 'rod of discipline' that slavery exemplifies is the only way *any* people can achieve self-consciousness. We can conclude, then, that Hegel believed the argument of the lord-bondsman dialectic could be applied to slavery, not just to feudalism.

The above passages alone, however, are insufficient for establishing that Hegel used the lord-bondsman dialectic as an *apologia* for slavery. A defender of Hegel might argue that these passages are purely descriptive: Hegel merely states that slavery in fact educates its victims, but he does not endorse such an education as all-things-considered desirable. However, Hegel does discuss slavery in explicitly normative terms elsewhere.

IV. ii. P2

In my reconstruction of the argument, Hegel's normative stance toward slavery is articulated by P2: the claim that if any culture has failed to reach self-consciousness due to lacking the experience of an adequate form of bondage, then their bondage is temporarily *desirable*.

By some phenomenon being 'desirable', I simply mean that rational and virtuous agents should see its existence as on-balance good, and should support its continued existence through their actions and attitudes. Seeing some phenomenon as temporarily desirable, then, need not carry the connotation that there is *nothing* bad about it, or even that the people involved in its perpetuation are acting for the right reasons. I argue that Hegel did see slavery in certain epochs as desirable in this sense.

Hegel's normative attitude to slavery is most clearly expressed in the *Philosophy of Right*. In his discussion of slavery, Hegel considers an 'antinomy' between radically pro-and anti-slavery views. He then claims that this antinomy, 'like all antinomies, is based on formal thinking, which fixes upon and asserts the two moments of an Idea in separation from each other, so that both are lacking in truth' (*PR*: §57, 87). He argues that one flaw with the anti-slavery position is the following:

> [T]he claim that slavery [*Sklaverei*] is absolutely contrary to right is […] one-sided in as much as it regards the human beings as *by nature free*, or (and this amounts to the same thing) takes the concept as such in its immediacy, not the Idea, as the truth. (*PR*: §57; original emphasis)

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Lecturing on this paragraph, Hegel further explicates his position:

> Slavery falls into the transition from the natural state of humanity to the truly ethical [*Sittlichen*] state […] Here the injustice is valid, is here in its place, and is necessary for this epoch. (*R* [1822/23, Hotho]: §57, 823; *GW* 26.2)

Rhetorically, Hegel seems to be positioning himself as a *moderate* in both passages, caught between radical abolitionists on his left and proponents of a doctrine of natural slavery on his right. The radical opponent of slavery, Hegel argues, mistakes the end-state ('the Idea') of freedom with the current conditions required for its actualization ('the concept as such in its immediacy'). We can infer that Hegel does not believe slavery is 'absolutely contrary to right'; that he believed it could be 'valid' and 'necessary' in certain moments of human development (such as the 'natural state of humanity'); and that his own view lies somewhere between the radically pro- and anti-slavery positions.

The relation of the above argument to Hegel's discussion of the lord and bondsman is not difficult to see: he even cites the chapter on Lordship and Bondage in the section quoted above (*PR*: §57, 87). But here, Hegel is clearly not just making a descriptive claim: he argues that the education that slavery makes possible is valuable enough to make it a 'valid' and 'necessary' social formation in certain epochs—that is, a social formation the existence of which is on-balance desirable. Hegel might accept that it would be better if we *could* reach self-consciousness without bondage: but since he believes we cannot, bondage is temporarily desirable for those cultures who have not yet experienced it.

The progressive Hegelian might now concede that Hegel did assert both P1 and P2. But they might still argue that Hegel did not intend to apply this argument to *colonial* slavery. Nicholas A. Germana, for example, argues that Hegel's apparent apologia for slavery should be read as only 'referring to slavery as it existed in the ancient world' (2017: 100). However, there is considerable evidence to show that Hegel believes the argument derived from the Bondsman-Thesis could be applied to colonial subjects.

IV. iii. P3

P3 posits that African peoples specifically had not yet gone through *adequate* bondage, and would therefore have to experience it before they could ascend to the heights of self-consciousness already occupied by Europeans.[17]

In his 1822–23 lectures on the philosophy of world history, Hegel argues that 'Africa proper' (i.e. sub-Saharan Africa) 'remains in its placid, unmotivated, self-enclosed sensuality' (*W* [1822/23, Griesheim/Hotho]: 197) and therefore does not take part in world history. In the same lectures, he explicitly discusses African slavery:

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> As to the general condition of slavery, it is said that slavery ought not to exist, that it is intrinsically unjust in terms of its very concept. But this 'ought' expresses a subjective wish: it is not a historical 'ought', for what ought to be exists, and what exists ought to be. […] There is no slavery in the state that is rational; slavery is found only where spirit has not yet attained this point, thus only where the true idea in some aspects is still just an 'ought'. Slavery, therefore, is necessary at those stages where the state has not yet arrived at rationality. It is an element in the transition to a higher stage.[18] (*W* [1822/23, Griesheim/Hotho]: 197)

Though Hegel does not cite the lord-bondsman dialectic here, the argument he presents is strikingly familiar. Hegel's claim that Africans are stuck in a form of 'self-enclosed sensuality', echoes his critique of the self-will; he argues that 'the idea' of freedom becomes actualized only through cultivation, harkening back to *PR*: §57; and he argues that slavery is a necessary step in the transition to a 'higher stage' of human development. All of these claims echo the Bondsman-Thesis.

It might be argued that Hegel is only discussing slavery *within* Africa in the above passage. But in his 1830–31 lectures on the same topic, he explicitly discusses the enslavement of Africans by Europeans:

> Slavery is wrong in and for itself, for the essence of man is freedom, yet he must first become mature before he can be free. When the Europeans recognize that slavery is thoroughly wrong, they would act just as wrongly if they granted the Negro slaves instant liberty, as the French did at the time of the French Revolution; the terrible consequences were immediately apparent. The Europeans are therefore right to proceed slowly with the emancipation of the Negroes. (*W* [1830/31, Karl Hegel]: 1229–30; *GW*: 27.4; cf. *R* [1822/23, Hotho]: 662; *GW*: 26.2)

In this passage, Hegel again argues that African people must 'first become mature' before they can be free, and explicitly endorses gradualism regarding the abolition of slavery by *European* powers due to the supposed immaturity of African slaves. Here, then, Hegel is explicitly discussing *colonial* slavery: and the argument he makes in its defence is virtually identical to the one we have seen him present in his discussions of the lord and bondsman. All of this points to Hegel believing P3: that Africans had not yet experienced adequate bondage, and could thus be educated through European slavery.

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Hegel therefore affirms all of P1–P3: he believes that a 'great oppression' is necessary for the development of the self-consciousness of any culture; that, as a consequence, slavery is 'valid' and 'in its place' in certain contexts; and finally, that Africans are still stuck in their 'placid, unmotivated self-enclosed sensuality', and that enslavement by Europeans could therefore 'mature' them. Hegel, then, believed that the bondage of Africans by Europeans was temporarily desirable, and used the lord-bondsman dialectic to argue for this conclusion.

IV. iv. Summing up

That Hegel had racist and pro-colonial views is hardly an original claim. But this fact is rarely acknowledged by interpreters of the lord-bondsman dialectic. Yet each of the three premises I have attributed to Hegel are informed by this celebrated argument. The passages from Hegel's lectures on the *Encyclopaedia* explicitly concern the lord-bondsman dialectic; *PR:* §57 directly cites his discussion of the lord and bondsman; and the passages from Hegel's lectures on the Philosophy of World History rely on many of the same arguments and terms as his discussions of lordship and bondage.

The progressive interpretations of the lord-bondsman dialectic, then, are one-sided. They tend to make no reference to Hegel's own use of the dialectic as a component of his justification of colonial slavery. In section III, I argued that these progressive interpretations focus on the Lord-Thesis over the Bondsman-Thesis and apply the lessons of the dialectic to modern Western society. Each of these choices, I argue, rests on a mistake.

First, the lord-bondsman dialectic cannot be plausibly read as *only* an explication of the shortcomings of lordship. Such a reading is excessively lord-centric. Following the Lord-Thesis, Hegel does believe that lordship is inconsistent with higher stages of civilization. But following the Bondsman-Thesis, he also treats bondage as a necessary moment in human development, a point he uses to support his apologia for the enslavement of 'primitive' peoples.

Second, even those progressives whose accounts are not excessively lord-centric apply the lessons of the lord-bondsman dialectic to relationships between modern Westerners. But Hegel saw bondage as a distinctively *primitive* phenomenon, one which the European Spirit had already overcome in Ancient Greece and Rome.[19] As the passages quoted above show, at no point does Hegel apply the argument to modern relationships between, for example, men and women or capitalists and proletarians. In Hegel's hands, the Bondsman-Thesis only tells us how primitive cultures might lift themselves to the level already occupied by Western culture—it is not a prediction or demand for the overthrow of that culture.

This much should suffice as proof that Hegel came to utilize the arguments of the lord-bondsman dialectic in his apologetics for colonial slavery. If I am right,

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we cannot easily separate Hegel's pro-colonialism and racism from his account of lordship and bondage. It is, of course, still possible to accept various arguments Hegel presents in the course of his account of lordship and bondage without accepting any of P1–P3. Hegel's progressive followers have already pointed to parts of the dialectic that might be reconstructed as self-standing arguments: for example, his hypothesis that the 'lords' of the world are motivated to dominate because they seek recognition, rather than security or material wealth.[20] I am not arguing, then, that progressives should abandon the lord-bondsman dialectic altogether. However, we should still acknowledge that Hegel himself saw the lord-bondsman dialectic as motivating a qualified defence of slavery: and thus, attributing solely progressive intentions to his *own* understanding of the dialectic is implausible.

Even if Hegel's discussion of the lord and bondsman may have been used by him as support for his conservative defence of slavery, it might be argued that its *legacy* remains laudable. Whether Hegel would have approved or not, the lord-bondsman dialectic is now an influential text mostly among progressives. Can we not say, then, that the impact of the lord-bondsman dialectic has been broadly progressive, even if Hegel himself never intended such a result?

This brings us to my second thesis. I will argue that the historical reception of the lord-bondsman dialectic is less progressive than is usually acknowledged. The pro-colonial use of the dialectic did not die with Hegel: it found its way across the Atlantic, finding a home in St Louis, Missouri.

V. The St Louis Hegelians

The St Louis Hegelians were a group of intellectuals active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though their writings are now largely forgotten, many members of the group had considerable influence on the intellectual climate of their time as philosophers, publishers, educators and politicians (Flower and Murphy 1977).

The St Louis Hegelians largely positioned themselves as political moderates: in James A. Good's words, their political thought is most plausibly read as representing a 'Hegelian Center', distinct from both the radicalism of the Young Hegelians and the religious conservatism of the Right-Hegelians (Good 2006: 65–66). This moderation extended to their attitudes to questions surrounding slavery and its abolition. Most members of the St Louis Hegelians supported the abolition of slavery during the Civil War; but they were not radical abolitionists. Though they believed the time for emancipation had come by the time of the Civil War, they argued that slavery had not *always* been evil, since it had educated Africans to a level they could not have reached on their own.[21] Most importantly

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for my purposes, many St Louis Hegelians argued for their position on slavery through appealing to Hegel's lord-bondsman dialectic for support.

Let us begin with the St Louis Hegelians' reading of the Bondsman-Thesis. William Torrey Harris, arguably the leader of the group, articulates the pro-colonial reading of the Bondsman-Thesis explicitly. In his book *Hegel's Logic* (1890), Harris summarizes what he considers to be the key insights of Hegel's philosophy. In his approving summary of the Lordship and Bondage chapter of the *Phenomenology,* he states the following:

> [Slavery] is the lowest stadium of human history, but it has its uses in preparation for further developments. Hegel makes some interesting and valuable suggestions on this head, showing how [slavery] […] develops ethical insight. The slave mediates his will through another, and begins the discipline which may lift him above a worse servitude to his passions and appetites. (1890: 87–88)

Here, Harris correctly characterizes Hegel as arguing that slavery can develop 'ethical insight' by lifting the slave 'above a worse servitude to his passions and appetites' (that is, by breaking his self-will).

While the above passage only deals with slavery in abstract terms, Harris applies this Hegelian argument to American slavery in his writings on the education of formerly enslaved African-Americans:

> [The negro] had brought with him from Africa the lowest form of civilization to be found among men […] But by contact with the Anglo-Saxon race in the very close relation of domestic servitude, living in the same family and governed by the absolute authority which characterizes all family control, the negro, after two and a half centuries, had come to possess what we may call the Anglo-Saxon consciousness. (1892: 722–23)

Harris credits the 'absolute authority' of domestic servitude for the preliminary education of African Americans. In both passages, then, Harris seems to draw from Hegel's idea that slavery educates its victims—the central claim of the Bondsman-Thesis.

Denton J. Snider, another prominent member of the group, makes a similar argument in his Hegelian history of the Civil War:

> Our ancestors knew no other method of bringing the natural man out of indolence and barbarism than by enslaving him, by taking away that will of his which, if left to itself, would not exert itself in labor. […] Civilisation is now strong enough and

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> humane enough to educate the savage without enslaving him. […] As we have often invoked the Genius of Civilization or the World-Spirit in other matters, we may here ask ourselves: What is it trying to do with the blacks? Evidently slavery has been for them a great schooling; they are made to work from the outside that they may learn to work from the inside. (1906: 322–24)

Snider believes that by the time of the Civil War, the educative work of slavery was done, and that American civilization could now turn to educating Africans without enslaving them. But up until this point, he argues that their enslavement had been a 'great schooling' in labour and discipline, and thus, not *entirely* evil. In Snider's case too, his argument relies on Hegelian premises: he uses terms like 'World-Spirit' and argues that slavery can educate the slave through constraining 'that will' which 'would not exert itself in labor' without external discipline—that is, the self-will. All of this points to Snider taking inspiration from the Bondsman-Thesis.

Many members of the St Louis Hegelians, however, also affirmed what I have called the Lord-Thesis: the claim that self-consciousness of one's own freedom is incompatible with their remaining a 'lord'.[22] This fact is made clearest in John Woerner's civil-war novel *The Rebel's Daughter*. Many of the novel's characters are based on members of the St Louis Hegelians. In one scene, Professor Rauhenfels—a stand-in for Henry Clay Brokmeyer, a leading member of the St Louis Hegelians—is asked about his attitude on the abolition of slavery. His ambivalent answer neatly encapsulates the tension between Hegel's Lord- and Bondsman-Theses:

> Slaves are such upon their own compliance. No freeman, loving liberty above life or ease, was ever yet made a slave. To the slave, then, manumission is of no benefit. The vice of slavery consists in its degradation to the master, because slavery is incompatible with his own freedom.[23] (Woerner 1899: 428)

Rauhenfels repeats Hegel's claim that slaves are responsible for their own condition.[24] As such, he claims that their liberation would be of 'no benefit' to them. But neither does Rauhenfels say slavery is entirely virtuous—its vice 'consists in its degradation of the master'. Despite being educational to its victims, slavery corrupts its *perpetrators* and remains incompatible with their freedom. Here, the influence of the Lord-Thesis should be clear.

What results from the conjunction of the bondsman-thesis and the lord-thesis is a (for its time) moderate position on the abolition of slavery similar to Hegel's own. The St Louis Hegelians saw slavery as the mark of a primitive society, but one that could educate its victims out of such primitivity. This position set

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the St Louis Hegelians apart from both their radical abolitionist peers[25] as well as the pro-slavery ideologues of the Confederacy.[26] Like Hegel himself, the St Louis Hegelians want to resist an 'antinomy' between radically pro- and anti-slavery positions (*PR*: §57). The truth, they believe, can be found somewhere in the middle.

While such a position was considered moderate in its time, the views of the St Louis Hegelians will rightly seem grotesquely racist to modern readers. It seems clear that radical abolitionists were correct in treating Southern slavery as an abomination with few, if any, redeeming characteristics. The idea of slavery as a form of spiritual education will strike many of us as implausible given modern scholarship on its destructive psychological effects (Patterson 1982). It seems both empirically and morally wrong, then, to suggest that American chattel slavery has *ever* been in the interests of the enslaved, even before the Civil War.

A defender of the St Louis Hegelians may now suggest that we read the above passages as pointing out a silver lining to slavery, but not as aiming to *justify* it like Hegel did. Even Frederick Douglass credits slavery as awakening his passion for learning (1845/2009: 44–45)—but clearly Douglass was no apologist for slavery. Rather, we should read Douglass as saying that slavery, though obviously unjust, was beneficial to him *in one way*.[27]

It is difficult to believe, however, that the St Louis Hegelians agreed with Douglass about the absolute injustice of slavery. Recall that Harris suggests that the plight of slaves was *worse* in Africa, and Snider claims that slavery was, until recently, the *only* way to teach Africans to labour. Rauhenfels goes even further and suggests that manumission would be of 'no benefit' to the enslaved. This suggests that all three figures believed slavery to be not just beneficial to its victims in one way, but beneficial to them all-things-considered. In contrast to Douglass, none of the three St Louis Hegelians spends much time discussing the effects of slavery on its victims, and their few condemnations of it all seem to appeal only to the interests of slaveholders.

To modern readers, the arguments of the St Louis Hegelians are easy to dismiss. But it is worth noting that they were very influential among philosophers in their time. Harris, with the help of other members of the St Louis Hegelians, was the editor of *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, the first English-language journal of philosophy without a specific theological bent. Their writings were likely read by a variety of philosophers, from John Dewey (Good 2006: 62–81) to W. E. B. Du Bois (Zamir 1995: 113–33). The pro-colonial interpretation of the lord-bondsman dialectic, then, influenced American philosophical debates about slavery and its abolition long after Hegel's death.

This concludes the argument for my second thesis. If my argument has been successful, we must recognize that both Hegel and Hegelianism as an intellectual tradition are complicit in downplaying the crimes of colonialism and slavery—and crucially, that the lord-bondsman dialectic lies at the centre of this project.

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VI. Conclusion

I have argued that due to his belief in the Bondsman-Thesis, Hegel believed that colonial slavery was justified in certain epochs. Hegel wanted his readers to forgive colonial domination and slavery, to lead them into seeing even the most barbaric excesses of European empires as necessary stepping stones on the way to absolute freedom. The lord-bondsman dialectic, at least as it was developed in his later work, was the vehicle for such an argument.

Progressive interpreters of the lord-bondsman dialectic have tended to focus only on the egalitarian ideal of mutual recognition Hegel endorses, but not on the horrors he saw as necessary for achieving it. Hegel's followers in St Louis were more receptive to a pro-colonial reading of the dialectic. They correctly noted that Hegel's argument implied that 'primitive' peoples had to be subjugated before they could be free, and used this argument as a defence of pre-Civil War American slavery.

In arguing for these two theses, I hope to have shown that neither the lord-bondsman dialectic nor its intellectual legacy can be easily separated from Hegel's pro-colonialism. As Alison Stone (2020) has suggested, Hegel's apologia for colonialism is deeply informed by, and in turn deeply informs, the rest of his philosophical system. I have argued that Stone's point applies even to the lord-bondsman dialectic. In addition, I have shown that the legacy of the lord-bondsman dialectic—at least in North America—is similarly tied up with Hegel's racism and pro-colonialism. This, of course, does not mean that we have nothing to learn from the lord-bondsman dialectic. But it should serve as a reminder that the text is not as friendly to the political goals of progressives as it is often suggested to be.

If we give up on Hegel and his American followers' insistence on the educative function of bondage—as I believe we should—we are compelled to face that the suffering of the 'bondsmen' of history is not imbued with deep lessons for the future, but that it is largely pointless, tragic and unromantic. This may seem like a bleak conclusion. But it is also a politically motivating one. It should, I hope, give us all the more reason to root out relations of lordship and bondage wherever we find them.[28]


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Notes

[1] Abbreviations used:

GW = Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1968–).
PhG = Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
PM = Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
PR = Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. A. W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
R [1822/23, Hotho] = Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie des Rechts II*, ed. K. Grotsch (Hamburg: Meiner, 2015). See *GW* 26.2.
SG [1822, Hotho] = Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie des subjektiven Geistes I*, ed. C. J. Bauer (Hamburg: Meiner, 2008). See *GW* 25.1.
SG [1827/28, Erdmann] = Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit 1827–1828*, trans. R. R. Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
W [1822/23, Griesheim/Hotho] = Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, 1822–1823*, ed. and trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson and W. G. Geuss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
W [1830/31, Karl Hegel] = Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte IV*, ed. W. Jaeschke (Hamburg: Meiner, 2020). See *GW* 27.4.

Abbreviations are followed by paragraph number or, where no paragraph numbers are available, by page numbers. For lecture transcripts, the year and author of the transcript are indicated in [ ] after the abbreviation. For untranslated lecture transcripts, this will be followed by the volume number from the Academy edition of Hegel's collected works (*GW*).

[2] I call this form of slavery 'colonial' because enslaved people in this period were *primarily* transported to European colonies and former colonies. However, my use of the term 'colonial slavery' should only be taken to refer to slavery in a specific time period, not slavery of a specific kind.

[3] What Hegel has in mind is likely not causal necessity, but something like 'the necessity found in a line of argument' (PhG 12). This kind of necessity is exemplified by cases where a set of premises necessarily entail a conclusion.

[4] I take this tripartite distinction from Neuhouser (2009).

[5] For greater accuracy, I refer directly to lecture transcripts rather than the *Zusätze* added by Hegel's editors to posthumously published editions of his works.

[6] See e.g. Kojève (1947/1980: 51–52) and Fanon (1952: 195–96).

[7] Fanon and Beauvoir both plausibly fall into this category.

[8] See e.g. Brennan (2013: 142), McGowan (2019: 344–48) and Taylor (1979: 50–51).

[9] See Buck-Morss (2000) and Todd McGowan (2019: 344–48). Buck-Morss, however, argues that Hegel abandoned his youthful radicalism later in life.

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[10] On this reading, cultures may exist either as distinct national groups or as small but distinctive groups within nations (e.g. 'African-American culture').

[11] By 'historical', I do not intend to track Hegel's usage of the term, given that he denied the status of 'history' to all past events he deemed still to exist in a state of nature (*W* [1822/23, Griesheim/Hotho]: 196). By a 'historical' reading of the dialectic, I simply mean a reading of the text that sees the lord and bondsman as corresponding to figures in the past, whether in or outside the state of nature.

[12] See Westphal (1998) and Brandom (2019).

[13] See Pippin (1993: 54–56) and Houlgate (2012: 28).

[14] Eduardo Baker and an anonymous referee pointed out this objection to me.

[15] For Hegel's detailed discussion of the arbitrary will, see *PR*: §§4–28. I will take for granted that Hegel's critique of the self-will (*Eigenwille*) and the arbitrary will (*Willkür*) are broadly similar, given that he moves from using the term 'self-will' in §435 of the *Encyclopaedia* to the term 'arbitrary will' in his lectures on the same paragraph.

[16] See Cole (2004).

[17] Exactly why Hegel did not believe the bondage that already existed in Africa to be adequately educational is a question I will set aside here.

[18] Cf. Karl Hegel's transcription of this argument, *W* [1830/31, Karl Hegel]: 1226; *GW* 27.4.

[19] See *SG* [1822, Hotho]: 114–15; *R* [1822/23, Hotho]: 226; *W* [1822/1823, Griesheim/Hotho]: 197.

[20] See e.g. Butler (1987: 52–54), Benjamin (1988: 31–36). For an opposing view, see Fanon (1952: 190, n. 10). I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out how this aspect of Hegel's argument has been used by progressive theorists.

[21] See Zamir (1995: 113–33) and Good (2000; 2006: 55–96).

[22] In addition to Woerner (1899: 428), see Harris (1890: 88–89) and Snider (1906: 322).

[23] While *The Rebel's Daughter* is a work of fiction, Brokmeyer's own writings (1910: 112–13) suggest that Woerner accurately captures his views on slavery.

[24] *R* [1822/23, Hotho]; *GW* 26.1: 823.

[25] See Thoreau (1859) and Emerson (1859).

[26] See Calhoun (1837/1992).

[27] This line of objection was helpfully presented to me by Dave Beisecker and Joe Ervin during a workshop for contributors to this themed issue.

[28] I would like to thank John Filling, Paula Keller, Thomas Ladendorf, Franz Knappik, Daniel James, Dave Beisecker, Joe Ervin, Leonie Stibor, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on drafts of this paper.

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