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Impasse as a Figure of Political Space

ABSTRACT: Spatial figures of impasse appear when politics is in trouble, and preserve political expectation when its prospects are poor. They take their meaning from the assumption that the political order is synonymous with social reality—as though people could do nothing when political movement is blocked. Focusing on Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* and the critical reception of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic among other references, this essay argues that the model of impasse and breakthrough occludes politics’ narrowness as compared with other organizations of collective well-being. By seeming to preserve political potential, perceptions of impasse encourage people to accept political processes as the only social reality despite their violence, their limitation of reality, and their contempt for the agential resources of nonpolitical being.

Keywords Hegel, Gramsci, political, nonpolitical

Political societies and nonpolitical societies, that is those societies in which there was an attempt to contain power by routinizing or institutionalizing it *and those societies in which this question did not arise.*

—Cedric Robinson, *The Terms of Order*¹

At the meeting point of forces, impasse \organizes the leverage of multiple participants, if only for the moment. For this reason, it becomes a figure of the real, where friction tests and validates relative strengths. Thus, Gramsci makes “equilibrium with catastrophic prospects” the privileged object of the “analysis of situations.” The “useful[ness]” of this analysis according to Gramsci is that it “awaken[s] an interest in effective reality and for stimulating more rigorous and more vigorous political insights” (221, 175).² Yet, the value that Gramsci gives to the tension in impasse is itself partial, whether resolution or the maintenance of antagonism is preferred. The fact that resolution is more often sought, and limits other possibilities by becoming normative,, has been amply criticized elsewhere (see Apter, *Unexceptional Politics*) and is not my main

target here. Rather, I want to argue that the reality principle of impasse serves to naturalize what Cedric Robinson calls “the order of politicality”: the identification of the political organization of power with social organization as such.

The Way, Impasse, and the Nonway

In Hegel's scenario of historical process, history's authority to create reality depends on the ability of antagonisms to form, resolve, and re-form. Antagonisms are not impasses: antagonisms, and elsewhere on the scale, obstructions and frictions, are only what impasses—dead ends—are made of. Along the spectrum, it isn't simple to say when an obstruction has become an impasse. And since, in the normative historical scenario, friction is the engine of movement and growth, and obstruction to movement is necessary to keep historical process honest, impasse hypothesizes a situation that is not completely, but only potentially outside productive antagonism. In impasse, growth principles find themselves fraying, but not because they are no longer powerful. Since impasse appears as a possibility just beyond healthy antagonisms, and is made of them, it combines the sense that this time everything is different—that what is happening is not history or politics at all—with the lingering hope that the impasse will be transcended in an even larger than usual historical and political breakthrough. For world spirit, an enduring impasse is just another local factor: stoppage in one place only channels movement to another.

This naturalized hydraulic landscape of contending forces, possibly but not necessarily in trouble as a whole, spatializes the centrist-colonial-liberal belief that history is an inherently creative force. This view validates globalized economy in the name of the inevitable interrelation of resources and spaces. As Hegel's sources in Pauline Christianity confirm, only in an “open” system can disinclination to participate in the system appear as obstruction and “particularism.”

In a similar way, impasse is often considered an obstacle, not to a particular goal, but to a free movement of history whose desirability and naturalness is not in question. For decades now, Slavoj Žižek's exhortations to "break the deadlock" have assumed such a stance, a negative-Hegelian and Euro-Christian stance calling for release from hindering attachments.³ It can only seem that "deadlock," the product of political forces, must be broken so that politics can continue if it is assumed that the free movement of historical process—not unidirectional or necessarily progressive, just free and moving—is the default. But what if this free historical movement cannot be asserted without the potential held in impasse's tense stability? Unlike the blank pages of history--periods when it doesn't seem to matter very much what happens, and which therefore are more threatening to Hegel—impasses still hold out the chance of the political real just at the moments when it seems as if some reality other than political reality is beginning to manifest. If it were not for the (low) promise held in the impasse, its residents would discover themselves *abandoned* by the political. What would they do then?

Given the casual domination of the idea that, where politics is not, people are not quite human, it can be no surprise that impasse often bears a positive valence, being made to hold residual liberatory possibilities.⁴ Gramsci's wars of position envision catastrophic equilibria among unequal hegemonic and subaltern groups. From a subaltern perspective, a slowdown of power's movement is all there is to hope for. Catastrophic equilibrium then looks like an achievement of ontological resistance. The perception of impasse, like the construction of barricades, hopefully posits a space that can be maintained. For Gramsci, a war of position is something in which to dwell. Yet, although this orientation is an understandable reaction and I'd like to explore what is going on in it in more detail, the willed optimism of inhabiting an impassive space is strained and claustrophobic. This is not only because impasse falls short of

breakthrough, however, disappointing the bigger risks and returns of a more classically confrontational perspective. Rather, impasse valorized negatively or positively elevates power struggle over *another* position that is also there. It creates political ground by dividing and holding space, when the space is also already inhabited otherwise, already something besides an object of a power struggle, and some of its inhabitants already something other than claimants in their relation to it. As a structure that appears and proliferates with the order of the political—like the division of land that it miniaturizes—impasse has little potential or even sense outside it. And the more attention it draws to itself as a reality effect, the more the impasse/breakthrough structure helps to render illegible and unreal the nonpolitical organizations of existence all around it.

Derrida points out the settler-colonial logic of the “way” that impasse blocks when he compares aporia to a desert—not an actual desert, but the fantasy of one projected by the observer:

no marked out [*tracé*] or assured passage, no route in any case, at the very most trails that are not reliable ways, the paths are not yet cleared [*frayés*], unless the sand has already re-covered them. But isn't the uncleared way also the condition of *decision* or *event*, which consists in opening the way, in (*sur*)*passing*, thus in going *beyond*? In (*sur*)*passing* the aporia? . . .

What would a path be without aporia? Would there be a way [*voie*] without what clears the way there where the way is not opened, whether it is still blocked or still buried in the nonway? (54, 83)

In asking what a path would be without the obstruction (aporia) that is cleared to make it, Derrida makes visible the interest that is demanding “assured passage” and, by implication, presences and possibilities different from it. Notice that there are not two present possibilities, but at least four. First, there is “what clears the way” when the path is being cleared; second, “what clears the way there where the way is not opened”; third (the counterpart, maybe, to the

first), there is the possibility that the way is “still blocked”; and fourth, as an alternative to blockage *or* clearance, a “nonway,” in which a way does not emerge, but not because it is blocked. Derrida underlines the historical valence of the force wishing to clear the path by adding the prefix “sur,” resonant with overcoming, so that what would otherwise be only the movement of passing becomes “(sur)passing.” Further,, even merely passing will look like surpassing to the observer in comparison to the “blocked” way (again, the reality effect of historical movement depends on impasse). What the passing force cannot do is render legible the counterpart that remains unnamed in this paragraph but *is* “*there* where the way is not opened.” This other something in the background, *which has not risen to the status of a party in an impasse*, makes the historico-political values of passage, decision, and event, resistance, blockage, and impasse, appear, and appear compelling. But it was before, and aside from the impasse/passage structure, remains now something in its own right unrelated to both movement and impasse. Of the various alternatives, realms even, that are hinted at here, that of the “nonway” is potentially the largest and most positive, despite its negative name. It excludes no possibilities *except* the dividing line of the route. Every other possibility is still there—maybe an infinite number, maybe a condition unassimilable to choice.

These few sentences indicate how the logical and argumentative category of impasse refers to and is made possible by what it has been actually desirable, possible, and impossible to do in the real abstraction of nineteenth- and twentieth-century world-building. In adducing this passage as evidence for how impasse functions, I intend more than a linguistic argument. What language says is not actual, but it describes patterns that it has not invented and without which it could not be written. The language of logical argument talks in its sleep about settlement and expropriation, colonialism and racial capitalism in noonday life. In this way the logical

terminology of “contradiction” fairly comes to represent material friction in Marx. Much of romantic culture comes to root for the impasse when violent historical development is the alternative. In such moments impasse usefully figures both holding one's position temporarily and the potentially liberatory buildup of tension around a political fault line. Most of all, however, the figure assumes that everyone *has* a side of the line to be on, and wants one, or should. Its appearance depends on history, power, and territory at the cost of a “nonway.” But in its own right this “nonway” cannot be reduced either to resistance, to counterforce, or to mere powerlessness.

In what follows, first I'll explore the costs of impasse's construction of political space in Gramsci. Then, I'll consider the use of impasse in the critical reception of Hegel's master-slave dialectic. This reception embraces the emergence of dialectics as the only positive energy within what it terms the “impasse” of domination. This mainstream reading, however, makes it hard to see the cost of the impasse/breakthrough structure: it relegates various possibilities of social organization to the negative category of the nonpolitical. This cost is exacted whether or not the political breakthrough ever comes. In calling attention to the disadvantages of an environment where the alternatives are political latency and political movement, I don't at all withdraw from liberation, self-organization, or justice. To the contrary, I mean that the monoculture of political order, a form of epistemicide, is also a mechanism of unfreedom worth being liberated from (see Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*).

Impasse, the Extension of War of Position

Let's turn now to Gramsci's thought about war of position and its preservation of recalcitrance.

Recalcitrance defends the political against two figures that threaten it in divergent ways. The first figure is that of space completely filled from the center out. In this scheme antagonism is

exterminated by the proliferation of depoliticized processes of civil society. The second is the figure of void space, where the political disappears through the mutual destruction of antagonists. These anxieties range from obstruction, the reality test of the political, to impasse, *the last stand of the political*. The two figures threatening the political are very different. The first ends in fascism, which Gramsci understands as a union of depoliticizing and antipolitical processes. The second, catastrophic as it is, captures the weightlessness that the political citizen experiences without the political frame, and therefore ends in a question about what else there is. The vacancy only appears vacant from the perspective of the political citizen. In the apparent vacancy could be ordinary non-subjectivity, claimless existence, by other lights.

Gramsci's analysis of the war of position is based, he asserts, on his reading in early nineteenth-century European politics and its historiography. What he understands of twentieth-century fascism is modeled on the microstruggles of post-Napoleonic civil society. "Wars of position" involve most class, and proto-class, factions in postrevolutionary Europe at one juncture or another. For Gramsci the existence, let alone ubiquity, of war of position indicates obstacles to both domination and liberation. Although these obstacles don't amount to impasse in the historical record—they don't stop dominating forces from growing and consolidating—they do create a *horizon* of impasse, to be hoped for so that problems can be worked through in borrowed time or, at least, sheltered in. Gramsci delineates the kind of situation he is concerned with by paraphrasing Marx from memory: "1. that no social formation disappears as long as the productive forces which have developed within it still find room for further forward movement; 2. that a society does not set itself tasks for whose solution the necessary conditions have not already been incubated, etc." (106). When the dominant social formation is not disappearing, and when it would seem to be approaching its maximum but the end of its growth (which would

cause it to begin to disappear) is not in sight, the figure of impasse fends off the possibility of maximally filled space. It is almost the worst of times that is not yet the best of times.⁶

Gramsci explains how at such a point, the war of position, which has been something like piling up pieces in the middle of a chessboard, modulates into “passive revolution,” a revolutionary level of consolidation that has been accomplished through this unglamorous means of war of position. The transactions involved are characterized by what contemporary think pieces would call “appropriation,”

in practice the necessity for the “thesis” to achieve its full development, up to the point where it would even succeed in incorporating a part of the antithesis itself—in order, that is, not to allow itself to be “transcended” in the dialectical opposition. The thesis alone in fact develops to the full its potential for struggle, up to the point where it absorbs even the so-called representatives of the antithesis: it is precisely in this that the passive revolution or revolution/restoration consists. (110)

Gramsci asks whether at that point “there exist[s] an absolute identity between war of position and passive revolution” (108), because at this worst moment, all movement is spreading from a flooding, expanding center. Again, Gramsci believes that the rise of fascism in the twentieth century corresponds to the appropriative process of war of position, and eventually passive revolution, in the European nineteenth century: “in present conditions, is it not precisely the fascist movement which in fact corresponds to the movement of moderate and conservative liberalism in the last century?” (119).

By tracing fascism to the homogenizing political processes of civil society, Gramsci joins a line of political theorists whose grasp of governmentality leads them to point out that the truly political society has yet to exist in Europe. The perception of impasse correlates to this

realization in a dynamic way. At first, the perception of impasse accompanies a rising discontent with political processes that visibly fail at the job of political movement. Impasse is associated especially with difficulties within *parliamentary* politics. In a parallel economic language, the dominant productive forces run into internal limits: “the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born,” and so on (Gramsci 276). But after a point, the perception of impasse diminishes as disenchantment with the political crests. As a strained guarantor of political reality, it cannot survive the perception of its unreality. Similarly, Gramsci cleaves to contingency--that the war of position was ever necessary, means that the flood of transactions consolidating fascism at the center could not be taken for granted; things could have been otherwise—but has difficulty reconciling his insistence that things could have been different with the power asymmetry his analysis starts with. In practice, Gramsci describes how the leverage that impasse entails, a leverage acknowledged *by the very existence* of war of position rather than war of maneuver, already contains an imbalance to the benefit of the “thesis,” which has risen to the first position by some prior advantage that it continues to retain. It’s tempting to theorize this prior advantage, a kind of primitive accumulation, as expropriation, the benefits to powerful classes of colonialism and slavery in the banks of Europe.

Yet, despite the anticlimax and even irreality of European political society, Gramsci gives himself nowhere to go except back to impasse—to *a fuller politics* of proper antagonism, robust enough to have created an impasse and so possibly still robust enough to break through. Nineteenth-century radicals like Proudhon and Mazzini, he writes, did not “understan[d] the necessity for each member of a dialectical opposition to seek to be itself totally and throw into the struggle all the political and moral ‘resources’ it possesses” (109). Gramsci feels entitled to this accusation because the leverage entailed in the sheer existence of war of position proves, to

him, the presence of an unfulfilled possibility. Equilibria are the only *possible* moments in which real distinction can develop. Gramsci can see that the limited possibilities in the period he studies were worth having by the way “conservative liberalism” was acting (prosaically, transactionally, as if it had something to lose). Even the slender possibilities were not fulfilled: “The popular intervention which was not possible in the concentrated and instantaneous form of an insurrection, did not take place even in the ‘diffused’ and capillary form of indirect pressure—though the latter would have been possible” (110). Since there is no determinate reason why the radical actors could not get the slender possibilities to take place, it becomes a consideration whether they understood opposition well enough (109). Because for Gramsci “the subjective conditions can never be missing when the objective conditions exist . . . consequently it is on the size and concentration of subjective forces that discussion can bear, and hence on the dialectical relation between conflicting subjective forces” (113). At this point, Gramsci has engaged a recognizable pattern. Wanting to know where, and to whom, the leverage to which war of position had attested was lost, he turns toward subjectivity and then, immediately, to “conflicting” subjectivities: “which represented the real ‘subjective forces’?” (113).

On the one hand, impasse appears to hold the line against the depoliticization of “conservative liberalism” and its modulation into the anti-politics of fascism, and on the other, loses its binding promise when the assumption that *reality is political* wavers. It is the very difference between political antagonism and its destruction. Given the asymmetry of Gramsci’s starting point there is no potential for improvement without passing through the impasse, and there can be no impasse where productive forces have not encountered their limits, especially internal ones. This, so far, is the narrative of politics’ atrophic demise in consolidation and fascism. But there is also the explosive alternative of mutual destruction that Marx and Engels

acknowledge in *The Communist Manifesto*. In a passage explored by Étienne Balibar, they retain “the common ruin of the contending classes” (219) as one of the possible outcomes of capitalist crisis (see Balibar, “On the Aporias”). Balibar remarks,

"the mutual destruction of combatant classes" . . . is in many ways the forgotten line of the *Manifesto*. It is here we find the thesis of *The Poverty of Philosophy*: "history advances by its bad side." If we compare this enigmatic thesis with the way that, at the end of the chapter, Marx describes the threat of death that, through pauperization and economic crises, weighs on the proletariat's physical existence (thus reinforcing the idea that the bourgeoisie is the first dominant class of history that at a certain point in its development proves incapable of feeding those who feed it, we understand that Marx's schema in the end is the following: the fact that the course of class struggle is comparable to civil war, in which no reconciliation is possible, immediately puts history on the edge of an abyss where society could annihilate itself. This perspective materializes with capitalism, which for that very reason represents in every sense of the word the "last" form of exploitation. (Balibar, "On the Aporias" 67)

Rosa Luxemburg addresses this threat when she demands rejection of the working class's destruction in the conclusion of *The Accumulation of Capital*: “even before this natural economic barrier of capital's own creating is properly reached it becomes a necessity for the international working class to revolt against the rule of capital” (447; translation modified).⁷ Luxemburg's declaration of a “necessity” that was not “natural[ly] economic” brought upon her the criticism that she was calling for a revolution that could not succeed. But she makes it because it's clear to her that otherwise the global south would not survive to enjoy capitalism's self-destruction. The ruin of the global South and of capitalism would be “common ruin.” Here, Luxemburg acknowledges a vast necessity that exists before and around the naturalized “barrier.” Mutual destruction is the negative of impasse—in spatial terms, a void (of the political) space of free fall. From the perspective defended by impasse, it is therefore nearly unthinkable, “forgotten” as Balibar puts it. Instead, the space of “common ruin” appears in political scientists' fictions, from Thomas Hobbes to Hannah Arendt to Giorgio Agamben, as an

exposure to destruction to be addressed *by better politicality*. {AU: added the other first names for parallelism's sake.} In Arendt's case, for example, her fear of what human beings are when they are not covered by the symbolic clothing of citizenship is drawn from the condition of the refugee, but she cannot imagine that there could be people without states who are not stateless; the refugee, for her, flees *toward* the state rather than having been created by statist politics (see Arendt, "We Refugees"). In the classic manner of political theory that I have been tracing, she conflates political organization with social organization as such.

Impasse and the Master-Slave Dialectic

To indicate where the cost of this conflation is channeled, I would like to turn to the critical reception of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, the few pages that take up so much room in political theory. In the canonical interpretation, domination is called an "impasse" in which authentic political movement ripens, embodied in the development of the slave. Making this argument locates the slave on a path to the political and polices and erases positions—including those of slaves—that form along different lines. As Sara-Maria Sorentino argues that a "tendentiously incipient identification of *political* slavery with chattel slavery" persists from early philosophical formulations to contemporary scholarship (177). As she points out, the insinuation generates, among other things, "good slaves and bad slaves," those who "demonstrat[e] their anthropological political potential" (177) and those who do not.

The question of whether Hegel refers or should refer to workers or to chattel slaves, then, transects the assumed politicality of the realm in which it is debated. That is: even if Hegel were referring to chattel slaves conventionally seen, by Hegel himself, as missing the human-political means to become protagonists at the time—so that Hegel may, even despite himself, be recognizing actual Haitian slaves' threatening politicality and historicity—this logic would in the

same moment require *other slaves*, as it were blacker slaves, whose “nonpoliticality” would relegate their activities to an equivalent register of dereliction, or as I suggest above, of impossibility in a world where all human activity is political. The question of how to translate *knecht*, as servant or slave, is less important because both translations lead to the same place. In classic political theory, the end of the path has indeed been the priority of the politically conscious worker over the slave; in contemporary terms, however, the same logic can produce other versions such as the priority of the politically conscious black subject over the racially conscious black nonsubject.⁸ I would now like to consider this logic as it informs constructions of the dialectic as an impasse.

As Alexandre Kojève describes the master,

he is recognized by someone whom he does not recognize. . . . He can be satisfied only by a recognition from one whom he recognizes as worthy of recognizing him. The Master’s attitude, therefore, is an existential impasse. (19)

From Kojève on, the master’s domination, which, Hegel explains, lacks and needs a historical growth principle, is commonly referred to as an “impasse,” even though Hegel himself does not theorize impasse. For Hegel, a group or mode may stagnate indefinitely, but the stagnation pertains only *to that entity at that time*, as world spirit is already moving in other ways and, indeed, already as a result. Faithful to Hegel, in Kojève’s “existential impasse” only the dominating entity is destined to a dead end, and that only insofar as mastery is its entire identity.

In his influential interpretation of Fredrick Douglass’s *Narrative*, Paul Gilroy accepts “Kojève’s identification of an existential impasse that develops out of the master’s dependency on the slave” (51) and—as the word *develops* foretells—uses *impasse* to describe the prolonged struggle between Douglass and Covey: “the two men were locked together in the Hegelian

impasse” (62). But for Gilroy, the master’s impasse is also an impasse for the slave; the dead end of domination is subtly conflated with the mutual antagonism that should be productive. This suggests that impasse has somehow totalized: domination’s dead end has implications for the slave in whom alone all historicity resides. Yet, at the same time, impasse still serves the function of proving political potential. For Gilroy, the literal interval—two hours—when Douglass and Covey “each was able to contain the strength of the other without vanquishing him” (62) seems like an eternity, as for Douglass it metonymizes the entirety of resistance from within chattel slavery. In Douglass’s mythic account, the interval that Gilroy calls an impasse already manifests the “independence” that he discovers through his refusal to subordinate freedom to life (Gilroy 63). That he can get to the point of catastrophic equilibrium shows that more than that point is possible.

Thus in these responses to *The Phenomenology of Mind* a positive relationship persists between something called an impasse and the preservation of the political specifically in a situation of indefinite domination. Impasse, whether as mastery’s debilitation or the depth of resources within antagonism, protects and cultivates the political emergence, someday, of the slave. It prefigures the end of slavery in political activity. Beginning with Douglass’s bondage, Gilroy’s narrative will be concerned with “how black Atlantic political culture changed as it moved out of the early phases that had been dominated by the need to escape slavery and various attempts to acquire meaningful citizenship in post-emancipation societies” (x).

In an interesting interpretation of Frantz Fanon’s relationship to Hegel, Gerard Aching takes an approach to the master-slave dialectic that we can think about beside Gramsci’s approach to Marx. Aching stresses that Fanon’s “invocation of the ‘colonized’ subject is analogous to the Slave in Hegel’s theory as a being that becomes thing-like [only] *after* the ‘life-

and-death-struggle' between the Master and Slave takes place." Rather than being a product of the Slave's supposed decision to live, "colonialism [is] the originating context" of "asymmetrical binary opposition" ("No Need" 27). Aching uses "impasse" to characterize the "mutual exclusion"(see Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 4) of colonized and colonizer in the absence of a mediating synthesis ("No Need" 28). Fanon's necessity of violence, for Aching, occurs "in light of this impasse" ("No Need" 28). In parallel passages of Aching's book, mutual exclusion, appearing in the master-slave dialectic as Hegel's "trial by death" (*Freedom* 20), seems to constitute an impasse inherently. As it was necessary to ask why the "existential impasse" of the Master becomes a problem for the slave in Gilroy, here it seems necessary to ask why trial by death is figured as an impasse necessarily rather than the transcendence of impasse that it is for Douglass (whom Aching also discusses, along with Gilroy).⁹

The reason is that Aching assumes that even in victory, "life-and-death struggle between lord and bondsman" cannot be survived "unscathed" (*Freedom* 20), and he takes Fanon's clinical studies of torturers and avengers to attest to this ("No Need" 33–34). That is, "internal grappling with forms of coercion" (*Freedom* 15) with no end in sight is one of Fanon's legacies, as is Fanon's decision, Aching believes, to "set all of this evidence aside in an all-out struggle for political freedom" ("No Need" 36). Impasse becomes a "utopian and, for this reason, inspirational moment for emancipatory politics and movements" (*Freedom* 20), and trial by death is an impasse necessarily—as opposed to a passage or obstacle—because even the death of one of the antagonists does not bring liberation. After the trial by death (here Aching meets Gilroy), the slave's anticlimactic achievement consists merely in access to the political, construed as Hegelian consciousness: "the conscious, relentless striving for greater self-

consciousness and freedom does not begin until *after* this trial by death or impasse has taken place” (*Freedom* 21–22).

Accordingly, Aching believes that Fanon, too, advocates anticolonial violence for the sake of a true rather than an “arrested dialectics” (“No Need” 31), “proper binary oppositions” instead of “distorted Manicheanisms” (“No Need” 28) that do not work. This conclusion assumes either that true dialectics and proper binary oppositions do work, or, that there is nothing but the political whether it works or not, no longer because of a set of contingent setbacks but because of an unnamed, implicitly metaphysical base, perhaps a structure of mind implied in Fanon’s clinical notes about the tenacity of self-subjection. While I’m interested in Aching’s idea that Fanon “set[s] aside” a disturbance that he discerns in clinical practice in pursuit of decolonization, however impossible it might be, I think we cannot accept the conclusion that he does so out of “conviction that the only form of decolonization that could possibly succeed in the ‘world’ is political” (“No Need” 36).¹⁰ This conclusion returns to Kojève’s and Arendt’s conflation of political recognition with “human reality” (Kojève 9), and thereby hierarchizes social organization by the criterion of the political.

Other than Impasse, in Hegel

To return from these critical readings of the master-slave dialectic to the eight pages of the *Phenomenology* that are “Lordship and Bondage” is to notice that Hegel’s own argument includes neither the appearance of the dialectic as an impasse nor the self-emancipation of slaves. If Hegel is writing about workers, it is not possible to rectify that by viewing slaves as “laboring subjects of history, par excellence” (Lowe 143). But even if Hegel is writing about chattel slaves, he argues that the bondage that develops the possibility of political consciousness develops as the capacity for subjugation (including self-subjugation) and remains there. Political

consciousness and *someone's* subjugation are inseparable, as they are for Aching, and that is not liberation in my book. If there were nothing but the political, there would be nothing but morphing subjugation. Even in Hegel's account, however, it's possible to make out in the darkness that there is more, for better and worse, of which impasse and political movement alike render no account. (Please bear with me then as, in what follows, I travel toward these alternatives and the term *impasse* fades from view.) In this section, I use the translations "lord" and "bondsmen" because, by my logic above, I take the *knecht* to be either the worker or the "good" slave who, *like* a worker, aspires to the political, unlike the slavish slave.

According to Hegel, the two self-consciousnesses that confront one another in the dialectic, which A. V. Miller's translation generally refers to as self and other [*Selbst und Andere*], are both traumatized by "the object [*Gegenstand*]" and distinguished by their different relations with the same object(s). While occasionally the other or the "I" is also called object, as when the subject's "absolute object is 'I'" [*sein . . . absoluter Gegenstand ist ihm Ich*]; or when the self's "being-for-self" needs to appear to it as an object; or when both self and other can be "for one another *like* ordinary objects [*ind sie füreinander in der Weise gemeiner Gegenstände*]" (section 186; emphasis mine), there is not really a problem distinguishing grammatical objects of this kind from the "ordinary objects" that the bondsmen work on. It is these ordinary objects that are strangely traumatic. That is why—in Hegel's telling, not to be confused with the actual archives of labor—the bondsmen have been coerced to deal with them on the lord's behalf. When self and other "are for one another like ordinary objects," that is a problem because they then appear as "*independent* shapes, individuals submerged in the being [*or immediacy*] of *Life* [*selbständige Gestalten, in das Sein des Lebens*]" (section 186). "Ordinary objects" model autonomy in a way that human beings never do. They cannot and do not offer the self, nor its

human other and antagonist, the recognition that alone makes them human. If the self could be in the presence of the ordinary object alone, it would be something else: a “specific existence,” an “individuality common to existence as such [*die allgemeine Einzelheit des Daseins überhaupt*]” (section 187).

The danger of being left alone with the ordinary object is the danger of being an existence relegated to its own specificity and enthralled by the mere existence of other beings. The purpose of the bondsman, from this perspective of the lord, is that the bondsman should be the one to spend time with things, to become like a thing, to possess “consciousness in the form of thinghood [*Bewußtsein in der Gestalt der Dingheit*]” (section 189). The lord, Hegel clearly states,

ist das *für sich* seiende Bewußtsein, aber nicht mehr nur der Begriff desselben, sondern für sich seiendes Bewußtsein, welches durch ein *anderes* Bewußtsein mit sich vermittelt ist, nämlich durch ein solches, zu dessen Wesen es gehört, daß es mit selbständigem *Sein* oder der Dingheit überhaupt synthetisiert ist. Der Herr bezieht sich auf diese beiden Momente, auf ein *Ding* als solches, den Gegenstand der Begierde, und auf das Bewußtsein, dem die Dingheit das Wesentliche ist [is a consciousness existing *for itself* which is mediated with itself through another consciousness, i.e. through a consciousness whose nature it is to be bound up with an existence that is independent, or thinghood in general. The lord puts himself into relation with both of these moments, to a *thing* as such, the object of desire, and to the consciousness to which thinghood is essential]. (section 190; translation modified).

“An existence that is independent” outside the self instead of in recognition, in Hegel the worst thing that can exist, here describes the ordinary object. The bondsman’s (assigned) nature “is to be bound up with” the object’s independent existence, which makes it more like a thing, “bound up with . . . thinghood in general” as its prescribed role. To care about ordinary objects, to have a “consciousness to which thinghood is essential,” is to nominate oneself to be delegated to handle things, i.e., to labor. Objects’ incapacity to care about subjects appears as a terrible intensity

manifest in their indifference to human power. This independence of objects is the mythical source of the need for labor:

Der Herr bezieht sich auf den Knecht mittelbar durch das selbständige Sein; denn eben hieran ist der Knecht gehalten; es ist seine Kette, von der er im Kampfe nicht abstrahieren konnte und darum sich als unselbständig, seine Selbständigkeit in der Dingheit zu haben erwies. [The lord relates himself mediately to the bondsman *through a being that is independent, for it is just this* that holds the bondsman in bondage; it is his chain from which he could not break free in the struggle[.]] (section 190; emphasis mine)

Hegel hints that the lord and bondsman attained their current positions because of the bondsman's demeanor toward the object, not the bondsman's choice of life when confronted with the trial by death. The bondsman is a bondsman because the bondsman could not or would not completely negate *yet another*, being that is independent. Again: it is not the lord, but "just this . . . being that is independent," that is *still* independent to the bondsman, "which holds the bondsman in bondage" (section 190). Complementarily, the lord has "proved in the struggle" that to it the independent being was "something merely negative," that it was possible to "go the length of being altogether done with it to the point of annihilation [*bis zur Vernichtung mit ihm fertig werden*; alternatively, "deal with it until it was destroyed"]" (section 190).

It is tempting to read a different origin myth for labor here, in which some are in bondage because before their encounter with the lord, they had not completely destroyed "being that is independent" around them, out of too much respect for what exists. The implication is that they "deal[t] with" independent being, only not to the point of annihilation (annihilation, extermination, and extinction are all consistent with "*Vernichtung*"). Of course, Hegel goes on to point out that since the lord needs to be recognized, he must recognize something else, but paints himself into a corner where he cannot. The lord's standing as a "sheer negative power for whom the thing is nothing [*reine negative Macht, der das Ding nichts ist*]" (section 191) displays his

incoherence. The presentation of self to itself through power not only annihilates independent being but, in the person of the lord, cannot do anything else, until there is nothing that could possibly recognize its bearer as political and human.

Although Hegel argues that this leaves only the bondsman to achieve “pure being-for-itself” more coherently, if anyone will, the lord’s mistake has not been the “setting at nought” (section 196) of independent being, but loading the labor of doing so onto another who benefits from the education of the effort instead of himself. What happens after the lord’s “unalloyed feeling of self” (section 195) wears off is only another more “permanent” and sublimated *ongoing struggle* between the bondsman and independent being (instantiated in “ordinary objects”), such that the worker learns independence from it. In order for this to keep happening, however, independent being’s autonomy must be never extinguished. It survives its pure negation by the lord and being treated as nothing. Its autonomy, even now, even as nothing as it seems, endures. It receives its own origin myth in the form of the philosophy of the Absolute in Hegel’s *Logic*, where indestructible autonomy licenses an open-ended world where negativity can expect to be infinitely enabled.

Instead of following Hegel there, however, it's possible to read the tripartite dynamic between lord, bondsman and independent being in a different manner. The forgotten third party, the independent being or ordinary object (the former phrasing gradually overtakes the latter) opens up a different realm of possibilities that not only could be, but in Hegel’s account are already, generated by different object relations. The bondsman is initially reluctant to annihilate independent being: nonpejoratively, the existence of the bondsman entails an existing population of not-quite-human beings who are not-human because of their esteem for ordinary objects and independent being. The slide from “ordinary objects, *independent shapes*” in section 186 to

“independent being [*selbständige Sein*],” occurring twice in section 190, is interesting. Miller strives to de-animate the latter phrase by inserting “a thing” in brackets after “being,” but this only underscores that these beings are by now only ambiguously “things.” They are not human in Hegel’s terms because they are radically “independent” and unconcerned with recognition.¹¹ Yet, the nonhumanity of independent being does not mean that this being has to take the form of inanimate objects or animals; they may or may not. Polemically, they too could be *homo sapiens* operating with other orders than the concepts “human,” “animal,” “thing.” They constitute some “form” or “nature”—categories of organization—with which the consciousness of bondsman is “bound up” (section 190). This binding leads to the bondsman’s subjugation only because of the proximate panic of the lord. Thus, although Hegel projects the bondsman’s use of these entities’ independence in order to learn pure-being-for-itself and “[rid] himself of his attachment to natural existence in every single detail” (section 194), the lord’s and the bondsman’s past and present indicate quite a different environment populated by various entities and different possibilities than Kojève’s politico-human teleology, rather than having no organization at all.

In fact, Hegel closes the section by distancing the accomplishments, or what would otherwise look like accomplishments, of an alternative being, and even “consciousness,” that inhabits just such an environment: “if consciousness fashions the thing without . . . initial absolute fear . . . *its formative activity* [*Formieren*] cannot give it a consciousness of itself as essential being” (section 196; emphasis mine). According to Hegel, then, there can be formative activity, negativity, fashioning, “skill which is powerful over some things [*eine Geschicklichkeit, welche nur über einiges*],” only without their aspiring to “negativity *per se*” over the entirety of being (section 196). As Chris Arthur points out, “quite arbitrarily, apparently, Hegel assumes everyone must undergo breaking of self-will through subjection to an alien power before being

capable of rational freedom”—and, more to my point, he makes it requisite to any “formative activity” worthy of the name (70). What is this *unworthy* formative activity that fashions without fear and without rendering existing being as not enough, that views autonomous being as neither nothing nor Absolute? Why would beings acting formatively in this way need to be construed as mythical, utopian, extinct, or primitive? How do they go on with their formative activities, while the political consciousness of the bondsman is only beginning its incubation of centuries? Aren’t they, even worse than the bondsman, beings not ready even for servitude? What would it mean to be unsusceptible to servitude, if also to the political? Would it fit one for slavery? For anarchy? For freedom?

Hegel writes that if lord and bondsman were to simply perish without having a history to contribute to, as in the catastrophic worst case of *The Communist Manifesto*—and it would be an even worse case, not mentioned there, if the bondsman alone perished—they would “leave each other free only indifferently, like things” (114). Here, Hegel thinks of entities independent of one another as like *dead* ordinary things, dead because not human, not preserved in history. Yet, this “leaving each other free” resonates as a possibility that ought to exist—and is being defended against at this textual moment—for people who are not dead. As I’ve tried to show above, critical readings of the master-slave dialectic often criticize it, instead, for not being political enough, not going far enough in its projects of recognition and legibility to recognize the political energy of even more actors, not reaching the reality of the political as it is exercised by black subjects in the Haitian revolution and elsewhere.¹⁴ Critiques of the political like Roberto Esposito’s *Categories of the Impolitical* (1988) withdraw from it only to conceive a politicality of greater strength. In her recent book, Emily Apter delves descriptively into the micropolitics of impasse in conditions corresponding to those of Gramsci’s civic fascism because abandoning it

“risks putting theorists of ‘big P’ Politics out of action” (10). Still in the orbit of Kojève, the nonpolitical appears here as lost-without-politics even as the very perception of lostness depends circularly on the “allness and everywhere-ness of political atmosphere and milieu” (Apter 2).

Figures of impasse both register anxiety about the capacity of political processes that are focalized from within them and magnetize the political organization of society, even casting it as a metaphysically necessary reflection of all there is at times when the supposition that reality is political reality threatens to give way. To imagine different communities, it is possible to forego the figure of impasse as barely productive crisis, just as it is possible and necessary to forego the logic of “development.” To the extent that the perception of impasse is a romantic and subaltern recoil from globalization, creating and hoping to inhabit a shelter, it is preferable to the ethos of world spirit, just as political antagonism is vastly preferable to the centralization and homogenization that, Gramsci shows, occupy the center only to transfer it to fascism. Given that world history takes place as real abstraction through all of the processes of coloniality and globalization, at this time there cannot *not* be politics defended by impasse. But there is not only that, and not only the attrition and extermination it ominously implies. There is also another non-world, so to speak, that the impasse/breakthrough dynamic renders unreal to the same extent that it makes the political order, the order that created it and the only order it knows, seem like the only reality. Its presence comes forward vividly in the realization that not everyone would be sorry to see the “common ruin” of the lord and the bondsman, as not everyone has been in contention. The “common ruin” of the parties involved in the impasse reads differently, as Luxemburg momentarily reads it, from elsewhere; while waking up outside the political frame might only be the loss of the illusion of a protectable space.

Notes

¹ My italics. The rest of the quotation: “could not be expected to have been encouraged in their development by the same forces” (1).

² Richard Fidler, in comments on his translation of Álvaro García Linera’s “Empate catastrófico y punto de bifurcación,” unpacks Linera’s notion of the “empate” or “tie game” as “blockage, standoff, deadlock, or impasse” (unpaginated).

³ E.g., “the only way to break out of the deadlock [of multiculturalism and reaction] is to propose and fight for a positive universalistic project that can be shared by all participants. Struggles in which ‘there are neither men nor women, neither Jews nor Greeks’ are many, from ecology to the economy” (Žižek, *Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, 46).

⁴ If only the British parliament of 2010 could have remained “hung” forever, representing as it did the inability of the public to desire any actually possible government.

⁵ The disruption that Marx’s revaluation accomplishes is lost as soon as the political is seen to follow and mediate the economic (thereby drawing reality for itself from it). Other names and constructions besides economy expand what otherwise only appears as “nonpolitical.”

⁶ For Rebecca Comay, “historical experience is nothing but this grinding nonsynchronicity, together with a fruitless effort to evade, efface, and rectify it” (5). I agree, or would, if the emphasis is on the specificity of *historical* experience. But if the claim is that there is nothing but historical experience as well—if its “ideology arises from the very structure of experience” (5)—it is epistemicidal again. Hegel is part of an institutionalization of statecraft that, indeed, assimilates all experience to historical experience as part of its racial and colonial project. From

another perspective, “not yet” is not the trauma of all experience but the forgone unfree conclusion of political history.

⁷ For criticism of Luxemburg on this point, see Andrew Kliman’s agreement with Raya Dunayevskaya in *Reclaiming Marx’s Capital* (198–99).

⁸ I expand on this transformation in “Hegel’s Racism for Radicals.”

⁹ Perhaps Aching can be read as rendering explicit an internalization that goes unspoken in Gilroy.

¹⁰ For the definitive alternative exposition of Fanon, see David S. Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*

¹¹ As Kojève puts it, “it is only by being ‘recognized’ by another, by many others—or—in the extreme—by *all others*, that a human being is really human, for himself as well as for others” (9; emphasis mine).

¹² See Sorentino’s analysis of Susan Buck-Morss’s *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* in “The Idea of Slavery: Abstraction, Analogy, and Anti-Blackness” (202–03).

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