

LAMMING, MARX, HEGEL

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In preparing for this conference, I was not sure whether I had anything significant to add to the many tributes to Mr. Lamming which have or, I am sure, will be paid in the course of this gathering here today or, indeed, on other occasions elsewhere designed to celebrate his turning 80.¹ I finally concluded, after much brain-beating, that perhaps the best I could do would be to use this opportunity to focus on an aspect of his career, his theoretical and critical writings, which often seems to be somewhat neglected in favour of his literary output. To this end, I thought that it might be useful to revisit one or two of these essays and to share a few thoughts with you in particular on one of my favourites, "The Negro Writer and his World," which remains to this day, in my view, insufficiently appreciated.

Lamming's work is, I think few would deny, characterised by a long and deep engagement with Marxist thought. It is often argued, and rightly so, that Lamming considers Marxism as *the* indispensable epistemological matrix through which a proper grasp of the post-colonial condition more widely, and the Caribbean situation in particular, is to be attained. Such emphases are palpable in essays like "Politics and Culture," his address to the graduating class of 1980 of the Cave Hill campus of the University of the West Indies which was delivered, I am told by someone who was in the audience, just outside the wall, facing the quadrangle, of the Arts Lecture Theatre where we find ourselves today. He begins here by evidently alluding to one of Marx's most famous quotes that men

make their own concrete history but we can only make that portion of it which our concrete circumstances allow. We do not choose the time or place of our birth . . . but the process of our thought, the hidden nature of our needs, the character and quality of our imagination may be decisively influenced by these origins. Our struggle towards freedom is experienced always within the external constraints of Nature and the invisible limitations of our own consciousness. (77-78)

The rhetoric of base and superstructure, Marx's celebrated architectural template for understanding any social and historical context which was perhaps most famously articulated in the Preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy of 1859, evidently informs Lamming's analysis here. To understand the Barbadian polity or, indeed, that of any of these islands, he stresses, one must begin with the brute economic reality which has historically determined all aspects of our lives. He describes Barbados in particular as, historically, "one large cane farm" (78) in which the slaves and their descendants all "lived within the shadow of the plantation" (78) in something akin to a feudal system. This was a region, he points out, "not designed for social living. It was intended exclusively for production" (78), the peasant class serving as a "source of fortune for hostile strangers" (78) in the form of a "reservoir of cheap labour" (78). This was the "material base upon which kingdoms of luxury and convenience would be constructed elsewhere" (78). Lamming traces, too, the racially-inflected social relations of production that were part and parcel of this economic mode of production, comprising a "dominant class, exclusively white" (78) and consisting of European colonisers and their descendants

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(‘whiteness’ in this system functions, he argues, as the “symbol and source of all authority” [78], that is, of political power founded on social privilege grounded, in turn, in the ownership of the means of production), on the one hand, and an “old and enduring servant class” (78) consisting of the descendants of African slaves, on the other. In this particular social and political configuration, race and class did not merely intersect, they were in fact synonymous with one another, with the result that to be “black was to be a *commodity* identified with the cheapest of labour” (my emphasis; 78), he stresses.

Lamming describes, as well, the institutional and ideological superstructure erected upon and accordingly determined by these “foundations” (78), paramount among which is the “ideology of racism; a morality whose guiding principle was” (78), as he so poetically puts it, the “excessive privilege of the skin” (78). All the institutions of this society, what in Louis Althusser terms the ‘ideological state apparatuses,’ such as the church, the educational system, the legal system, and so on, together with their concomitant ideologies, revolved around the privileging of one skin colour and the demonisation of the other. In brief, the “priest and the planter, school and church, legislation and the law, all gave their weight to this social and economic arrangement” (78), all “in the name of decency, honour, and Christian democracy” (78). “Our relation to bread” (78), he stresses, “our relation to God, our relation to the courts of law were influenced daily by these demons” (78).

There is a hint in this account, I would suggest, which may not be immediately obvious, a gesture noticeable especially at the end of the long quote cited above towards that dialectic of alienation and freedom, which is perhaps most famously discussed in Marx’s Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. I am referring here to Lamming’s claim that our “struggle towards freedom is experienced always within the external constraints of Nature and the invisible limitations of our own consciousness” (78). I mention this allusion because it points, it seems to me, towards the way in which Lamming’s thinking is profoundly informed by that specifically Hegelian mode of Marxism which, in the view of many subsequent commentators, marks (or mars, in Althusser’s opinion) an earlier phase of Marx’s career. This was a time when Hegel’s shadow loomed large in Marx’s thinking, but with which Marx is thought to have subsequently broken. Althusser speaks of an ‘epistemological break’ (*coupure*) that separates what he sees as the more valuable, *scientific* accomplishments of the mature Marx (exemplified by works such as Capital, volume 1 of which was published in 1867) from the earlier, *humanist*, Hegel-‘infected’ tendencies of works such as the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts mentioned above and The German Ideology of 1845.

This is almost certainly not the place nor the time to offer a detailed account of Hegel’s idealist philosophy of history which, suffice it to say, he conceived of as synonymous with the dialectical self-realisation of what he called ‘Geist.’ Translated variously as Mind, Reason or Spirit, Geist functions in Hegel’s lexicon as something akin to a universal, transcendental principle of rationality inherent in the cosmos, a depersonalised divine force almost synonymous with reason itself which, never a *fait accompli*, is caught up in a perpetual process of becoming and, as such, always seeking to expand and surpass itself. (For a relative straightforward account, by Hegel’s standards, of his views on this score, see his posthumous Reason in History of 1837.) Nor could I hope to do even cursory justice to Hegel’s account, laid out especially in his bewildering masterpiece The Phenomenology of Spirit (1807), of the complex relationship which obtains between the growth of this universal consciousness on a macrocosmic scale and that of geist with a small ‘g’ (the mind, reason or spirit of the individual) on a microcosmic scale. In a nutshell, Reason as a whole expands as the reason of humans grows, that is, as they grow in knowledge and come to the realisation that their own budding rationality mirrors the

ever expanding rationality that inheres in the universe. Hegel argued, importantly, that this growth takes the form of a dialectical process of development which, via the overcoming (*aufhebung*) of successive, antithetical stages of merely partial knowledge, ultimately culminates in the possession of a state of absolute knowledge that synthesises the imperfect, because incomplete, perspectives peculiar to earlier stages. I can only make the briefest mention at this point, moreover, of the crucial role played in the course of this intellectual odyssey by the indispensable mechanism of self-awareness depicted in the notorious 'master-slave' episode. Hegel uses the unequal relationship of master to slave as a metaphor for the specular relationship of recognition that binds one consciousness to another. To be precise, Hegel argued here that humans are caught up in a conflictual relationship with one another in which each party constantly seeks to gain leverage over the other by winning the other's acknowledgment of one's superiority. It is to this process, in the final analysis, that our very capacity for conscious reflection is indebted and from which we consequently derive a sense of who we are. Hegel's thesis here is, in short, that conscious awareness and, more specifically, self-consciousness, develops precisely as a function of one's confrontation with difference, self and other being represented, in Hegel's analogy, by the polar opposites of master and slave.

A full consideration of Hegel's subsequent impact, notwithstanding his idealism, on such avowedly materialist philosophies as Marxism and Existential Phenomenology as well as, by extension, some of the most important strands of so-called 'Post-colonial' theory inspired by these schools of thought, is also beyond the scope of this essay. Those who are familiar with the work of Georg Lukács (not least his seminal History and Class-Consciousness of 1923) will undoubtedly be aware at least of the broad contours of this so-called 'Hegelian Marxism,' to the development of which C. L. R. James in turn contributed so much via such classic works as Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin (written in 1948). Similarly, those acquainted with Martin Heidegger's Being and Time (1927), Jean-Paul Sartre's Being and Nothingness (1943) or, by extension, chapters like "The Negro and Recognition" in Frantz Fanon's Black Skin White Masks (1952) will also recognise Hegel's enormous influence on the development of Existential Phenomenology as well. Suffice it to say that the Hegelian master-slave dialectic in particular has proved profoundly influential upon a whole host of Marxists and Existentialists who are, whether located in the major metropolises or on the colonial peripheries, by definition ultimately hostile, of course, to Hegel's own, ultimately idealist premises. For such thinkers, even if Hegel were wrong about much else, he certainly seemed to grasp the crucial conclusion from which many located in the Cartesian and, later, the Kantian camp had till then shied away: to wit, that our consciousness is necessarily socially and historically situated. Hegel's legacy in this regard is responsible, it should be noted, for the development of at least one important strand of modern thought, the so-called 'Continental,' as well as those intellectual traditions such as the Post-colonial which have in turn engaged in profound ways with it.

John Noyes' succinct overview of Hegel's huge impact on the Post-colonial project in particular, notwithstanding his denigration of Africa and Africans, may suffice in this regard:

Postcolonial theory remains Hegelian in its pursuit of a language that describes what happens when the self-sufficiency of consciousness encounters another consciousness whom a prior history has cast in an inferior position – the consciousness of a master must find a way to think about itself through the thoughts of a servant. It is Hegelian too in its refusal to allow the categories of master and servant, colonizer and colonized to ossify in a static bipolar relationship. And the postcolonial insistence on re-casting the categories of critique within the social arrangements of the

new world order seems to follow Hegel's insistence that Kant's understanding of reason be historically contextualized, not only within his own new world order, but also within the social order appropriate at any one particular historical and geographical moment. And his attempt to think history in geographical terms (which Kant had also wanted) has not been shed by postcolonial theory. On the contrary, if there is a primary distinguishing moment in postcolonial theory, it is perhaps best thought of in terms of a recuperation of this aspect of Kant's philosophy in all its implications for critical theory.²

In addition to gesturing towards the (in)famous 'master-slave dialectic' episode alluded to earlier, Noyes underscores here Hegel's sense (in a way that exemplifies his conception of intellectual history) that he was building on, but in order ultimately to overcome, what he saw as the limitations inherent in the dehistoricised and 'de-geographied' critique of reason offered by the later Kant and, as a result, *Hegel's* importance per se, more so than Kant's, for the subsequent development of Post-colonial thought.

It is useful to bear in mind at this juncture the colonial provenance of Hegelian thought by recalling Susan Buck-Morss' recent and very persuasive claim that though one might never be able to definitively prove that Hegel was thinking of Haiti when he couched one of the central passages of The Phenomenology of Spirit in terms of a violent conflict between master and slave (one ultimately won by the slave, she stresses), it is at the same time a very plausible conjecture. Given the newspaper accounts which he is known to have read at the very time he was writing his magnum opus, ones which reported in considerable detail many of the bloodiest events which comprised the Haitian revolution, it is likely not only that Hegel must have been aware of these events but, more importantly, that they impinged in profound ways upon the rhetoric and, thus, the conceptual framework which informed his attempt to articulate that dialectic of selfhood and otherness which he came to think of as indispensable to the development of individual (self-)consciousness. Sibylle Fischer contends that Buck-Morss' argument is a significant claim that "goes directly against the kind of Eurocentric provincialism — philosophical and otherwise — that considers modernity something that took place in London, Paris and Berlin, as if the colonies and the slaves somehow belonged to another era and played no role in the shaping of modernity."³

It is perhaps only fitting, from this point of view, that many post-colonial thinkers have engaged in profound ways with those aspects of Hegel's thought bequeathed especially to historical materialism. Much of Lamming's work certainly redolent of this legacy. This is particularly true of "The Negro Writer and his World," for example, which originated in an address to the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris in 1956 and which bears the unmistakable signs especially of the specific influence which Sartrean existentialism wielded on Lamming at this stage of his career. "The Negro Writer and his World" is a moving, lyrical evocation, through the prism of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic in particular, of the predicament of the 'black' and, by extension, non-white, 'third world,' (post-)colonial subject, located in a white-, 'first-world'-dominated

²Noyes, John K. "Hegel and the Fate of Negativity after Empire." Postcolonialism Today: Theoretical Challenges and Pragmatic Issues. Virtual Symposium of the Open Semiotics Resource Center. Posted June 2003.

<<http://www.semioticon.com/virtuals/postcolonialism_2/Noyes%20Hegel.htm>>

³Fischer, Sibylle. Interview with Gina Ulysse. Bomb Magazine 90 (2005).
<<<http://www.bombsite.com/issues/90/articles/2712>>>

world order, and struggling to find and to express himself in relation not only to others for the most part like himself, but above all vis-à-vis those who are decidedly different.⁴ Lamming's argument here anticipates current controversies as to whether 'race' is a biologically-grounded reality predicated on skin-colour (the position of, for example, Afrocentrists like Molefi Asante) or merely a social construction, that is, a function of the discursive attribution of particular characteristics to a given skin-colour and related traits (this Kwame Appiah's contrasting view, for example). Lamming contends is that the "term Negro" (36) is both a "fact and a fallacy" (36), a synthesis of both nature and nurture. It is a fact in the sense that it is biology, to be precise, the brute fact of skin-colour, which, like anatomical sex, necessarily positions each and every one of us in the social pecking order with regard to the distribution of economic resources, social status and, ultimately, political power. Skin colour and related attributes form the necessary ground upon which racial differences are erected. Were there no such differences, there would be one less reason to think of ourselves as different from one another. But it is also a fiction in that it is human beings who attribute significations to such phenotypical variations, just as they do to the distinction between a penis and a vagina, thereby turning mere anatomical sex into gender. It is *people* who erect boundaries, *people* who make distinctions, *people* who place values on particular skin-colours or kinds of hair, none of which are in and of themselves natural givens and, significantly, it is people who in turn internalise these definitions, often to their detriment.

Lamming's main focus here is on precisely how, in an economically and racially asymmetrical world, the negro acquires a sense of self in the light of his/her relationship to those who are not only different in appearance but also possess the economic clout as well as the social and political wherewithal to impose their point of view. The neo-Hegelian framework of Lamming's thinking on this score is unmistakable when he contends that our "speculations lean so heavily on the attention of the Other, that it is difficult to think at all without being constantly mindful of the sympathy and attitude of the Other" (36). This is because, he argues, our "speculations and actions are so often reactions to the Other's impact in our world" (36). Equating the 'Other' in this case with the "Non-Negro" (36), he argues that the Other "represents a *fact* of the man's existence as Negro" (36), not in the sense merely of the "Other defining the Negro but rather of the Negro becoming conscious of his own presence as a result of the regard of the Other" (36). The negro is, Lamming stresses, one who "through a process of social and historical accidents, encounters himself . . . in a category of men called Negro" (36). This classification is a "definition" (36) imposed on and, unfortunately, ingested by the negro. This is a categorisation with which he consequently intimately identifies himself and which he consequently carries around with him like he would, perforce, his very own "limb" (36). For it is a definition which has settled upon him with an almost natural finality until he has become it. He is a reluctant part of the conspiracy which identifies him with that condition which the Other has created for them both. He does not emerge as an existence which must be confronted as an unknown dimension; for he is not simply *there*. He is there in a certain way. The eye which catches and cages him has seen him as a man *in spite of*. . . . (36)

The negro is, in short, for the other as much as for himself, always already a known quantity (and quality). The result of this is that the negro encounters himself in a state of surprise and embarrassment. He is a little

⁴Lamming's use of masculine pronouns throughout and his effacement of the crucial role played by gender in social relations is arguably a function of the period when this essay was composed.

ashamed, not in the crude sense of not wanting to be this or that, but in the more resonant sense of shame, the shame that touches every consciousness that feels it has been *seen*. (37)

Lamming is evidently gesturing here towards Sartre's famous 'parable' of the voyeur, itself a significant rewriting of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, in Part III ("Being-for-Others") of *Being and Nothingness*. While peeping through a keyhole, the voyeur suddenly realises that he has himself in turn become the object of attention of someone else who has sneaked up from behind and fixed him in his gaze, summing him up and thereby objectifying him as nothing more than a peeping-tom. For Sartre, a mixed sense of embarrassment, shame and related emotions accompanies the recognition that I have become the object of the gaze of the Other who, in looking at and judging me, has stripped me of my subjective point of view and, in so doing, my freedom to craft my existence as I would like, by conferring on me a classification by which I am henceforth constrained. I become, because I accede to his perspective, what the Other says I am. As I wrote this, I could not help but think in this connection of the famous lines from T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

And I have known the eyes already, known them all –
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume? (55-61)

In Sartrean jargon, being-for-itself (*pour-soi*) is suddenly forced to take itself as being-in-itself (*en-soi*) for another.

Lamming contends, in short, that the Negro is a "man whom the Other regards as a Negro" (37) and who consequently comes to grasp himself through the Other's eyes, from the Other's vantage-point. The result is a "dichotomy" (37), a "split" (37), as it were, "at the very centre of this consciousness" (37) between what he is taught by external forces to think about himself and what by contrast he could and should, via a process of what Sartre might describe as phenomenological introspection, apprehend about him/herself. The problem is, in other words, not only that the Negro has been categorised and classified (most often pejoratively) against his/her will, but that s/he has perforce *internalised* these categories and classifications to his/her own detriment, obviating in the process the fruits of that journey of self-discovery in which the negro would otherwise ideally be engaged. At this point, Lamming turns his attention to the precise role played by language per se in the discursive construction of the Other. The split psyche of the negro is a function, he contends, of "that old, and it would seem eternal conflict between the [externally imposed] naming of a thing and a[n internally apprehended] knowledge of it" (37). Through language, he argues, we "attribute to any class of objects (stones, leaves, birds, insects) these names" (37) and, in so doing, we find a "way of avoiding the mystery which clothed these objects in their original state of silence and anonymity" (37). By means of language, we pigeon-hole, we categorise and we classify. Language, moreover, is the vehicle of social inequity and political power. Gesturing towards Nietzsche in particular, Lamming stresses that language is "intentional, and the intention seems clearly part of the human *will to power*. A name is an infinite source of control" (my emphasis; 37).

If language is an important instrument by which those who wield power cement their privilege and authority, it also provides the means of mounting a resistance to such effects. Literature in particular provides, for Lamming, a critical way out of the dilemma in which the negro finds him/herself. It is through literary self-expression that the negro can

presume to spit out all the butt-ends of his days and ways and arrive at a conception of himself untainted by the speculations of the Other. The negro, Lamming argues, experiences a "desire for totality, a desire to deal effectively with that gap, that distance which separates one man from another, and also in the case of an acute reflective self-consciousness, separates man from himself" (39). Accordingly, it is by virtue of the "fundamental need to *redefine* himself for the comprehension of the Other" (my emphasis; 40) and in the "hope that the stage shall be set for some kind of meaningful communication" (40) with the Other that is not merely one-sided, that the negro writer joins hands . . . with every other writer whose work is a form of *self-enquiry*, a clarification of relations with other men, and a report of *his own very highly subjective conception of the possible meaning of man's life*. (My emphases; 40)

For the negro writer, to "speak of his situation is to speak of a general need to find a centre as well as a circumference which embraces some reality whose meaning satisfies his intellect and may prove pleasing to his senses" (40). Lest one think of this as some sort of solipsistic, untrammelled exercise in which the negro writer is engaged, Lamming stresses the dialectic of self and other, us and them, freedom and constraint amid which the negro necessarily seeks to find himself and to impose personal order, coherence and significance on an impersonal experience which constantly threatens to dwarf the individual and to thwart such aspirations: a

man's life assumes meaning first in relation with other men, and his experience, which is what the writer is trying always to share with the reader, is made up not only of the things which happen to him, in his encounter with others, but also of the different meanings and values which he chooses to place on what has happened. What happens to him depends on the particular world he happens to be living in, and the way he chooses to deal with his own experience is determined by the kind of person he considers himself to be. (40)

Lamming emphasises that the negro writer is "continually being shaped by the particular world which accommodates him, or refuses to do so; and at the same time he is shaping, through his own desires, needs and idiosyncrasies, a world of his own" (40).

Lamming concludes that the work of the negro writer should accordingly, in the light of the foregoing, be grasped in terms of his relation to three concentric "worlds" (40): firstly, the "world of the private and hidden self . . . which might be only known by others after that man has spoken" (40) and which the writer himself struggles to know and to understand; secondly, the social "world in which he moves among other men" (43) and, last but not least, that broader, universal "community" (44) of "human beings" (44) that transcends racial, national and other such divisions and in whose he also necessarily partakes. In finding "meaning for his [own personal] destiny" (44), Lamming stresses, every utterance he makes in this direction is an utterance made on behalf of all men. And his responsibility to that other world, his third world, will be judged not only by the authenticity and power with which his own private world is presented, but also by the honesty with which he interprets the world of his social relations, his country . . . for those who have no direct experience of it, but are moved by the power of his speech, his judgement and his good faith. (44)

The negro writer, in writing for and about himself, also writes for both those who form part of his immediate community and those beyond its pale who know little or nothing about this individual or his community. What originates, seemingly, in the most selfish of motives abuts ultimately in the most altruistic of purposes: the breaking down of the

barriers of ignorance and incomprehension which stand in the way of greater social and, by extension, international harmony which is, paradoxically, the forum in which the means of individual fulfilment can best flourish.

I would like to end by offering a few brief thoughts on an important implication for literary and intellectual history more broadly of Lamming's engagement with Hegelian modes of Marxism and Phenomenology. What the developmental dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis offers us in the Caribbean, I would suggest, is a way of assimilating the similarities which link us to and the differences that separate us from our contemporaries. It offers us, likewise, a way of synthesising both the continuities which bind us to and the discontinuities that divorce us from our forbears. Lamming's neo-Hegelianism provides, in short, a way of (re)thinking those tired and, most often, tiresome notions which have installed themselves so completely, it seems, in the popular consciousness concerning the nature of the relationship which binds a 'new world' post-colonial culture such as the Caribbean with the antecedent 'old-world' cultures of Africa, Europe and Asia. These implications are hinted at in Althusser's typically rather opaque summation of Hegel's account in The Phenomenology of Spirit of the "'experiences' of consciousness and their dialectic" (101). Hegel equates consciousness, he argues, with a "cumulative *internalisation*" (101):

at each moment of its development consciousness lives and experiences its own essence (the essence corresponding to the stage it has attained) *through all the echoes of the essence it has previously been*, and through the *allusive presence* of the corresponding historical forms. Hegel, therefore, argues that every consciousness has a suppressed-conserved (*aufgehoben*) *past* even in its present, and a *world* (the world whose consciousness it could be, but which is . . . virtual and latent), and that therefore, it also has as its past *the worlds of its superseded essences*. But these past *images* of consciousness and these latent *worlds* (corresponding to the images) never affect present consciousness as *effective determinations different from itself*: these images and worlds concern it only as echoes (memories, phantoms of its historicity) of what it has become. . . . Because the past is never more than the internal essence (in-itself) of the future it encloses, this presence of the past is the presence to consciousness of consciousness itself, *and no true external determination*. (101-102)

Again, lines from Eliot who, at least in the early part of his career, is often thought to have abandoned the Hegelian idealism of his mentor F. H. Bradley, spring to mind, though this time they are from his "Four Quartets":

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo

Thus, in your mind. ("Burnt Norton" I, 1-15)

In our ends, paradoxically, are our beginnings, just as in our beginnings are our ends. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. By the same token, it is in the Other that we find, paradoxically, our own selves, and in ourselves that we inevitably find unmistakable traces of the Other. Through his appropriation of the Hegelian dialectic, I would argue, Lamming, whom no one could ever accuse of being anything but fiercely proud of the autonomy of Caribbean thought, strives to move us beyond simplistic 'us versus them' formulae and to deconstruct silly games of temporal one-upmanship ('we are not Hegel's progeny, he is ours,' and the like). These, to my mind, constitute the core of Lamming's signal achievement.

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