

Introduction to Part 2 of the Themed Issue, ‘Racism and Colonialism in Hegel’s Philosophy’: Common Objections and Questions for Future Research

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In the first part of our editorial introduction to the themed issue ‘Racism and Colonialism in Hegel’s Philosophy’ we outlined its rationale and some of its main topics. Here we address some common objections against research of this kind and formulate questions for further research.

Hegel’s views on race and colonialism have not received much attention within mainstream Hegel scholarship so far. Instead of encouraging a closer examination of relevant texts and elements in Hegel’s thought, scholars have often preferred to deny or downplay them—as (1) views that are marginal to his philosophy, (2) just a matter of Hegel absorbing passively the prejudice of his time, or (3) views that are documented only by texts of doubtful philological quality. As far as (1) is concerned, the first part of our introduction already gave examples of systematic entanglements which show that the views in question are not simply isolated from those parts of Hegel’s thought generally considered to be philosophically central. It will be worthwhile at this point to respond also briefly to the other two attitudes.

With regard to (2), ample evidence speaks against this view. Bernasconi (1998, 2016) has shown that Hegel actively exaggerated negative elements in reports about non-European societies. Besides, Hegel was arguably aware of many critical voices that objected to racism, slavery and colonialism. For example, Hegel’s copy of the 1817 *Encyclopedia* includes handwritten excerpts from Herder’s *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Humankind* (GW 13: 263–65).¹ While Hegel’s notes cite Herder’s account of the characteristics of various human groups, they fail to reflect the critique of colonialism, racist stereotypes and the very concept of ‘race’ that Herder develops in the same parts of the book (James and Knappik 2023: 100). Similarly, Hegel’s discussion of slavery in *Philosophy of Right*

§57R is based on the seminal *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1786) by Thomas Clarkson, a leading British abolitionist (James and Knappik, [forthcoming](#)). In Clarkson's *Essay*, Hegel could find not only a catalogue of arguments against slavery, but also graphic depictions of the cruelties of slavery and the slave-trade, as well as a critique of anti-Black racism that cites extensively from poems by Phillis Wheatley. That Hegel nevertheless opted for a hierarchical theory of race (James and Knappik 2023) and a qualified defense of slavery and colonialism (James and Knappik, [forthcoming](#); Jaarte 2024) shows he made active choices in ongoing debates, rather than merely absorbing all-pervasive prejudices.

Concerning (3), it is true that earlier research on such topics often had to draw on texts of problematic philological standing, namely the posthumous compilations of lecture courses especially on the Philosophy of History and the Philosophy of Subjective Spirit, and 'Additions' in posthumous editions of the *Encyclopaedia* and *Philosophy of Right*. Hegel's editors had compiled these texts based on lecture transcripts and sometimes Hegel's own notes, without making this process of compilation transparent to the reader. More recently, however, the need to rely on such dubious sources has been obviated by the critical edition of the extant lecture transcripts in the Academy Edition of Hegel's writings. This edition makes it possible to compare versions within and across courses, and offers a solid (though in many cases still untranslated) textual basis for research on 'the details' of the Encyclopaedia system which Hegel, in his own words, 'reserve[d] [...] for the oral presentation' (*Encyclopaedia* 5/23, cf. James and Knappik 2023: 101). Where possible, authors in this themed issue used the critical editions of the lecture transcripts in the Academy Edition.

We predict that the contributions collected in this themed issue will stimulate much-needed further debate and research. Some topics that would seem to merit (further) consideration include the following:

How does Hegel understand the relation between biological, psychological, cultural and geographical factors that enter into his conception of race and national spirits, and what systematic role does that conception play at the interface of Hegel's theories of nature and of spirit? How do Hegel's views on race relate to those of other late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century theorists, such as Meiners, Kant, Blumenbach, Schelling, Carus and Steffens? To what extent did Hegel influence the development of nineteenth century 'scientific racism'?

To what extent are those parts of Hegel's system that have so far received less attention in this context, such as his Aesthetics and his Philosophy of Religion, informed by his views on race and colonialism—and vice versa?

To what extent did Hegel's philosophy shape the views on race, racism and colonialism that can be found in later thinkers and traditions, beyond those addressed in this themed issue? Examples include: Marx and Marxism; other schools of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hegelianism and the broader diffusion of

Hegelian ideas in, for example, Germany, Italy (cf. Egid 2024), Scandinavia and the British Empire, in disciplines including philosophy, but also social science, law, theories of international relations and of development, history, art and music history, and Indology; and other thinkers from the Afrodiaspora and the Global South, such as Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, Angela Davis and Enrique Dussel?

What resources and teaching methods can be used in the classroom to enable teachers and students to engage with topics of race and colonialism in Hegel and post-Hegelian traditions? How can ‘new narratives’ be forged to help overcome the exclusionary Hegelian legacy (Park 2013) in the historiography of philosophy, in curricula and in public memory?

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Note

¹ Abbreviations used:

Encyclopaedia = Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part I: Science of Logic*, trans. K. Brinkmann & D. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* (1830). *GW*, vol. 20.

GW = Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Nordrhein-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften und Künste (Hamburg: Meiner, 1968 ff.)

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