

# Endless History: Hegel's Flawed Account of Amerindians

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## Abstract

In this article, I argue that Hegel's treatment of Amerindian peoples is rooted in an exclusionary perspective of Reason, which establishes a particular form of life as its defining standard-bearer. This stance results in a distinct form of epistemic misrecognition and injustice that disregards the potential contributions of Amerindian resources and worldviews to the lexicon established throughout the modernity. To present an alternative viewpoint, I examine the insights of Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa, whose pluriversal conception of reason and history challenges one-sided portrayals of rationality. My aim is not to 'fit' Amerindian concepts into our familiar modern philosophical vocabulary. Instead, I wish to consider Hegel's philosophy through the lens of encounters and epistemic recognition with those who have been denied it. In particular, the application of an 'ethnographic pact' as a mode of translation constitutes a valuable contribution to ongoing decolonial discussions. I assert that this approach calls into question Hegel's notions of progress and universal reason, suggesting that his philosophy of history might have taken a divergent path if it had not been entangled in a self-centric epistemic framework. While these considerations remain subject to further development, they offer a fresh perspective for comprehending Hegel's argument beyond his own epistemic limitations.

'To translate is to coexist'—Guimarães Rosa (*Revista Humboldt*, no. 16, 1968).

'Without the forest, there is no history'—Davi Kopenawa (interviewed by Carlos Dias Jr. and Stelio Marras, *Mana*, Rio de Janeiro, vol. 25, no. 1).

Amidst the disputes and particularities within the decolonial and anticolonial debate, a recurring theme is the critique of discourses that have historically asserted the authority of rationality. Beyond the nuances of specific interpretations, these instances revolve around the broader issue of universalization—specifically, who has historically been authorized to lay claim to a concept of reason assumed to be universally shared by all human beings. Ranging from the decolonial engagement with European philosophy to standpoint epistemologists who elucidate

how our situatedness impacts our knowledge, this critique has consequently been directed at those who, in their quest for universalization, inadvertently widened the gap between the philosophical centre and the periphery due to their disregard for the specific contexts in which these discourses originate.

Certainly, it is only from an assumed standpoint of universal reason that Hegel, when referring to the Amerindians, would have felt authorized to write passages like these in his lectures: ‘their inferiority in all respects, even in stature, can be seen in every particular’ or ‘the Americans, then, are like unenlightened children, living from one day to the next, and untouched by higher thoughts or aspirations. The weakness of their physique was one of the main reasons why the Negroes were brought to America as a labour force (...)’ (*PH*: 164–65).<sup>1</sup>

In passages like these, we see Hegel assuming that Amerindians’ alleged physical weakness and childlike mentality merely signify a deeper incapacity for transcending the immediacies of day-to-day life and achieving intellectual *Mündigkeit*—i.e., the capacity for speaking as rational subjects. By identifying matters of concern for all human beings, it was not challenging to characterize certain individuals as deficient in reasoning skills or as ‘closer to nature’. This characterization justified their subjugation as a means of assisting them in attaining the same rational standards.

Behind all these normative and metaphysical assumptions, there is an epistemic issue that underlies the universal versus particular distinction. In response to Hegel’s account of Amerindians, I would like to pose a straightforward question: How did Hegel come to understand Amerindian thought? Well, it is conceivable that Hegel had no idea. I propose that this epistemic gap lies at the heart of Hegel’s misunderstanding, specifically an epistemic misrecognition in his account of these people, who were a priori excluded from the possibility of speaking on behalf of reason. Once an exclusionary standpoint of reason is adopted, it matters little what these ‘others’, the Amerindian peoples, have to say about themselves. In the context of what has been labelled as epistemic violence (Spivak 1988), epistemic injustice (Fricker 2008) or ‘epistemicide’ (Carneiro 2023), I referred to this as a first-order injustice. Silenced worldviews are unable to contest epistemic validity in a second-order domain, such as moral justifications (Campello 2022). The issue at stake is a specific kind of recognition—the acknowledgment that their reflexive resources and worldviews could contribute to correcting exclusionary, and therefore fundamentally flawed, notions of universality.

Assuming a universal perspective relies on the criterion of identifying ‘Reason’ within all human beings. In this paper, I will explore the concept of Reason (with a capital ‘R’), which, distinct from debates over formal models and criteria of rationality, could be characterized as ‘rationality as a form of life’. In this context, Reason does not denote a mere logical schema; rather, it signifies a worldview that deems a particular way of life superior and universally desirable, a

perspective that often manifests in various forms of epistemic practices, including silencing and exclusion. It gives rise to a problematic cycle that links Reason as a form of life with epistemic violence: Because certain human beings are not acknowledged as capable of abstaining from speaking in the name of Reason, their worldviews are deemed uninteresting; conversely, by adopting a self-centred discourse, other worldviews are rendered ineligible for rectifying what is deemed a rational way of life. Consequently, these excluded perspectives find themselves marginalized within philosophical discourse.<sup>2</sup>

If Reason is taken as a rather European modern worldview, the problem extends beyond the exclusion of Amerindian thought from this worldview (in some sense, Europeans are also excluded from the Amerindian worldview). The issue relates to a yardstick that entails epistemic violence as linked rather to a project of domination. Much of the literature concerning Hegel has also demonstrated that it is no accident that colonization and slavery became consequences of assuming a specific concept of Reason to be universal (Bernasconi 2003a, 2003b; Sanguinetti 2021; Stone 2020; Fanon 1986; Mignolo 2011; Dussel 1993). I shall engage with Hegel in a dialectical manner, underscoring that the colonizing concept of progress is an outcome of a flawed understanding of rationality that sought to see itself mirrored in the course of history. This is because the precise conception of Reason, which colonial and racist endeavours are predicated, is the product of a conceptual history for which Hegel's philosophy bears, at least in part, some responsibility.

Hegel's argument could have taken a different course had it not been ensnared by a self-centred epistemic framework from which his philosophy of history originates. In this article, I will argue that this problem led to a lack of genuine interest in understanding the concepts underlying Amerindian thought. That is, the exclusion of Amerindians from the realm of rationality results from assuming that universal reason essentially equates to European modernity. However, my aim is not to 'fit' Amerindian concepts into our familiar modern philosophical vocabulary. Instead, I wish to examine Hegel's philosophy through the lens of encounters and epistemic recognition with those who have been denied it, as exemplified by the worldview of Davi Kopenawa, a Yanomami shaman.

I will argue that Kopenawa not only provides a complex conceptual framework underpinning a worldview but also offers tools to address the epistemic confrontation of worldviews. Furthermore, I raise the question of whether the Hegelian project of historical progress and the actualization of reason over time can be preserved or redefined with the assistance of Kopenawa's and Bruce Albert's strategy of an 'ethnographic pact'. By emphasizing how his perspective offers a more pluralistic and inclusive understanding of reason and history, I propose that this provides a valuable methodological contribution to the ongoing decolonial debate, making an effort to shift the epistemic center, as suggested by Kopenawa himself:

Today, white people think we should imitate them in every way. Yet this is not what we want. I learned their ways from childhood, and I speak a little of their language. Yet I do not want to be one of them. I think that we will only be able to become white people the day white people transform themselves into Yanomami (*QDC*: 22).

### I. Where does Reason speak from?

When philosophers grapple with the relationship between history and progress, they often underscore two fundamental aspects. The first, falling under the domain of the philosophy of history, seeks to demonstrate that our construction of history is far from neutral, encompassing both epistemological and axiological biases. Essentially, the past is not an objectively self-evident entity; instead, it heavily relies on the narratives we craft to recount it. The narrative we construct acts as a mirror to the present, reflecting the criteria we employ in narrating history and offering insights into contemporary perspectives. Consequently, the act of narrating the past inherently encapsulates an evaluative dimension, and different modes of historical narration are open to dispute.

A second perspective argues that these historical narratives do not inherently possess the criteria to be morally judged. A mere comparison of historical facts and a search for signs of progress within history are insufficient. Philosophy assumes a crucial role in history by furnishing arguments that engage with the normative dimension of historical accounts. These arguments transcend the mere description of historical facts or the exposition of the world's state; they delve into the realm of how the world ought to be. Concepts of justice, models of State and institutions, or moral justifications do not emerge from historical revelations on their own but demand continuous scrutiny and validation.

The way Hegel addresses the interplay between philosophy and history, as extensively discussed in his reception, did not unfold without its fair share of conflicts. From the perspective of so-called *Linkshegelianismus*, dedicated to disputing the assumption that Hegel's philosophy of history merely served as a legitimizing force for the status quo, it asserts that when he delves into history, civil society, or the State, he is not conducting a mere sociological or empirical analysis. Instead, he is actively engaged in what he deems the essential task of philosophy: a normative interpretation of reality that perceives within reality a rationality extending beyond the mere sequence of contingent and disjointed events.

However, within the framework of decolonial theories and the critical reception of Hegel, new facets have come to the fore. The emphasis is no longer placed on the classical distinction between *Rechtshegelianismus* and *Linkshegelianismus*, but

rather centres on the extent to which Hegel's philosophy can shed light on the dichotomy between legitimation and critique. This is particularly pertinent considering the quandary of relying on concepts and worldviews that are intrinsic to European modernity, which Hegel and his adherents sought to universalize. Yet, in addressing this issue today, we must inevitably scrutinize the epistemic presuppositions that guided Hegel's responses and contemplate what lay outside the boundaries of this episteme. It involves observing the extent to which this narrative was inherently linked to a larger project, one that legitimized the imposition of this 'progress' on societies labelled as 'pre-modern'.

Considering the historical and political context when Hegel penned his works, Spanish and Portuguese America witnessed significant and tumultuous political conflicts. In the case of Brazil, the colonial process held a unique character, especially as the entire Portuguese royal family had relocated to the colony to evade the Napoleonic War. Notably, after the royal family returned to Portugal, Dom Pedro I, who had remained in Brazil, proclaimed Brazilian independence in 1822. The irony of a Crown Prince declaring the independence of a colony is something that Hegel could have incorporated into his account, providing a nuanced perspective beyond the Napoleonic context.<sup>3</sup>

Within the intricate political landscape of Brazil and surrounding countries, Hegel's portrayal of Latin America remained anchored in a fetishized image detached from reality.<sup>4</sup> He reduced his portrayal to the Amerindians, characterizing them as 'savages' governed by irrationality. His depiction homogenized Amerindian communities, with the sole distinction drawn in his text being between 'natives' and 'Europeans', without acknowledging the latter as colonizers. Worldviews and levels of education (*Bildung*) were exclusively linked to the extent of the natives' interactions with the colonizers. This is evident when he asserts, 'some of them have visited Europe, but they are obviously unintelligent individuals with little capacity for education' (*PH*: 164). He also implies that 'the emigrants have brought with them the assets of European culture, so that they began life in America with advantages which, in Europe, were the fruit of thousands of years of development' (*PH*: 170).

It is more perplexing to comprehend why Hegel assumes that the 'people of Spanish and Portuguese descent in America' do not yet possess the spirit of rationality (*PH*: 164). Still, Hegel attributes this absence of reason to the ongoing existence of slavery within these colonies.<sup>5</sup> However, he disregards the presence of a spirit of liberation among the enslaved individuals. Instead of acknowledging the harsh reality of slavery and Europe's culpability in colonizing dominion, Hegel's alignment of freedom with a particular conception of reason yields two adverse outcomes: from a non-European perspective, there emerges a perceived lack of comprehension of freedom. Secondly, slavery is construed as justifiable, serving as a transitional phase for educating the enslaved and bestowing on them the

gift of 'Reason'. Paradoxically, it is assumed that enslaved black people lack the 'rationality' to liberate themselves, neglecting their own yearning for freedom.<sup>6</sup>

From the perspective of Reason, it seems more judicious to consider these discourses that it promptly excludes, even in the absence of substantial justification. Consequently, we find ourselves ensnared in a vicious cycle. Many European philosophers asserted that Amerindians unquestionably reside outside the realm of Reason, as their preconceptions hindered them from treating Amerindians as epistemic equals. If the engagement with Amerindians on equal footing were pursued, it would promptly undermine their exclusionary conception of Reason.

Certainly, during Hegel's time, there were practical challenges arising from linguistic disparities, given the scarcity of translated sources in native languages. Nonetheless, these challenges reveal a lack of motivation for translation—an oversight that might be a sign of disinterest in the potential contributions of Amerindian thought to European philosophy. Consider the historical imposition of Portuguese and Spanish languages upon Amerindian peoples through the process of colonization.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, linguistic barriers should not lead to the presumption of speaking on behalf of others, as if one comprehends their perspectives prior to engaging in a genuine dialogue. Assuming that Amerindians are incapable of speaking on behalf of Reason renders irrelevant the nuances of their worldviews, concepts and self-reflective assertions, even regarding inquiries central to Hegel's philosophy. In these instances, Hegel's account of Amerindians falls short of encapsulating the multifaceted and authentic tensions prevalent in their context. His characterization tends to oversimplify and neglect the intricacies of their social and intellectual diversity, reducing them to a binary framework that obscures the nuances of their interactions with European colonizers. Even if Hegel's depiction of Amerindians was primarily driven by anthropological curiosity, reducing them to objects of cultural peculiarity as 'eccentrics', his position emanates from the premise of a central perspective rooted in a 'rational' form of life. Again, the potential intellectual contributions of Amerindians were deemed inconsequential.

Currently, we can discern that the portrayal of foreign people featured in European philosophical discourse were essentially external descriptions, fundamentally disinterested in how these contributions could substantively enrich philosophical discussions with their unique concepts and worldviews. Solely adopting an 'anthropological' fascination with other cultures already embodies a form of epistemic injustice, as it presupposes that their worldviews cannot attain the status of 'genuine' philosophy. Conversely, as Viveiros de Castro aptly articulates, 'treating indigenous ideas as concepts entails regarding them as carrying a philosophical meaning or a potential philosophical use' (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 189). As anthropologist Peter Skafish wrote in the introduction to the English edition of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's 'Cannibal Metaphysics':

Can anthropology be philosophy? Can it not merely contribute to but actually engage in and even assist in the reconfiguration of philosophy, in the sense of constructive, speculative metaphysics? In that case, what would philosophy be, given that most of its most prominent instances originate, conclude with, and never depart from Western categories?’ (Skafish 2014: 9)

It seems misleading how a more pluriversal concept of Reason could provide a vocabulary for addressing the epistemic injustices that have pervaded a supposedly universal model aimed by Hegel, albeit at the expense of an exclusionary view of ‘others’ forms of life. Summing up, this entails recognizing that beyond its anthropological interest, Kopenawa’s thinking may provide concepts that aid in reconfiguring some of the metaphysical categories that underlie Hegel’s philosophy.

## II. What Could Hegel Have Learnt from a Yanomami Shaman?

After briefly introducing some of the quotes in which Hegel addresses Amerindians, I intend to embark on a thought experiment and envision a hypothetical response from Davi Kopenawa, a Yanomami Shaman, to Hegel’s ideas. Rather than engaging in an exegetical reading of Hegel’s lectures, my aim is to emphasize the significance of discourse in the epistemic contributions of Amerindian thought, a dimension that I believe Hegel may have overlooked. This endeavour is primarily fictional (or prefigurative, as it were) because Kopenawa’s proposal is less about delving into a critique of a specific philosopher and more about offering an alternative worldview that could contribute to a novel cosmopolitics.

To be sure, there are inherent risks in the task of ‘translating’ different worldviews into the epistemic framework of contemporary philosophy, particularly given the unfamiliarity of their cosmological perspectives. One form of epistemic injustice involving Amerindian thought is related to the dominant emphasis on the production of knowledge through written tradition. While unintentionally stifling knowledge rooted in oral traditions, Amerindian thought has been systematically denied access to the space designated for written traditions, resulting in an imbalance in the production and perpetuation of knowledge. Thus, the challenging task of translation arises not only in recognizing the broader cosmological perspectives that diverge from the Eurocentric framework but also in bridging the gap between written and oral traditions.

While some conceptual content has been explored in bridging literature, such as the concept of person (Viveiros de Castro 2020) and ‘imagination’ (Valentim,

2019), I would like to focus on a more ‘formal’ aspect, namely that the dialogue between Davi Kopenawa and the French anthropologist Bruce Albert, culminating in their monumental work *‘The Falling Sky’*, exemplifies a promising effort in translation, a kind of common ground between different worldviews through a theoretical disposition that shifts from speaking for others to allowing them to be heard. As Bruce Albert defines it, the contribution of Kopenawa is at the same time an autobiography as a kind of self-account and a heterobiography since it is a result of the interchange—an *ethnographic pact* between Kopenawa and him.<sup>8</sup> All the same, this is an ethnobiography: Kopenawa is simultaneously an author and a communicator of a worldview that does not centre on the individual as owner.<sup>9</sup> This breaking perspective challenges the very concept of authorship—certainly, it does not conform to some sort of intellectual property.

By recognizing the divergence in worldviews as the starting point, Bruce Albert spent four decades coexisting with Davi Kopenawa in the role of a mediator, establishing a bond of mutual trust. It was through this commitment that new conceptual frameworks and tools for conveying vastly distinct ontological perspectives began to emerge. In the words of Davi Kopenawa, ‘I like to explain these things to white people, so they can know’ (Turner and Kopenawa 1991: 63; quoted in *QDC*: 63). The choice of verbs in this statement carries significant weight: ‘explain’ and ‘know’ convey a deliberate and self-aware claim to truth, including an essential epistemic affirmation.

In this narrative, both the White and Yanomami communities were brought into existence by Omama, the forest creator. However, the Whites fell under the sway of Omama’s brother, Yoasi, who introduced diseases and other misfortunes into their lives, alluring them with his words. For the Yanomami, their task is to adhere to the words of their ancestors—Omama’s words, rather than Yoasi’s. Language plays a pivotal role in this account. As a reversal of Hegel’s self-centric perspective, Davi Kopenawa presents a form of critique of ‘white reason’, where the words of white men are associated with falsehoods (*QDC*: 245; see also Valentim 2014).

A significant challenge arises when we shift the *locus* of our inquiry to the perspective of a Yanomami shaman speaking in the first person. This transition necessitates a reconsideration of what we mean by ‘our reason’ in the context of these worldviews. In his manifesto, Kopenawa articulates a narrative that critically challenges the notion of a predetermined world. By adopting an oppositional stance to nature, Kopenawa implies that politics should be conceived as the transformative process of an already existing nature. This highlights the age-old dichotomy between nature and culture, reminiscent of Hegelian distinctions between nature and spirit.

After the so-called ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology, the core organizing aspect is not that of different worldviews and perspectives about one and the



same world, but of entirely different worlds, each of which is equally valid. Rather than a form of multiculturalism that stems from an opposition between nature and culture and/or subject and representation, Amerindian perspectivism could be accurately described as multinaturalism. In this framework, perspective is not reduced to a representational schema but affirms a form of life expressed by the multiple natural configurations of bodies.<sup>10</sup>

While Hegel sought to present nature and indigenous peoples as a reconciled (*versöhnt*) whole, it is incorrect to assume that Amerindians had a peaceful relationship with it. It is a spiritual condition of multiple subjects who recognize themselves as subjects (*Bewusstsein an und für sich*) and are mimetized in nature, where the shared condition between humans and non-human animals is not animality but humanity<sup>11</sup>. In Amerindian perspectivism, there is a saturation of humanity that obscures embodied perspectives. At the core of their cosmologies is the effort to understand the perspective of other beings, not as a homogeneous whole with differences limited to ways of representation. This task of translation is connected to the shaman's power to adopt a second-person perspective, acting as an ontological diplomat capable of bridging the gap between different forms of life. The 'translatability' in the sense of a meeting of perspectives found in Amerindian perspectivism arises from a balance of perspectives.

From the immanent variability (inconstancy) of natural worlds and forms of life arises the concept of shamanic diplomacy<sup>12</sup>—what Viveiros de Castro calls a 'cosmopolitical performance' or 'cosmodiplomacy' (Viveiros de Castro 2015). In this endeavour, the shaman assumes a crucial role of a trans-species translator, embodying different natures, which leads to new expressions of nature rather than mere representation. Amerindian perspectivism, accordingly, offers a key to epistemic confrontations, since it does not posit a common world but rather underscores the value of the uncommon and the diverse. This principle operates as a guiding force in their thought systems, paving the way for a fundamental shift in the way we engage with different worldviews.

This novel perspective on nature stems from a reconsideration of the significance of humanity as a rational and ethical agent. When humans are not seen as fixed entities but rather as interchangeable within various species, the importance of valuing the perspectives of others becomes paramount. Each point of view inherently contains a potentially human narrative and should be regarded as such. There is no singular human perspective that can guarantee our status as subjects confronting a static nature, nor is there an immediate other that can be conveniently controlled and explored at will. In the realm of multinaturalism, characterized by diverse embodied expressions of a shared ontological foundation, the notion of a rational perspective exclusively tied to humanity is in constant flux. The fundamental question is not how we can appropriate these narratives and represent them within our conventional philosophical framework while relying

on our established and secure beliefs in hermeneutic translation. Such an endeavour would negate the essence of multinaturalism, which revolves around the acknowledgement and respect of diverse natural expressions and perspectives. In essence, it would reduce multinaturalism to mere multiculturalism. As Viveiros de Castro puts it:

from the point of view of a multinaturalist counter-anthropology, philosophers are to be understood in the light of savage thought, and not the other way around: it involves realizing the countless becomings-other that exist as potentialities of our own thinking. To contemplate an alternative perspective in order to challenge the predominant thought of the ‘Other’, by starting from the opposite end. Every encounter with another mode of thought is an exploration of our own (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 93).

In ‘The Falling Sky’, Kopenawa delves deeply into the concept of ‘becoming other’, a theme that lies at the heart of human existence and its intricate interactions with various forms of life. What makes Kopenawa’s work truly mesmerizing is his adept portrayal of co-inhabitation as a profound somatic transformation. He explores the shamanic process, revealing the interconnectedness of humans and spirits as a journey into ‘becoming other’, offering a gateway to grasp human condition and its intricate relationship with the spirit world.

Kopenawa’s narrative invites readers to contemplate the intricate dance between self and other, human and spirit, and the complex process of somatic metamorphosis that underlies the shamanic experience facilitated by drinking the hallucinogenic substance, *yākoana*. In Yanomami culture, *yākoana* is sourced from the *Banisteriopsis caapi* plant and is renowned for its properties that enable communication with the *xapiri*—the ancestral spirits that hold a fundamental role in Yanomami culture and spirituality. So Kopenawa tells us as follows:

Little by little, this is how the *xapiri*’s numbers swell. By drinking the *yākoana* and becoming other so often, the young shaman’s tongue becomes increasingly firm, and he stops speaking like a ghost. The spirits’ words truly reveal themselves to him then. The *xapiri* constantly sing their songs, one after another, as they hear their father answer their calls [...] for the initiate to acquire such beautiful songs, the *xapiri* must also gradually replace his throat with their own. Failing that, he would continue to sing as badly as the white people! Learning the *xapiri*’s song is as difficult as trying to learn to draw words on paper skins. At first, the hand is stiff and the line crooked. It is truly awful!

You must refine your tongue for the spirits' songs as much as you must soften your hand to draw letters (*QDC*: 111–12).

In this passage, Kopenawa provides an account of the initiation process of a young shaman. The ingestion of *yãkoana* serves as a pivotal rite of passage, enabling the initiate to establish contact with the *xapiri*, who are entrusted with the transmission of shamanic songs and wisdom. The transformation of the initiate, characterized by their enhanced ability to communicate more confidently and accurately, is attributed to the influence of the *xapiri*, who gradually share their songs and profound knowledge. This description underscores the significance of both *yãkoana* and the *xapiri* within Yanomami cosmology, shedding light on the intricate complexities of shamanic initiation.<sup>13</sup>

Cosmopolitics unfolds in the interplay between multiple worlds. This perspective underscores the absence of a unifying project, accentuating the importance of coexistence. Kopenawa and Albert's manifesto serves as a stark reminder of our preconceived notions of politics anchored in a pre-existing and inert world, ripe for exploitation. In this regard, true politics unfolds in harmony with the world. What we, the modern or simply 'human', have recently re-acknowledged in light of an unprecedented global crisis, these peoples, such as the Yanomami, have always known. As such, it becomes paramount to enhance our listening skills and embrace their wisdom:

In the forest, we human beings are the 'ecology'. But it is equally the *xapiri*, the game, the trees, the rivers, the fish, the sky, the rain, the wind, and the sun! It is everything that came into being in the forest, far from the white people: everything that isn't surrounded by fences yet. The words of 'ecology' are our ancient words, those Omama gave our ancestors at the beginning of time. The *xapiri* have defended the forest since it first came into being. Our ancestors have never devastated it because they kept the spirits by their side. Is it not still as alive as it has always been? The white people who once ignored all these things are now starting to hear them a little. This is why some of them have invented new words to defend the forest. Now they call themselves 'people of the ecology' because they are worried to see their land getting increasingly hot. [...] We are inhabitants of the forest. We were born in the middle of the 'ecology' and we grew up in it. (*QDC*: 393)

If 'to translate is to presume that an equivocation always exists; to communicate through differences, instead of silencing the Other by assuming an original univocality and ultimate redundancy' (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 89), we must explore

the form of life that emerges after translation as a means of ‘inhabiting the equivocation’. How could this form of life aid in the reimagining of our social vocabulary? In other words, we should seek pathways to address the inherent ontological instability inherent in the puzzle of multiple narratives. This can be achieved by developing a shared vocabulary that recognizes the incommensurability of distinct worldviews, rather than categorizing them as ‘rational’ or ‘irrational’ from one’s perspective.

In summary, we can draw valuable insights for epistemic recognition from Kopenawa that Hegel lacked. Kopenawa’s perspective challenges a unidimensional portrayal of rationality and lays the foundation for a more nuanced understanding of progress and universal reason, detached from concepts of progress, power and reason as the domination of nature. In fact, Kopenawa’s approach diverges from Hegel’s intrinsic feature of modernity as it identifies the locus of discourse with the locus of Reason, creating an epistemic division between the epicentre and the periphery of rationality. While adopting a teleological approach to history as a rational and irreversible progression, it becomes necessary to extend this progression to those societies that have hitherto been relegated as ‘absent from history’. Very few of the available conceptual frameworks for expanding the semantic scope of freedom manage to break free from this vocabulary, thus constraining new political imaginaries within the same categories and metaphors inherited from European modernity. Kopenawa’s approach does not necessitate classification as antimodern, as they do not position themselves in opposition to modernity. Instead of merely offering a critique of modernity (as a kind of ‘negative’ approach), they contribute to the epistemic landscape in their own right.

If Hegel were to listen to narratives such as this, he would likely realize that, from the Yanomamis’ perspective, we remain ‘ignorant’ in our inability to comprehend their unique knowledge-production methods and for underestimating the significance of the forest (cf. *QDC*: 390). Such opposition to Hegel’s ‘rational’ historical narrative is encapsulated in Davi Kopenawa’s assertion that ‘without the forest, there is no history’—an insight even more thought-provoking than the one Dostoyevsky is said to have experienced during his Siberian imprisonment when he learned that, according to Hegel, history had not yet reached that harsh place.

### III. Between worldviews and claims to universality

As I have argued, Hegel’s portrayal of the Amerindians does not result from a normative evaluation of their arguments; instead, it is grounded in a concept of Reason that denies the possibility of including Amerindians as rational human beings whose discourse would be valuable for appraisal in its conceptual content. The challenge in recognizing the epistemic potential of these narratives arises from

a primary injustice: an epistemic misrecognition, where certain narratives and worldviews have been elevated to the status of the universal, while others have been relegated to the particular. The presence of vocabularies claiming to represent universal reason can be traced back to an injustice in which other vocabularies have not received due recognition for their normative contributions in expanding and refining notions like rationality, subjectivity, identity and other concepts that shape our modern frameworks. Before delving into the disputes concerning these concepts, we must address how discourses are epistemically acknowledged as participants in such debates. In conclusion, by questioning the inherent linkage between reason and history, I aim to closely examine the argument that worldviews marginalized from the realm of universal reason should be duly acknowledged as potential sources for the expansion of our normative vocabulary.

Beyond their anthropological implications, accounts like those of Davi Kopenawa assert a pursuit of epistemic recognition. Different worldviews not only can but indeed should transcend being objects of mere anthropological interest. The distinction between anthropological and philosophical significance often arises from an oversimplification within our epistemic frameworks.<sup>14</sup> Rather, these worldviews ought to be acknowledged as fountains of innovative concepts and ideas that can offer a valuable epistemic vocabulary.

This struggle extends beyond mere representation; it involves making these narratives visible and heard. It encompasses a rejection of the notion that the construction of ‘universal’ epistemic categories inherently excludes alternative narratives, rendering them invisible in the process. The thrust of this endeavour is largely metacritical. It is not focused on contesting the content of the critique itself but in ensuring that the claims to critique are granted the same level of attention. By stating, ‘I do not recognize myself in your universal’, these particular perspectives are neither reduced to their particularity nor imposed as a new universal. Instead, they exert pressure on established theories, urging corrections and extensions.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, the struggle for epistemic recognition encompasses the potential for theoretical advancements that transcend the constraints of their particular narratives. Cosmologies from Amazonian peoples, for instance, do not merely pertain to the Amazon region but also resonate from the Amazon to the global stage, just as philosophy originating in Germany or France did not consider itself limited to addressing solely the German or French context. These narratives, therefore, are not only stories; they harbour epistemic potentials, offering fresh perspectives on our ways of describing and inhabiting the world. To recognize such epistemological contributions without reducing them to mere narratives, it is imperative to seek common grounds for epistemic critique.<sup>16</sup>

To expand this normative framework, addressing the exclusion of worldviews as a matter of justice, and thus reimagining our accounts by making visible what was previously disregarded, it is a question of reclaiming the potential of

vocabulary translation. This transformation signifies that narratives are no longer perceived as mere fictions, and utopia transitions into the realm of the conceivable. Confronted with a scarcity of political imagination or the urgency of survival, these alternative narratives not only broaden our vocabularies but also compel us to envision the hitherto inconceivable. Such a reframing, as a tool of prefigurative politics, could even contribute, as Ailton Krenak claims, to postponing ‘the end of the world’:

Our time is specialized in creating absences: of the idea of living in society, of the very idea of the experience of life. This phenomenon generates profound intolerance for those who can still revel in the pleasure of being alive, dancing, and singing. Yet, there exist scattered communities worldwide that continue to dance, sing, and even make it rain. The pervasive image of a dehumanized society resists such enjoyment. It promotes the notion of an impending apocalypse as a means of coercing us into relinquishing our own dreams. My provocation, thus, lies in the idea of postponing the end of the world, always being able to narrate one more story. This act of storytelling serves as a form of resistance, deferring the inevitable end. (Krenak 2020)

This prompts a normative inquiry into how we can expand our categories beyond our existing vocabulary. The semantic horizon, which transcends individual ownership, cannot be escaped. In conclusion, one can argue that the foremost contribution philosophy can make is the offering of a new vocabulary—which recalls Richard Rorty’s somewhat surprising statement that Hegel was, in essence, a poet. This is because Hegel’s philosophy doesn’t merely describe reality; it extends to a normative representation of reality, as evident in the well-known statement from the preface of his *Philosophy of Right*: ‘whatever is actual is rational’ (*‘was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig’*). This introduces a novel vocabulary that enables us to identify how the world can be construed as rational.<sup>17</sup>

In reflecting in the concept of history, the dialectic between nature and spirit, and even the epistemological underpinnings of his political philosophy, Hegel has endeavoured to demonstrate how the construction of semantic and political discourses can provide a valuable framework for comprehending our social norms. This essentially entails the development of a shared ‘philosophical’ lexicon. However, Hegel’s pursuit of a comprehensive vocabulary would have yielded greater efficacy had he acknowledged the expansiveness of semantic discourses extending beyond the confines of his contemporary milieu. In this regard, he could have drawn insights from Kopenawa, highlighting that the concept of translatability need not be synonymous with a uniform conception of universality and

progress. This insistence often proves unfruitful, if not intrinsically coercive, as previously discussed. Distanced from a modern lexicon tied to notions such as property and identity, Kopenawa's linguistic framework opens the door to diverse perspectives on social practices and modes of political organization.

Alternative narratives serve as safeguards against the ossification of our perspectives. They consistently revise and extend the categories at our disposal. To accommodate new self-descriptions, it is essential to acknowledge that the private sphere of descriptions is inherently reliant on the socially available vocabulary. It does not necessarily lead to an inflation of metacritical questions or an unsolvable dispute over the criteria of critique. Instead, from a more modest perspective, it discerns modes of existence and ways of discussing the world.

The vocabulary for normative solutions to issues such as reparative politics, moral justification or addressing ecological crises encounters the limitations of our linguistic resources. It is during moments of exhaustion within our political lexicon that the imperative to expand our narratives becomes especially apparent. Urgency arises in the development of novel epistemologies capable of crafting alternative vocabularies. To narrate stories differently, we must first embark on the journey of redefining the semantic that underpin our narratives. Only through this process can new stories transcend the realm of mere narratives and unlock the potential to reshape our modes of discourse and existence.

Hegel continues to offer the opportunity to locate critique within the confines of our existing vocabulary. He traces a genealogy of semantic and political disputes and grasps the normative dynamism inherent in the historical construction of our social practices. To prevent the depletion of semantic potential, confined to a limited and interdependent concept of reason and history, it is essential to present alternative narratives and embrace novel accounts, including those that transcend the Eurocentric philosophy canon. Such endeavours are not only crucial for re-evaluating our relationship with the past in the contemporary context but also for comprehending the enduring influence of the past on the present. Normative theories must listen to and integrate an ever-expanding array of accounts, or else it risks clinging to notions of universality that reveal its provincialism. By broadening the scope of rationality beyond an essentialist interpretation of history, we create space for fresh perspectives and vocabularies, thus contributing to the expansion of our political imagination and the freedom to experience the world in different ways and to recount our stories in innovative manners.<sup>18</sup>

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations used:

*PH* = Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

*QDC* = Kopenawa, D. and Albert, B. (2013), *The Falling Sky: words of a Yanomami shaman*. Cambridge MA/London: The Belknap Press.

*RP* = Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Appiah 1992 and Kilomba 2019.

<sup>3</sup> To be sure, Hegel was not an exception as a perpetrator of epistemic injustices; even within Brazil, indigenous accounts were marginalized in the narrative of how a Brazilian national identity came to be. In Brazil's history books, we often encounter the episode known as the Pernambuco Insurrection when, after thirty years of Dutch dominion in the Northeast, a resistance fomented by Portuguese, indigenous, and enslaved black peoples was able to banish them. However, this story has consistently been told from the perspective of the Portuguese side. What did the native indigenous population think of the conflict? How did they perceive it? Not much effort has gone into making this known, and it's not due to a lack of documentation: letters written in Tupi demonstrate intense self-reflexivity concerning the interests and strategies used by indigenous peoples who fought on opposite sides for the same cause. For instance, some of them converted to Catholicism and were allied to the Portuguese. These letters were only recently translated by Eduardo Navarro, a Brazilian researcher, after being filed in the Royal Library of the Netherlands almost three hundred years ago (see Alves 2021).

<sup>4</sup> A symptomatic example of Europe's fetishized view of Amerindians in the 19th century is Spix and Martius' *Reise in Brasilien* (2017). What would become one of the most insightful and detailed descriptions of the Amazon's flora and fauna to this day, influencing thinkers like Goethe, several indigenous groups were merged into a reified and exotic nature. After a three-year research trip into Brazil, the authors returned to Europe with botanic samples and two Amerindian children who were exhibited in human zoos, such as the prestigious *Jardin d'Acclimatation* (see Lima 2019 and Le Monde 2012). If scientific curiosity resulted in silencing Amerindian thoughts and possible epistemic contributions, reducing them to an irreflexive part of nature as seen in a zoo or botanic garden, literature plays an important role in translating and communicating different worldviews. The same Martius who once reinforced a Eurocentric prejudice towards Amerindians, reflected in his later years autobiographical novel *Frei Apollonio*, on how a genuine interest in what indigenous people had to say could help overcome such epistemic injustices. Another similar effort to imagine through literature can be found in Micheline Verunsch's recent novel *O som do rugido da onça* (2022). The narrative follows Spix and Martius' trip back to Europe through the eyes of the indigenous children, interpreted as a way of acknowledging their voices.



<sup>5</sup> ‘The South American states are still growing and developing; the peoples of Spanish and Portuguese America have still to emancipate themselves from slavery. They do not yet possess the spirit of rationality. The peoples of the northern part have still to overcome their isolation and to gather around a central focus; none of the provinces is autonomous, for they are all dependent upon their mother countries. The emigrants have brought with them the assets of European culture, so that they began life in America with advantages which, in Europe, were the fruit of thousands of years of development’ (PH: 215, Addition).

<sup>6</sup> This scenario is eerily reminiscent of the sentiments expressed by Alexis de Tocqueville, who, at a later period, asserted that he knew better than the slaves themselves what independence meant: If he becomes free, independence often then seems to him to be a heavier chain than slavery itself; for in the course of his existence, he has learned to submit to everything, except to reason; and when reason becomes his sole guide, he cannot recognize its voice. A thousand new needs besiege him, and he lacks the knowledge and the energy necessary to resist them. Needs are masters that must be fought, and he has only learned to submit and to obey. So he has reached this depth of misery in which servitude brutalizes him and liberty destroys him (Tocqueville 2010: 518).

<sup>7</sup> By contrast, it is estimated that by the beginning of the Portuguese colonization there were around 1000 ethnicities in Brazil, speaking between 600 and 1,000 languages.

<sup>8</sup> ‘The first [task of the anthropologist], of course, was to be scrupulous in doing justice to my hosts’ conceptual imagination; the second, to think rigorously through the sociopolitical, local, and global context in which their society was embedded; and the third, to maintain a critical overview of the framework of the very act of ethnographic observation itself.’ (*QDC*: 430–31)

<sup>9</sup> What Kopenawa says against our standard definition of politics could easily be seen as a critique of our social vocabulary: ‘For us, politics is something else. It is the words of Omama and those of the xapiri that he gave us. These are the words that we listen to during the time of dream and that we prefer because they are truly ours. The white people, they do not dream as far as we do. They sleep a lot but only dream of themselves. Their thought remains blocked, and they slumber like tapirs or turtles. This is why they are unable to understand our words’ (*QDC*: 313). Expanding horizons, as a central conceptual image for the Yanomami, is closely related to our ability to dream—and, more specifically, to how dreaming with the other can help us expand our social vocabulary (Limouja 2022).

<sup>10</sup> As described by Viveiros de Castro: ‘(Multi)cultural relativism supposes a diversity of subjective and partial representations, each striving to grasp an external and unified nature, which remains perfectly indifferent to those representations. Amerindian thought proposes the opposite: a representational or phenomenological unity which is purely pronominal or deictic, indifferently applied to a radically objective diversity. One single ‘culture’, multiple ‘natures’—perspectivism is multinaturalist, for a perspective is not a representation. A perspective is not a representation because representations are a property of the mind or spirit, whereas the point of view is located in the body. The ability to adopt a point of view is undoubtedly a power of the soul, and non-humans are subjects in so far as they have (or are) spirit; but the differences between viewpoints (and a viewpoint is nothing if not a difference) lies not in the soul.

Since the soul is formally identical in all species, it can only see the same things everywhere—the difference is given in the specificity of bodies’. (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 469–88)

<sup>11</sup> ‘In sum, these are worlds where humanity is immanent [...]; that is, worlds where the primordial takes human form; which does not make it in any sense comforting, much the opposite: there where all things are human, the human is something else entirely. And there where all things are human, nobody can be certain of being unconditionally human, because nobody is—including ourselves. In fact, humans have to be capable of deconditioning their humanity in certain conditions, since the influx of the non-human and becoming-other-than-human are obligatory moments of a fully human condition. The world of immanent humanity is also (and for the same reasons) a world of the immanence of the enemy’. (Viveiros de Castro 2012: 32)

<sup>12</sup> ‘In anthropology, the image of the shaman is known as a diplomat or cosmic translator, one who travels through different worlds and deals with diverse but equally human subjects. In order to return and tell what he has seen, the shaman cannot confuse perspectives, otherwise he runs the risk of being captured by another’s vision, becoming definitively another. In the theory of shamanistic translation, the same referent, object or word may mean something else entirely, depending on the perspective. There is no adamic, absolute language responsible for equalizing the differences between worlds and languages’ (Imbassahy 2019).

<sup>13</sup> In another passage: ‘Later the *xapiri* came to reassemble the segments of my body, which they had dismembered. They put my skull and torso where the lower part of my body goes, and they put that part where my arms and head go. It is true! They put me back together upside down, placing my rear where my face was and my mouth where my anus was! Then, they put a large belt of colorful *bëima si* and *wisawisama si* bird feathers at the juncture of the two parts of my reconstructed body. They also replaced my entrails with those the spirits have, which are smaller, dazzling white, carefully wound around themselves and covered in luminous down feathers. Then they replaced my tongue with the one they reconstructed and put teeth in my mouth that were as beautiful as theirs, colored like the plumage of the *sei si* birds. They also replaced my throat with a tube, which we call *purunaki*, so that I could continue to deftly learn their songs and speak clearly. This tube is the spirits’ larynx. This is where they get their voice’s breath. It is a door through which our words can come out beautiful and right’ (*QDC*: 95–96).

<sup>14</sup> As Viveiros de Castro said: ‘Anthropology cannot content itself with describing in minute detail “the indigenous point of view” [...] if it is only subsequently going to be gratified to identify, in the best critical tradition, the blind spots in that perspective, and thereby absorb it in the point of view of the observer. Perspectivism demands precisely the opposite, symmetric task, which is to discover what a point of view is for the indigenous: the concept of the point of view at work in Amerindian cultures, which is also the indigenous point of view on the anthropological concept of the point of view’. (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 77)

<sup>15</sup> As stated by Spivak: ‘This isn’t an attempt to depict ‘the way things really were’ or to favour the narrative of history as imperialism as the superior historical account. Rather, it is an effort to present an account of how a particular explanation and narrative of reality became the normative one’ (Spivak 1988: 48).

<sup>16</sup> An insightful development of this discussion is founded on the concept of *cosmopolitics*. Unlike the way in which Kant had thought about the concept of cosmopolitanism, which is closer to the sense of universal reason, cosmopolitics makes room for an inclusive notion of other knowledges that cannot be reduced to a simplified ‘centre versus periphery’ image of rationality. As Isabelle Stengers has argued, instead of starting from a principle of self-referential rationality, which, in its pretension to universality, ends up being manifestly exclusive, cosmopolitics sees efforts at translation and political imagination that make room for other ways of articulating the world (Stengers 2007, 2011). Not coincidentally, much of the inspiration for this vision has been found in Amerindian perspectivism, which offers images that predate a rigid distinction between nature and subject and offers a vocabulary opposed to the notion of rationality as domination.

<sup>17</sup> Still, if we revisit Hegel’s task of connecting being and thought, providing the philosophical tools to describe a ‘rationality of reality’, closely aligned with his ambitious goals in his *Logic*, such theoretical challenges already reveal how Hegel might have fallen short in grasping the plural and complex forms Reason could take. A closer examination demonstrates that the level of conceptual analysis is rich enough to provide elements that, at the very least, could introduce tensions to Hegel’s framework.

<sup>18</sup> A previous version of this paper was presented at a workshop in preparation for the current special issue of the *Hegel Bulletin* on Racism and Colonialism in Hegel’s Philosophy. The discussions and other participants’ papers provided me with valuable insights. I am particularly grateful for the thoughtful comments I received from Jamila Mascát, Franz Knappik, Javier Hernández Soto, Pedro Pennycook and Federico Sanguinetti.

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