

6-1-2019

## Habib, M.A.R. Hegel and Empire: From Postcolonialism to Globalism. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Harold A. Young Ph.D.  
Austin Peay State University, youngh@apsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Young, Harold A. Ph.D. (2019) "Habib, M.A.R. Hegel and Empire: From Postcolonialism to Globalism. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 10 : No. 2 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol10/iss2/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact [phuffman@lindenwood.edu](mailto:phuffman@lindenwood.edu).

**Habib, M.A.R. *Hegel and Empire: From Postcolonialism to Globalism*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.**

M.A.R Habib's *Hegel and Empire: From Postcolonialism to Globalism* focuses on Hegel's "master-slave" (master-bondsman) dialectic and its link to empire, post-colonial theory, Africa, India, Islam, and globalism. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) was well known in his day for his dialectics: thesis to antithesis and then to a synthesis. His influence on his contemporaries is reflected in the works of Kant, Hume, and Rousseau; many carefully crafted public policies reflect Hegel's Eurocentric biases. Habib's well-sourced book is important because it illustrates how Hegelian philosophy continues to underpin the post-colonial era through the European/Western imperialism and globalism that still treats the rest of the world as the static "Other," to be led by the progress of the White Christian/Protestant West.

Habib offers the reader several challenges. The first is to understand the dialectic in its historical context. This approach supports Eurocentricity, imperialism, and a Protestant/Christian outlook as the driver of capitalism, something which resonates strongly today. Second, he suggests we can read Hegel devoid of historical context, rejecting any single universal historical process, instead using the dialectic as a tool to forge identity and consciousness. While the author explains the dialectic as a means of avoiding internal contradictions, there is an assumption of validity that makes the dialectic useful. This is problematic, as the dialectic assumes that Europeans have superior explanations of human existence. Further, when read in the historical context, Hegel himself gives many indications that he was a product of a Western environment and history. Hegel blatantly reveals the obvious biases, inconsistencies, and purposely negative approaches to Africa, Asia, Judaism, and Islam that inhibit any objective application of his own dialectics. Having never been to Africa or Asia himself, he relies on the jaundiced writing of others such as Bezenet (1771, rpt 1778) for his opinion on Africa as whole, and for all times. Further, his own selective reading of the Mahābhārata (the Indian epic poem composed between 300 BC and 300 AD) and Islamic literature predisposes him to conclusions grounded in historical preconceptions of their subordination. This results in casting the "Other" (Africa, Asia and Islam) as inferior and deserving of domination by Europe. Hegel's own application of his elegant dialectic to Africa leads him to conclude:

In Negro life, the characteristic point is that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence—as for example God, or Law—in which the interest of man's volition is involved and realizes his own being....The Negro...exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state...Hegel's Philosophy of History, 93)

Hegel concludes the Negro "does not show an inherent striving for culture" and "Negros are to be regarded as a race of children" (Hegel's Encyclopedia, III, p. 393, Zus). Further, he blames the Native Americans for their own demise, due to their own natural deficiencies. Edward Said (1980) captures the essence of the Eurocentric imperialism threading of the dialectic this way: "Imperialism was the theory, colonialism the practice of changing the useless unoccupied territories of the world into useful versions of the European metropolitan society" (p. 78). India does not fare much better. Hegel applies his dialectic and concludes that Hinduism is confused and indeterminate and "deals with nothing according to its proper nature and overturns each and everything," which in turn blocks "clear understanding" (Hegel's Aesthetics I, p. 343).

Ultimately, if Habib's goal is to salvage the Hegelian dialectic from its historical context and the writings of Hegel himself, he falls short. The greatest weakness of *Hegel and Empire: From Postcolonialism to Globalism* is Habib's failure to persuade readers that we should read Hegel (however flawed) unhinged from its historical mooring. It is precisely Hegel's historical context that informs us of his intent. Further, Habib does not question the internal validity of the dialectic. Hegel's foundational tenets of movement from thesis through antithesis and then synthesis are unquestioned and could be helpful if actually applied in historical context (not detached from it), illustrating Hegel's own racist and demonstrably flawed application. In effect, therefore, Habib wittingly or unwittingly is prepared to accept the Hegelian assertion (supported by other thinkers of the time) of European superiority.

*Hegel and Empire: From Postcolonialism to Globalism* is a compelling sortie into the philosophical and intellectual links that create and sustain White Eurocentricity by treating the "Other" as static, barbaric, and secondary, the existence of which demands to be dominated and transformed (if not extinguished). To his credit, Habib avoids completely validating Hegel and makes the Hegelian dialectic accessible without losing the nuances or ignoring the contradictions. Further, he provides the reader with numerous critiques, including those of Buck-Moss (2009); Tibebe (2001), Berman (1998), Fanon (1952, rpt 2008; 1961), Young (2004), Spivak (1999), and Chaudhury (1965). Habib succinctly employs both supporters and critics of Hegel to lay bare the connections between racist events, racist policies, and institutions complicit in the perpetuation of racism and white supremacy. Hegel's influence was not lost on the earliest of anti-colonial thinkers, like Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois, who recognized the implication of the dialectic in degrading both the "master" and the "bondsmen" in maintaining their unequal status and thereby frustrating the human progress promised by the dialectic in realizing true consciousness. The wide range of sources is a credit to this book.

The dialectic is inextricably intertwined with Hegel's view of European superiority and the right of European states to dominate the inferior regions that have nothing of real value to contribute to human history. Hegel's work is mired in its historical context, and Hegel himself ensures that it appeals to the European ego and supports colonialism, imperialism, and globalization thinly disguised as manifest destiny. Nevertheless, Habib's *Hegel and Empire* is a must read for anyone seeking useful insights into the philosophical underpinnings of European Protestant imperialism. Undoubtedly, this work illuminates the Hegelian racist Protestant imperialism using a plethora of reputable sources from within and without Africa and Asia. Further, it helps us crystallize and identify the ongoing challenges and the devastating effects of Eurocentric racism and the marginalization of peoples of color as individuals, communities, and modern states that continues in our own time.

### References

- Fanon, Frantz. ([1952] 2008). *Black Skins, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press.
- Hegel, G.W.E. (1980). *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. trans. H.B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hegel, G.W.E. ([1830] 1971). *Philosophy of the Mind: Being Part three of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830), trans. William Wallace. Oxford: Clarendon Press,
- Hegel, G.W.E. (1974). *Aesthetics: Lectures on the Fine Arts*. Volume I, trans. T.M. Knox Vol. I Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harold A. Young PhD  
Austin Peay State University  
youngh@apsu.edu