

# AFRICA, MODERNITY, FREEDOM<sup>1</sup>

## África, modernidad, libertad

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Recibido: junio 2018; Aceptado: abril 2019

Cómo citar: Serequeberhan, Tsenay (2019). África, modernity, freedom.

Revista de Estudios Africanos, Número Cero (2019): páginas. 1-22

doi: <http://doi.org/10.15366/reauam2019.0.001>

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### Abstract

The paper is focused on highlighting some choice samplings from modern European philosophical narratives of “emancipation” and showing how they frame Africa, and the world beyond Europe, into a subordinate position in need of “beneficent” conquest. The paper will argue that, to undo this frame the formerly colonized must articulate their own sense of history, in and through which they can enter our contemporary world on their own terms. It will argue this point by articulating what it takes to be a central concern of contemporary African philosophy, i.e., the systematic undermining of Western hegemonic narratives while—and concurrently—formulating a stance cognizant of the varied, incommensurable, historical and cultural actualities that are, and constitute, our shared human existence. The focus of the paper is thus to explore the possible, beyond the demise of colonialism, in the hope of catching-sight-of a truly postcolonial future.

**Key words:** *Idea; emancipation; colonized; decolonized; frame.*

### Resumen

Este texto se propone destacar algunas muestras selectas de narraciones filosóficas europeas modernas de “emancipación” y mostrar cómo encuadran a África y al mundo más allá de Europa, en una posición subordinada que hace necesaria una conquista “benéfica”. Se argumentará que, para deshacer este *marco*, los antiguos colonizados

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<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this paper was an invited presentation prepared for and presented at the, *Africa and Modernity Workshop*, organized by the Axer Chair in the Philosophy Department and Global African Studies, Seattle University, Seattle Washington, December 2–3, 2005. All emphasis in the original unless otherwise indicated.

deben articular su propio sentido de la historia, a través del cual pueden ingresar a nuestro mundo contemporáneo en sus propios términos. Sustentará este argumento en lo que considera como un cometido esencial de la filosofía africana contemporánea, a saber, el socavamiento sistemático de las narraciones hegemónicas occidentales, al tiempo que, de manera concomitante, desarrolla un enfoque que tiene en cuenta las variadas, inconmensurables, históricas y culturales realidades que son, y constituyen, nuestra existencia humana compartida. El objetivo del trabajo es, por lo tanto, explorar lo posible, más allá de la desaparición del colonialismo, con la esperanza de llegar a tener una idea de lo que sería un futuro verdaderamente postcolonial.

**Palabras clave:** *Idea; emancipación; colonizado; descolonizado; marco.*

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## - 1 -

As Jean-François Lyotard has observed the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries are “governed by an *Idea* (in the Kantian sense); the Idea of emancipation”,<sup>2</sup> constituted by the:

Christian narrative of the redemption of original sin through love; the *Aufklärer* narrative of emancipation from ignorance and servitude through knowledge and egalitarianism; the speculative narrative of the realization of the universal idea through the dialectic of the concrete; the Marxist narrative of emancipation from exploitation and alienation through the socialization of work; and the capitalist narrative of emancipation from poverty through technoindustrial [*sic*] development.<sup>3</sup>

These two centuries are also the period in which Africa was completely colonized and subsequently, towards the end of the twentieth century, achieved the status of political independence. It seems then that the colonization and subsequent decolonization (i.e., the attainment of formal political independence) of Africa occurs within a period of Western history “governed” by differing narratives of “emancipation.” And, as Lyotard further points out, “there is ground for litigation and even for differends” between, or among, these narratives but, despite this, for all of them history, and the happenings that constitute it, is arranged and understood in terms of what “is called universal freedom, the fulfillment

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<sup>2</sup>Lyotard, Jean-François (1992) *The Postmodern Explained*, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 25.

of all of humanity”.<sup>4</sup> These narratives are thus guided and controlled by “the Idea”. And it is within the glow, the sanctimonious halo, opened-up by this “Idea” that brutal conquest is seen as, and becomes, the arduous effort aimed at benefiting and bettering humankind, *per se*.

In what follows, I will highlight some choice narratives “of emancipation” articulated by Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Karl Marx. These are three of the most important thinkers of European modernity, rooted in the Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> As we shall see, these narratives “of emancipation” “governed” by “the Idea” *frame* Africa, and the world beyond Europe, into a subordinate position in need of *beneficent* conquest. I will argue that, to undo this *frame*, the formerly colonized must articulate their own sense of history. I will argue this point by enunciating what I take to be a central concern of contemporary African philosophy, i.e., the systematic undermining of Occidental narratives while, and concurrently, formulating a stance cognizant of the varied cultures and incommensurable histories that constitute our shared world.<sup>6</sup> Let us then begin by looking at some choice samplings of Europe’s self-flattering narratives.

## - 2 -

Reflecting on aspects of the Enlightenment—the cultural/intellectual movement that ushered in and accompanied the material transformations that became the modern age—and specifically on the work of Immanuel Kant, Cornelius Castoriadis makes the following insightful remarks on the mind-set of this period of European history. He writes:

For, everybody always judges and chooses not only within but by means of

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>For a systematic critique of the Eurocentric proclivities of these seminal thinkers please see my book (2007) *Contested Memory: The Icons of the Occidental Tradition*, Trenton, NJ, Africa World Press. See also my articles: “Eurocentrism in Philosophy: The Case of Immanuel Kant”, *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. 27, no. 4 Summer 1996; “The Idea of Colonialism in Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”, *International Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 115, September 1989; and “Karl Marx and African Emancipatory Thought: A Critique of Marx’s Euro-centric Metaphysics”, *Praxis International*, vol. 10, nos. 1 & 2, April & July 1990.

<sup>6</sup>For my most recent efforts in this direction please see (2015) *Existence and Heritage*, New York, SUNY Press.

the particular social-historical institutions—the culture, the tradition—which formed him. Indeed, without this he would not be able to judge and choose anything. That Kant is both capable of knowing this and ignoring it is typical of his essential stand as an *Aufklärer*: in truth, there is but one history—and for all that really matters, this one history coincides with our own (or, our own history is the “transcendentally obligatory” meeting point of all particular histories).<sup>7</sup>

As Castoriadis points out, the above is not to be mistaken for an “empirical”<sup>8</sup> view, the result of observation. Rather, this *credo*—that “our own [i.e., Western] history is the ‘transcendentally obligatory’ meeting point of all particular histories”—expresses a speculative attitude, or bias, that arrogates to itself the status of humanity, as such. This is what Castoriadis means when he states that Kant knows that he works from within a specific heritage that forms and determines every aspect of his thought and being and nonetheless can ignore this situatedness.

This is the force of Castoriadis’s remarks, for the tacit ignoring of lived actuality is as it should be since, “this postulate—the ‘transcendentalization’ of the historical fact of the *Aufklärung* is necessary, if the semblance of an answer is to be given in ‘universal’ terms to the original question”,<sup>9</sup> the question of “What Is Enlightenment?” (1784); the question as Kant posed it, of “man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage”.<sup>10</sup> The abstraction “man,” in Kant’s posing of the question, is a convenient place holder for European history-culture which, effectively, conceals—befuddled by its own deluding abstraction of itself—the variedness that is humankind.

The “semblance” of universality is indispensable, furthermore, because Enlightenment is aimed at not just European humanity but humankind, as such. For as Kant tells us in “An Old Question raised Again: Is the human Race Constantly Progressing?” (1789), his concern is with “the totality of men united socially on earth and apportioned into peoples (*universorum*)”.<sup>11</sup> The focus of his reflections is thus the population of the earth, as a whole. Indeed, as Kant himself points out, in the “Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” published in the

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<sup>7</sup>Castoriadis, C. (1991) *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 100.

<sup>8</sup>Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Kant, I. “What Is Enlightenment?”, in *Kant on History*, ed., and intro., Beck L.W. (1963), Indianapolis, IN, Bobbs-Merrill, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup>*Kant on History*, p. 137.

same year as, “What Is Enlightenment?” (1784).

[I]f one starts with Greek history, through which every older or contemporaneous history has been handed down or at least certified; if one follows the influence of Greek history on the construction and misconstruction of the Roman state which swallowed up the Greek, then the Roman influence on the barbarians who in turn destroyed it, and so on down to our times; if one adds episodes from the *national histories of other peoples insofar as they are known from the history of the enlightened nations*, one will discover a regular progress in the constitution of states on *our continent* (which will probably give law, eventually, to all the others).<sup>12</sup>

Kant conflates his empirical concern for differing “peoples” (i.e., races, nations, etc.) with the *credo* that posits European history as the mandatory, or requisite, transcendental “meeting point of all particular histories”. For, it is from the perspective of “the history of enlightened nations” that world historical developments are considered and only in terms of the self-understanding of these very nations. Thus, “man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage,” is seen as being coequal with the very process through which, ultimately, the Occident gives law “to all the others”.

Now, this calls for the “semblance” of universality because Kant’s thinking is oriented by European history—i.e., a particular history—and yet his concern is with the situation of humankind, as a whole. That is why he tells us that “eventually” “all the others” will receive the “law” from Europe. The default between *orientation* and *concern*, in Kant’s thinking, is nicely cloaked/masked by an elevated—and purportedly disinterested—stance grounded on the *abstraction* “man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage” which, effectively, confers the semblance of universality on Kant’s specific orientation. It does so by dissimulating the particularity of Occidental historicity under the abstraction “man”.

It should be noted that Kant does not stand alone in this “transcendentalization” of the historicity of the Occident. The historical-political thinking of Hegel and Marx, among others, is also based on a logic that marginalizes and requires us to *see* humanity, in all its varied diversity and vastness, not as it shows itself (i.e., as different, diverse, multiple, contradictory, etc.) but in and through, what Lyotard refers to as,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 24, emphasis added.

the “mediation or protection of a ‘pre-text’”<sup>13</sup> that flattens all difference. This is masterfully accomplished by elevating the Occidental historicity of mastery—i.e., the “pre-text”—to the status of human historicity *per se*.

And so, specific and concrete forms of non-Occidental existence/experience are automatically seen, and presented, as being mediocre, degraded, and below the level of humanity proper. Thus, Kant, citing David Hume, can state categorically, with brazen confidence, that:

The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praise-worthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world.<sup>14</sup>

Much could be written on these luminous and illuminating gems of thought! Kant, who never left the security and comfort of his native city of Königsberg, makes light of being “transported elsewhere.” And notice, he is well aware that this *transporting* is the act of enslavement, since he mentions that once “set free”, the victims of this heinous crime, do not amount to much. As Hannah Arendt points out, Kant valued highly “one’s community sense, one’s *sensus communis*”<sup>15</sup> and saw it as the source of one’s humanity and critical capacity to judge and communicate. And yet, he makes light of being violently uprooted from “one’s community sense”, the experience of enslavement, when this calamity befalls the “Negroes of Africa”.

To be sure, Kant was not devoid of sympathy for non-European peoples. In “Perpetual Peace” (1795) he is quite disturbed by the

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<sup>13</sup>Lyotard, Jean-François (1988) *Peregrinations*, New York, Columbia University Press, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup>Kant, I. (1965) *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, p. 75. An interesting anecdote: In 1734, 30 years before Kant wrote the above, Dr. Anton Wilhelm Amo (an African) “submitted his inaugural dissertation to the faculty” of the “University of Wittenberg.” McClendon, J.H. (2003) “Introduction to Drs. Anton Wilhelm Amo and Charles Leander Hill,” *APA Newsletters*, vol. 02, no. 2, Spring, p. 42.

<sup>15</sup>Arendt, H. (1982) *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*; ed., & intro., Beiner, R., Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, p. 75.

“injustice” of civilized commercial nations, from “our part of the world”, in their dealings with other peoples. He notes the regrettable fact that “the lands inhabited by the Negro, the Spice Islands, the Cape, etc., were at the time of their discovery considered by these civilized intruders as lands without owners, for they considered the inhabitants as nothing.”<sup>16</sup> A few lines further he mentions, with indignation, “the Sugar Islands, that place of the most refined and cruel slavery”.<sup>17</sup> All of this he notes is the work of “powers, which make a great show of their piety...while they drink injustice like water”.<sup>18</sup> These words of indignation do Kant honor! They show his compassion and concern, for distant Others.

And yet, the selfsame Kant, in the second part of his, “Reviews of Herder’s *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind*” (1785), rhetorically asks, “if the happy inhabitants of Tahiti, never visited by more civilized nations, were destined to live in their quite indolence” one could not satisfactorily answer the question “why they bothered to exist at all, and whether it would have been just as well that this island should have been occupied by happy sheep and cattle as by happy men engaged in mere pleasure?”<sup>19</sup> Having criticized the arrogance of Europe’s treatment of the peoples beyond its shores, Kant repeats—and thus philosophically validates and sanctions—this same gesture. For, what he criticizes is the concrete effect of the “unsocial sociability”<sup>20</sup> of human nature—that aspect of human existence—which he conceptualizes as innately violent and destructive and, in this respect, necessary for the proper unfolding of culture and history which, somehow, the Tahitians seem to lack. And so, he writes:

Thanks be to nature, then, for the incompatibility, for heartless competitive vanity, for insatiable desire to possess and rule! Without them, all the excellent natural capacities of humanity would forever sleep undeveloped. Man wishes concord, but nature knows better what is good for the race, she wills discord.<sup>21</sup>

But it should be noted that the arrogant aggressive stance of European states—in their dealings with the non-European world—is driven precisely

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<sup>16</sup>Kant on History, 103–104.

<sup>17</sup>Ibidem, p. 105.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Kant on History, pp. 51–52.

<sup>20</sup>Kant on History, “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 16.

by this “insatiable desire to possess and rule”, this “discord” which nature “wills”. Indeed, this is so arranged, Kant tells us, that “perhaps” it is a sign, or a confirmation, of “the ordering of a wise Creator”.<sup>22</sup> But then, Kant can’t have it both ways. He cannot, on the one hand, approvingly impute to nature, and to a “wise Creator,” these tendencies and, concurrently, condemn the effects of these very tendencies. Now, having, thus far, glimpsed some choice samples from Kant’s “enlightened” Enlightenment narrative, we must now go on to do the same with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

Albert Memmi, writing in 1957, points out that: “Today, the economic motives of colonial undertakings are revealed by every historian of colonialism”.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, as far back as 1821, with his singular insight into “the conditions of the modern world”,<sup>24</sup> Hegel was well aware of these “economic motives.” In the third and central section of the *Philosophy of Right* (1821), he shows, and in detail, how modern European society generates a segment of itself which it is incapable of maintaining on an acceptable standard of life (pr. 241). A segment of society which, continually, slides into poverty and pauperism. Hegel sees this as the central and insolvable problem of modern society, the concurrent and incessant creation, under normal conditions—of misery and wealth—at opposite extremes, in the regular functioning of the economic mechanism of modern European society (pr. 245). And so, Hegel accurately and despairingly points out that: “The important question of how poverty is to be abolished is one of the most disturbing problems which agitate modern [European] society” (addition to pr. 244).

It is this vexing problem which prods Hegel to endorse the colonization of “lands, which are...generally backward in industry” (pr. 246). In keeping with the imperialistic sentiment of his day, Hegel sees migration and “systematic colonization”, directed by the state (pr. 247-249), as the only solution to the social-economic problems that afflict

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Memmi, A. (1967) *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Boston, MA, Beacon Press, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, trans., with notes, T.M. Knox (1967), Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, p. 126, paragraph no. 189. Knox translates the term Geist as “Mind.” In keeping with contemporary convention, I substitute the term “Spirit” for every occurrence of the term “Mind.” All reference to this text will henceforth be given in paragraph (pr.) numbers in brackets in the body of the text.



modern European society.<sup>25</sup> And so, he bluntly states: “Civil society is thus driven to found colonies” (addition to pr. 248). The legitimacy of this rests in the fact that: “The civilized nation is conscious that the rights of barbarians are unequal to its own and treats their autonomy as only a formality” (pr. 351). Indeed, as Hegel points out, colonization solves the socio-economic problems of modern society by relocating, in the colonies, its impoverished segments and, concurrently, as an added incentive, spreading culture and civilization. Thus, Hegel tailor-fits the imperialistic practices of European states, to “the Idea” and goes on to affirm that: “It is the absolute right of the Idea to step into existence in clear-cut laws and objective institutions” (pr. 350). In this, it should be clear by now that, for Hegel, “the Idea” is a placeholder and/or a surrogate for the Occident.

In the “Geographical Basis of History”, to be found in the much-neglected second section of the introduction to *The Philosophy of History* (1830), it is based on similar considerations that Hegel justifies the enslavement of Africans. The African Negro, for Hegel, is a human being that does not exist on a par with humanity proper.<sup>26</sup> The Negro has not achieved technical mastery and, when assessed in terms of this “pretext”—i.e., the technical mastery of nature, which is the Occidental historicity of mastery<sup>27</sup>—he is found wanting and appears and presents himself as on the very margins of humanity, i.e., immersed in nature.

To be sure, Hegel points out that: “Slavery is in and for itself an *injustice*”.<sup>28</sup> In the *Philosophy of Right*, he states that: “The argument for

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<sup>25</sup> It is as if Hegel consciously supplies practical colonialists with a metaphysical-theoretical scaffolding, for their colonialist projects. This is how for example, Cecil Rhodes, a pioneer colonialist understood his purpose in Africa: “I was in the East End of London yesterday and attended a meeting of the unemployed. I listened to the wild speeches, which were just a cry for “bread,” “bread,” “bread,” and on my way home I pondered over the scene and I became more than ever convinced of the importance of imperialism... My cherished idea is a solution for the social problem, i.e., in order to save the 40,000,000 inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statemen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced by them in the factories and mines. The Empire, as I have always said, is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists.” As quoted by Lenin, V.I. (1939) in *Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, New York, International Publishers, p. 79.

<sup>26</sup> *The Philosophy of History* (1956) prefaced by Hegel, C., and trans., Sibree J., New York, NY, Dover Press, pp. 93-99.

<sup>27</sup> See note 13 above.

<sup>28</sup> *The Philosophy of History*, p. 99.

the absolute injustice of slavery...adheres to the concept of man as spirit, as something inherently free" (second section of pr. 57). Slavery goes against "the essence of humanity" which, according to Hegel, is "*Freedom*".<sup>29</sup> But "for this man must be matured",<sup>30</sup> and in view of a lack of maturity in the African, whose "Kings...sell their captured enemies, or even their own subjects",<sup>31</sup> in view of this *immaturity* "we may conclude slavery to have been the occasion of the increase of human feeling"<sup>32</sup> in the Negro. It is interesting to note that for Hegel, the selling of "captured enemies, or even... [one's] own subjects" reflects badly or negatively on the being (i.e., the humanity or lack thereof) of the African. The correlative act of buying human beings—engaged in by modern Europeans—on the other hand, has no such marring effects on their humanity! Indeed, for Hegel, it can be seen as initiating "a phase of education"<sup>33</sup> that extricates the Negro from complete immersion in nature, and so, a "gradual abolition of slavery" is to be preferred to "its sudden removal".<sup>34</sup>

Hegel's stance supplies a firm metaphysical-ethical grounding for the self-understanding of actual colonizers. As if echoing Hegel, for example, Father Placide Tempels writes: "[O]ur civilizing mission alone can justify our occupation of the lands of uncivilized peoples".<sup>35</sup> In philosophy as in life, civilized, uncivilized—these are the terms in which Africa, and the world beyond Europe, is *framed* as an object of conquest, in the poetic words of Rudyard Kipling, as "Half devil and half child".<sup>36</sup> Thus far, we have seen how Kant and Hegel ensnare Africa in this manner and reduce the African to the status of a *thing* that *invites beneficent conquest*.<sup>37</sup> In

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<sup>29</sup>Ibidem.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Tempels, P. (1969) *Bantu Philosophy*, Paris, Présence Africaine, pp. 171–72 (originally published in 1945).

<sup>36</sup>This is the last line, of the first stanza, of Kipling's notorious poem, "The White Man's Burden", in Eliot, T.S. (1962) *A Choice of Kipling's Verse*, New York, Anchor Books, p. 143.

<sup>37</sup>As Aimé Césaire puts it: "*A mon tour de poser une équation: colonisation = chosification*". *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1955), Paris and Dakar, Présence Africaine, p. 19. I say "invites" because as Anne Hugon points out: "In 1788 [i.e., at the height of the Enlightenment] a booklet was issued in London by the newly formed Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa (or the African Association). It

Karl Marx, we find again the same *frame* of “the Idea,” in the idiom of the “materialist conception of history”, in which Africa, and the world beyond Europe, is ensnared.

One of the most memorable passages in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) is the passage in which Marx celebrates the advent, the establishment, of the modern age in and through the concurrent and systematic globalization of Europe. He writes:

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all nations, even the most barbarian, into civilization. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In a word, it creates a world after its own image.<sup>38</sup>

European expansion creates one unified civilization, by globalizing the socio-economic conditions of modern European existence. Marx hesitates momentarily: the bourgeoisie compels barbarians to “introduce what it calls civilization”. But this is only a momentary hesitation. Earlier, in the same passage, Marx points out that the bourgeoisie “draws all nations, even the most barbarian, into civilization”. He then approvingly notes that, with the “cheap prices of its commodities...it forces the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate”.

And so, the stiff resistance that European expansion encounters is described, not as the legitimate resistance of differing peoples fighting off unprovoked aggression, but as the “barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners”. Opposition to European aggression is not legitimate, it is merely a manifestation of barbarism! But why, why, is Marx so callous?

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stated that at least one third of the inhabited surface of the earth was unknown, notably Africa, virtually in its entirety. For the first time this ignorance was seen as a shameful gap in human knowledge that must immediately be filled” (*The Exploration of Africa, From Cairo to the Cape*, (1993), New York, Harry N. Abrams Inc., p. 19). And so, the colonization of Africa is pursued under the *guise* and in the interest of knowledge and the betterment of humankind.

<sup>38</sup>Marx, K., and Engels, F. (1983) *The Communist Manifesto*, New York, International Publishers, p. 13.

Because for him the conditions of modern European existence are the context in which the human being is “compelled to face with sober senses his *real* conditions of life”.<sup>39</sup> Modern society, in other words, in contradistinction to the feudal past and/or non-European social formations, for Marx, institutes *The True* conditions of human existence. As he tells us in *Capital Vol. 1*:

Those ancient [non-European] social organisms of production are, as compared with [European] bourgeois society, extremely simple and transparent. But they are founded...on the immaturity of man...who *has not yet severed* the umbilical cord that unites him with...a primitive tribal community...and exist only when the development of the productive power of labour has not risen beyond a low stage, and when, therefore, the social relations within the sphere of material life, between man and man, and between man and Nature, are correspondingly narrow [i.e., low].<sup>40</sup>

The point of the above comparative assessment is the situation of human life in non-European, pre-capitalist, pre-modern societies. For Marx, these societies are based on the “immaturity of man”, which means that human beings, in these societies, have not yet “severed the umbilical cord that” binds them to nature. His stance is anticipatory. The “umbilical cord” “has not yet” been cut, but it is destined to be “severed”. As Jacques Taminiaux has observed, this anticipatory comparative stance is constituted in terms of and by reference to “the productive force” of modern European society.<sup>41</sup> For Marx, in the above passage, the *idea* is that the limited and inferior mode of life—of non-European societies—will be transcended in and through the development of the forces of production. In this regard, colonial conquest has a beneficent effect; it hastens and facilitates development. As Marx points out in “The British Rule in India” (1853):

England...in causing a social revolution in Hindustan was actuated only by the *vilest interests*, and was *stupid in her manner of enforcing them*. But that is not the question. The question is, can *mankind* fulfill its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the *crimes* of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing

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<sup>39</sup>Ibidem, p. 2 (emphasis added).

<sup>40</sup>Marx, K. (1974) *Capital Vol. 1*, ed., Engels, F., New York, NY, International Publishers, p. 79 (emphasis added).

<sup>41</sup>Taminiaux, J. (1979) “Empiricism and Speculation in the German Ideology”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 6, no. 3 (Fall), p. 257.

about that revolution.<sup>42</sup>

What must be noted and emphasized in the above—which applies not only to India, but to the non-European world as a whole—is that, for Marx, in view of the singular “destiny” of “mankind”, European colonialism has a beneficial effect. It unites the world in and through the globalization of European culture. Despite his commendable indignation, expressed by the words “vilest interests”, “stupid in her manner of enforcement”, and “crimes”—the frame of the Idea—the logic of his thinking, compels Marx to endorse the effects of the ignoble motives that fuel his indignation. His outrage is trumped, in other words, by “mankind fulfilling its destiny”. As we noted earlier with Kant’s use of the abstraction “man,” the abstraction “mankind”, fulfills, in Marx, a similar function; it plays the role of a convenient place-holder that dissimulates the particularity of European historicity and makes it appear, or presents it, as historicity *per se*.

In all of the above, what our choice samples show is that, Africa, and the world beyond Europe, is inhabited by a lower grade/segment of humanity.<sup>43</sup> The “idea of emancipation” that “governs” the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries and is articulated in the differing narratives of Kant, Hegel, and Marx, places Africa—and the world beyond Europe—in this lower position. Correlatively, it elevates and presents European humanity as coequal with humanity, *per se*.

The historical and violent globalization of Europe is thus not seen as merely the factual result of the effective use of modern armaments (e.g., the Maxim gun), but as part of a larger process of fulfilling the *telos* of humanity. But one needs to ask: Does humanity have a *telos*? Kant, Hegel, and Marx seem to think so. In their reflections, the “enlightened” perspective of their time is posited as the *telos* inherent in humankind. Castoriadis refers to this, in the case of Kant, as “the ‘transcendentalization’ of the historical fact of the Aufklärung”.<sup>44</sup> The same holds true, as we saw above, for Hegel and Marx, and if one is prepared to undertake the textual “leg work”, the same can be shown to be the case with Hobbes, Locke, Hume, etc.—i.e., the modern tradition of European thinking as a whole. But why is this so?

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<sup>42</sup>Marx, K. (1972) “The British Rule in India,” in Marx, K., and Engels, F., *On Colonialism*, New York. International Publishers, p. 41 (emphasis added).

<sup>43</sup>On this point, Eiseley, L. (1961) *Darwin’s Century*, New York, Anchor Books, see chapter ten and specifically pp. 26-264.

<sup>44</sup>See note 9 above.

As Hans-Georg Gadamer tells us, enlightenment inspired modern European thinking was grounded on “the prejudice against prejudice”.<sup>45</sup> The belief, or bias, that one’s thinking is *scientifically*<sup>46</sup> grounded and thus beyond the limitations of prejudice and/or bias. This epistemically untenable claim traps the thinker, in the belief that his/her own perspective/bias is the very measure of the *True*. And so, in the guise of universality the thinker, thus befuddled and enthralled, effectively *transcendentalizes* the prejudices/biases of his/her own culture and age, because she/he thinks that he/she has overcome all perspectives and is writing and thinking in the realm of the universal *as such*. Given our finitude *malheureusement*, this is not possible.<sup>47</sup>

We all exist within the bounds of our lived historicity. As mortals the touchstone and source of our thinking, our lived existence, is our situatedness. As Gadamer appropriately observes in *Truth and Method*, “a standpoint...beyond any standpoint [*überstandpunktliche Standpunkt*]” is, in effect, “a pure illusion [*eine reine Illusion*]”.<sup>48</sup> Here, it is imperative to note that the Occident globalized itself and subjugated the world at a time, in its history, when it was under the firm grip of this “illusion”. Charmed by its grandiose myths about itself Europe subjected the globe and, in so doing, devastated the earth and impoverished—by eradicating countless

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<sup>45</sup>Gadamer, H-G. (1982) *Truth and Method*, New York, Crossroad Pub. Co., p. 242.

<sup>46</sup>As Hugon points out: “The European elite—stirred by the discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton, the writings of René Descartes and Francis Bacon, and Denis Diderot’s publication in 1751 of the first encyclopedia—was becoming increasingly fascinated by science and in particular by ethnography... Interest in the facts of the natural world was not, however, an end in itself. Toward the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was believed to be *the mission of human reason to achieve perfect mastery of the world by discovering the laws of the universe*. Thus the African Association, resolutely up-to-date in its optimism, proclaimed its conviction in the usefulness...of enlarging human knowledge through the exploration of Africa.” *The Exploration of Africa, From Cairo to the Cape*, 19 – 20, and emphasis added. This is the source of the “scientific” attitude critiqued by Gadamer. All of this, on the whole, has been surpassed and is today behind us. On this last point see, Vattimo, G. (2005) “The Age of Interpretation”, in *The Future of Religion*, ed. S. Zabala, New York, Colombia University Press, p. 45.

<sup>47</sup>This, *grosso modo*, is Gadamer’s critique of the Enlightenment critique of prejudice. In this Gadamer appropriates for modern hermeneutics what Nietzsche, and after him Heidegger, had thematically articulated as the impossibility of a non-situated perspective.

<sup>48</sup>Gadamer (1965) *Truth and Method*, p. 339; *Wahrheit und Methode*, 1965, Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, p.358. The original reads: “*Der überstandpunktliche Standpunkt, von dem aus seine wahre Identität gedacht würde, ist eine reine Illusion.*”

cultures/histories—our shared humanity.<sup>49</sup>

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In view of all of the above, a necessary task of our philosophic reflections, in African philosophy, must be a kind of Socratic dialogical counter-encounter of the Western tradition aimed at “a relevant reading...that has not been addressed”<sup>50</sup> thus far. The aim, of such a “reading” would be the systematic dismantling of the symmetry of concepts/biases and theoretic constructs/presuppositions that have legitimated the subordination of Africa and the world beyond Europe. I have elsewhere referred to this as the “critical-negative aspect”<sup>51</sup> of the discourse of contemporary of African philosophy. A thinking aimed at releasing us from the residual burden of Europe’s self-deluded “thinking” of itself as the center of the universe.

As Gianni Vattimo has noted: “In the second half of the twentieth century...Eurocentric colonialism” has come “to an end”.<sup>52</sup> The “critical-negative aspect” of the contemporary discourse of African philosophy, is a reflective correlate to this situation. For the other side of the West’s claim to superiority is the dependence and internalized inferiority of contemporary Africa. On the other hand, in its *constructive*<sup>53</sup> aspect the practice of African philosophy must engage in the systematic and critical study of indigenous forms of knowledge and “know-how”, both practical and theoretic, focused on a critical “return to the source”<sup>54</sup> which, as Amilcar Cabral points out, is a process of reclaiming the possibilities of

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<sup>49</sup>Today, it is an accepted view, among biologists and environmental scientists that, species extinction harms and impoverishes/degrades the natural environment. Analogously, it is becoming clear that, cultural-historical or language extinctions, have a similar impoverishing effect, on our shared human-cultural-historical environment.

<sup>50</sup>Said, E.W., and Barsamian, D (1994) *The Pen and the Sword*, Monroe, Maine, Common Courage Press, p. 78.

<sup>51</sup>Serequeberhan, T. (2003), “The critique of Eurocentrism and the practice of African philosophy”, in *The African Philosophy Reader* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), edited by P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux, New York, NY, Routledge, p. 64.

<sup>52</sup>Vattimo, G. (2004), *Nihilism and Emancipation*, trans., McCuaig, W., New York, Columbia University Press, p. 52.

<sup>53</sup>On this point see also, Outlaw, L (1987) “African ‘Philosophy’: Deconstructive and reconstructive challenges”, in *Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey*, Vol. 5, *African Philosophy*, ed. Gtton Fløistad, Dordrecht, Netherlands, Martinus Nijhoff, p. 11.

<sup>54</sup>Cabral, A (1973) *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1973, *passim*.

our shared history from within the concrete exigencies and concerns of our present moment of time.

This “return” is aimed at systematically sifting through and appropriating, out of the exigencies of the present, the possibilities of our colonial and precolonial heritage of indigenous and hybrid knowledge. In this regard, and among other things, *we*, those of us engaged in African philosophy, must be willing to learn from and critically study the history of the various African liberation struggles. In this our concern would be focused on the productivity of the *concepts* and *ideas* that we encounter in exploring the resources of this recent history.

During the period of these struggles—which lasted anywhere between 10 to 30 years—a concrete “return to the source” was enacted which, in many cases, has fallen into neglect after the achievement of political independence. It is as if the attainment of the goal, of these struggles, ended by smothering, in its success and euphoria, the process of the hard labor of struggle that made it possible. This was a struggle grounded on its own indigenous resources and remedies, derived from specific and particular histories. In these histories we have access to the forgotten heritages of differing struggles: *our* shared treasure-trove of cultural-historical resources.

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In this respect—in as much as philosophy is a reflexive discourse always located within specific historical-cultural horizons and focused on the exploration of these horizons—this indigenous reorientation of philosophic work is nothing more than the proper practice of philosophy within the lived ambient of our specific histories and cultures.<sup>55</sup> In this local and specific focus, philosophy would be what it has always been, a critically situated speculative, historical, and cultural re-interpretation and interpretative exploration of our neglected indigenous inheritance. A *hatāta*, i.e., a systematic prodding, inventorying, and exploring of our concrete and lived concerns. A critically interpretative sifting and sieving of that which, as Zār’a Ya’aqob puts it, “people hastily accept...from their

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<sup>55</sup>It is important to note that this “indigenous reorientation of philosophic work” is the very character of philosophy. For, the dialogical meanderings of Socratic questioning, or the oracular sayings of pre-Socratic thinkers, or Kant’s systematic critical explorations of “pure reason,” or Nietzsche’s aphorisms directed against the cultural maladies of his age, etc.—are all reflective explorations grounded on an “indigenous terrain” out of which they originate and on which they focus their critical reflections.



fathers”.<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, an extroverted philosophy, properly speaking, fails in its claim to be what it is, precisely because philosophy is always, and of necessity, a lived concern with its own concrete existential space. The central danger in this effort, on the level of theory, is the temptation to formulate an “overall” critical philosophy for Africa, or the formerly colonized world, as a whole. In this respect what should be emphasized is a practice of solidarity in our theoretic efforts, aimed at our local and specific concerns. Only thus can we engage the specificity of our historical situation and combat the Eurocentric proclivity of the dominant tradition.

As Castoriadis has correctly noted, what we can tangibly do as contemporary thinkers working within and/or at the margins of the European tradition is to, “destroy the *myths* which, more than money or weapons, constitute the most formidable obstacle in the way of the reconstitution of human society”.<sup>57</sup> It is these *myths or* narratives, as already noted, that justify Africa’s subordinate position in the modern world. To the extent that our theoretic efforts are aimed at helping in the “reconstitution of human society” we must engage in an exploring and exposing of the *myths* of the colonial era, of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that still control our contemporary world. But how exactly do these myths/narratives affect—on a practical level—the lived situation of contemporary Africa? In other words, what is the urgency in confronting the narcissistic narratives of the Occident? Let us, briefly, look, at an example.

As Paulin Hountondji has noted: “Historically, science and technology, *in their present form* on the African continent, can be traced back to the colonial period”.<sup>58</sup> In today’s Africa, the practice of science, technology, and theoretic work in general—as conducted in African

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<sup>56</sup> Zär’a Ya’aqob (1985) “The Treatise [*Hatäta*] of Zär’a Ya’aqob”, in Sumner C., *Classical Ethiopian Philosophy*, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Commercial Printing Press, p. 235. I have inserted square brackets [] because as Sumner himself points out, in his sectional introduction to Zär’a Ya’aqob’s text, “the title in the *ge’ez* [i.e., the original] is...*hatäta*” (p. 225). On Zär’a Ya’aqob’s conception of philosophy see my book (2000) *Our Heritage*, Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 47-58.

<sup>57</sup>Castoriadis, C. (1991) “Reflections on ‘Rationality’ and ‘Development’ Presentation and Response to Critics”, in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 198.

<sup>58</sup>Hountondji, P. (1990) “Scientific Dependence in Africa Today”, *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 21, no. 3 (Fall), p. 7.

universities and research centers—continues, in the same vein, as during colonial times. This deplorable situation is taken “for granted”<sup>59</sup> and as “normal” by those engaged in scientific work.

Indeed, it would be surprising if this was not so, for the intellectual formation of those engaged in scientific work is internal to a systematic process of the valuation of Europe and the devaluation of Africa. In this context, educational scholarships, for example, ironically perpetuate, as if by design, the very dependency they purportedly aim to eliminate. As Fanon observed, not so long ago, in the Antilles—but also in Africa—when a student returns, the locals’ remark: “*c’est un Européen qui arrive*”.<sup>60</sup>

If today, in postcolonial Africa “scientific and technological activity...is just as ‘extroverted’ or externally oriented, as economic activity”<sup>61</sup> this is so precisely because, over and above the political and economic strangle hold that the West has on us, the thinking of the dominant segment of Westernized Africa has internalized, as a positive fact, the claimed superiority of the West. The characters, and specifically the main character—El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye—in Sembène Ousmane’s *Xala* (1974), is a paradigmatic case of the duplicity and impotence that characterizes this segment of contemporary African society.

The West today controls the world not merely through brute force but in a much more intangible and pernicious manner. It rules through the lived subjectivity of the non-Western world that *sees* the West as the norm and model for humanity. Contemporary Africa and Africans are products of this world *imaged* in the semblance of the Europe. Our present postcolonial world, in effect, is the uneasy residual *mélange* of those who ardently engaged in the “*mission civilisatrice*,” those who took up the “White Man’s Burden” and produced “*évolués*” and “*assimilados*” and those who suffered, in their flesh and bones, the ensuing *métissage* or historic mingle, the lived fusion that, in the concrete, constitutes this unhinging experience.

To critically engage the Western tradition is then to engage an important aspect of our own African heritage. It is to explore both the

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<sup>59</sup>Ibidem, p. 6.

<sup>60</sup>Fanon, F. (1952) *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, p. 31.

<sup>61</sup>Hountondji, O. (1990), “Scientific Dependence in Africa Today”, *Research in African Literatures*, 21, 3 pp. 5-15.

limits and the possibilities encapsulated in Africa's disastrous encounter of Europe. As Marcien Towa has noted, "The greatest actual difference between the Occident and Africa...is the difference between he who exercises the power of initiative and creativity and he who is deprived of it".<sup>62</sup> To be worthwhile, philosophic reflection in the African context must contribute to the undoing of this "deprived" depravity. This struggle, on the level of reflection, if engaged in earnest, will contribute its vital share to the process of Africa's re-entry into the modern world, on its own terms, i.e., in *freedom*.

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<sup>62</sup>Towa, M. (1979) "Propositions sur l'identité culturelle", *Présence Africaine*, no. 109, p. 84.

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