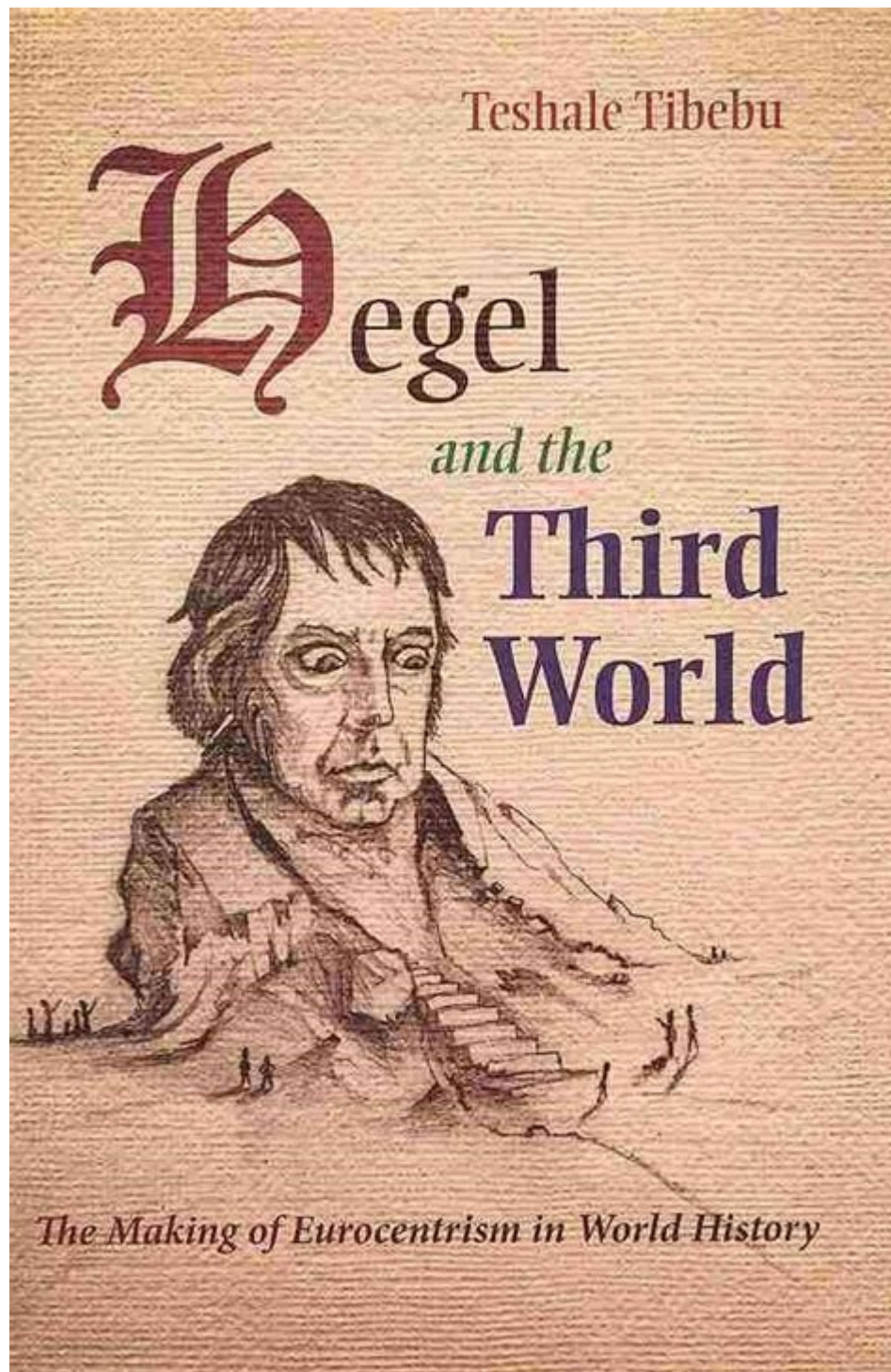


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Hegel and the Third World: The Making of Eurocentrism in World History



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Reviewed Work(s)

Hegel and the Third World: The Making of Eurocentrism in World History. By Teshale Tibebu. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011). Pp. 424. Cloth, \$45.00.

Michel Foucault once famously expressed the thinker's fear that, no matter what road one takes, Hegel sits at the end waiting. Perhaps, then, it should come as no surprise that the various tendencies under the umbrella of Postcolonial Studies would, after a long honeymoon with Foucault himself, wind up coming back around to Hegel. If an emerging trend arrived with Susan Buck-Morss' short 2009 book *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, then it is now in full fruition with historian Teshale Tibebu's *Hegel and the Third World*. One might immediately object that Tibebu's project begins with an anachronism, as nothing called the "Third World" yet existed when G. W. F. Hegel developed his famous dialectical philosophy in early nineteenth-century Germany. In spite of this little problem, however, Tibebu presents a thorough and erudite study of Eurocentrism and racism within Hegel's thought, along with an interesting exercise in understanding Eurocentrism and racism *through* Hegelian dialectics. Tibebu's work is a mix of serious intellectual history and good old-fashioned polemic, and it easily overshadows Buck-Morss' somewhat speculative and fanciful attempt to bring Hegel into current debates within postcolonial theory.

Tibebu appears to have waded through the entirety of Hegel's corpus, and this is naturally the material of his book. He also brings to the table a veritable encyclopedia of Hegel commentary and criticism—which he draws on as need arises—and Tibebu's vast knowledge of global history from the Spanish colonization of the Americas to the present serves him well every time he needs to make a concrete historical example. Overall, the book has two interconnected arguments. First, that Hegel's philosophical system and reading of world history amounts to a justification of European colonialism, and second, that Hegel makes this justification via *racism*, even though the core of his philosophy ostensibly rejected the elevation of an arbitrary factor like skin color or bone shape to a rational significance. As Tibebu phrases it, "Hegel is not a *biological* racist; he is rather an *environmental-cultural* racist" (91). Like many who have commented on Hegel, Tibebu makes a loose distinction between the young Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the old Hegel of the *Philosophy of Right* and the *Lectures of the Philosophy of World History*. This view takes the young Hegel as a liberal republican who slowly transformed into that conservative monarchist known as the old Hegel. Tibebu extends this characterization to show that the young Hegel strongly rejected

biological racism in the *Phenomenology*, whereas the old Hegel openly embraced the familiar racist viewpoints common in Europe at the time. He did so, however, in a mostly *non-biological* way, which in turn makes his late racism even more insidious since it does not seem to contradict his earlier “liberal” stance.

Between an introduction, a conclusion, and an opening chapter summarizing a multitude of previous commentaries on Hegel, the main body of the book divides into two parts: Part One, entitled “Dialectic of Nature and Spirit,” and Part Two, called “Philosophy of History.” This division also matches that of the young and old Hegel, with the former based mostly on the *Phenomenology* and the latter drawing primarily from the *Philosophy of World History*. Chapter two, the first of Part One, sets up the distinction between the Hegelian categories of “Nature” and “Spirit” as the basis upon which Tibebu will reveal Hegel’s variety of racism. In short, the whole remainder of the book serves to demonstrate that Hegel puts Africans, Asians, and the native people of the Americas into the realm of Nature, reserving Spirit only for European peoples. Scholars of philosophy might object that the Nature-Spirit dichotomy is not the fundamental category of Hegelian thought, and therefore that Tibebu begins his critique from a false premise. However, for the purpose of this book on the specific topic of racism, the Nature-Spirit dichotomy makes good sense as a starting point, even if it is only one of many that the author could have chosen. Tibebu hits his stride in chapters three and four, the former offering a new reading of Hegel’s famous Master-Slave Dialectic, and the latter going into the basis of Hegel’s rejection of biological racism through a reading of the passages against phrenology in the *Phenomenology*. Chapter three also presents a wonderful interpretation of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in light of the Hegelian struggle for recognition, one of book’s high points (62-72). Part Two becomes much more descriptive, as it consists primarily of a detailed reading of Hegel’s views on Africa and Asia, culled mostly from his lectures on history, but from other of the late works, as well. Tibebu’s point is simple: Africa appears as a realm of “natural” barbarism, in line with every racist idea later utilized by European colonialism, and Asia appears as a land of stagnant and unchanging decadence, just as in the classic orientalist model.

Again, Tibebu's primary contribution is to reveal the extent to which the racism of Hegel's day penetrated his philosophy, most specifically that of his later works. He is absolutely correct to say that Hegel's many commentators—both friendly and unfriendly, and including his Marxist critics — have systematically overlooked his racism. *Hegel and the Third World*, therefore, fills in this glaring oversight. However, as Tibebu notes repeatedly, Hegel's racism was in no way abnormal or unique for its time. In fact, he was simply revealing the common prejudices of his early nineteenth-century European intellectual milieu, and Tibebu himself argues that there was really nothing novel in Hegel's racism other than the fact that, being Hegel, he integrated his common notions of white superiority into a grand, totalizing philosophical system. The problem arises, therefore, that much of Tibebu's attention goes to parts of Hegel's thinking that were in no way unique to Hegel. Especially in Part Two, too little attention is given to what made Hegel's views on human racial and civilizational difference specific to his own philosophy. The reader is left, instead, with a description of a racist vision of the world and its history that could apply equally well to nearly any of Hegel's contemporaries. Because it focuses on the *specificities* of Hegelian thought regarding the concept of race, Part One is therefore the stronger half of the book.

There are certainly flaws in some of Tibebu's individual assertions. At one point, he makes a rather groundless comparison between Hegel and Arthur de Gobineau, the French proto-eugenicist whose works effectively founded modern racial science (126-128). As anyone familiar with the *Phenomenology's* take on phrenology should recognize, two objects may share common characteristics without being the same thing. In this unfortunate case, Tibebu equates Hegel with Gobineau while ignoring the enormous differences between the two. In his conclusion, Tibebu attacks Hegel scholar Philip Kain as an apologist for racism simply because he distinguishes between scientific racism and racism in general (340). This charge makes little sense in light of Tibebu's own argument, which itself hinges on the distinction between the biological racism that Hegel stood against and the geo-cultural racism that Hegel openly espoused. One could cite other examples of questionable claims made at one point or another by Tibebu, but even after each line has been thoroughly scrutinized, the work as a whole still stands as a formidable achievement. One oddity of the book is the lack of attention

given to the Marxist critiques of Hegel. Tibebu appears to consciously distance himself from the dialectical-materialist tradition, even though many of his criticisms of Hegel are nearly identical to those raised by Karl Marx himself. Tibebu presents Hegel as the philosopher of colonialism much as Marx presented him as the philosopher of capitalism. Since Tibebu himself emphasizes the underlying basis of colonialism in political economy, it seems odd that his extensive wealth of sources overlooks writers from the Marxist tradition like Rosa Luxemburg and Walter Rodney who already did so much to make similar points. (Rodney does appear in the bibliography, but remains little discussed.)

A work of intellectual history of this sort must necessarily include countless long quotations, and yet it is Dr. Teshale Tibebu, and not G. W. F. Hegel, who shines through in these pages. Tibebu's analysis comes first, even in the sections that are largely descriptive, and his witty and sometimes acerbic prose only serves to sharpen his insights. The book crosses genres and academic disciplines. It fits most neatly into the rubric of Postcolonial Studies, while it also functions as a work of African and European history as well as a commentary on historical methodology. Historians of all stripes would do well to read this book, whether or not they have any immediate interest in Hegel (or in the Third World). The book does not speak as directly to the literature from academic philosophy, and yet it still should be, if nothing else, an interesting read for those in a philosophy department, simply because it tackles a familiar figure in such an unfamiliar way. As a final note, it is worth mentioning that Tibebu's work is pleasantly approachable. Hegelian philosophy is a notoriously difficult subject to breach for the uninitiated. Although readers already familiar with Hegel will undoubtedly get more out of Tibebu's text, the book comes with no prerequisites, and it even offers enough of a grounding in Hegel's philosophy to serve potentially as an entry point to the subject at large, albeit a highly untraditional—and even controversial—one.

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