# The myth of *Aufheben*

## A comment on Matthieu Renault's Hegelian myth of counter-violence

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Matthieu Renault argues in a recent issue of *Radical Philosophy* (*RP* 2.10, Summer 2021) that justifications for the counter-violence of the oppressed which draw on Hegel's master-slave relation are based on a myth originating from Kojève's Paris lectures (1933-9). The Kojève myth is that history begins with the violence of the master over the slave in the life-and-death struggle and ends with the counter-violence of the slave over the master, in a reverse of that original struggle. Kojève's emphasis on this reversibility, Renault argues, lends 'an intrinsic value to revolutionary violence.'* Renault sees a similar reversibility in Frantz Fanon and Angela Davis, among others, but finds it 'untraceable in Hegel's account' (22). There is nothing in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* that suggests the life-and-death struggle which creates the master-slave relation must itself be repeated in order to undo that relation. Instead, Hegel's silence on the slave's emancipation leaves it open to 'multiple and competing interpretations' (23).

I propose we add three further myths to the myth of reversibility or counter-violence: the myth of the struggle for recognition, the myth of the cowardice of the slave, and, more significantly, the myth of *Aufheben* itself as an essentially absolutist and imperial form of mastery, or of overcoming, resolution and completion. This latter myth, explained below, continues to frame our most familiar readings of Hegel. Less discussed is how this myth and these readings carry the continued domination of property relations deep into radical philosophy. According to Hegel, the life-and-death struggle takes shape as the culture of property. Property preserves life as the master by keeping death alive in the form of the slave. Property then defines truth and logic in its own image. Truth masters error, and logic masters contradiction. When philosophy conforms to this culture, it reproduces this propertied truth and logic of mastery. When radical philosophy critiques such mastery or absolutism, it often does so in a reversal that tries to master or overcome property's – and, by implication, Hegel's – absolutism. But life and death have a necessity and a logic that preserves and negates them differently than within the logic of property. Against the myth of *Aufheben* as mastery I suggest that in Hegel radical *Aufheben* is this different logic of living and dying[1] and that it has significant implications for the way Renault 'completes' his article as 'myth'.

## The myth of the struggle for recognition

The relevant sections of Hegel's *Phenomenology* can be divided into three parts: paragraphs 177-184 on the myth of recognition; paragraphs 185-189 on the experience of life and death; and paragraphs 190-196 on the master-slave relation.

Hyppolite states unequivocally that the life-and-death struggle is waged for recognition.[2] But as staged in Hegel's text, the encounter does not actually involve two self-consciousnesses meeting each other with such intentions. Self-consciousness emerges *from* the struggle. What participates in the struggle is desire wherein, by

the satisfaction of its physical needs, life preserves itself against negation or death. This living desire is indifferent to its objects. It is not in search of political or social recognition. The myth of recognition emerges, rather, from the passages on mutual recognition. When presented as 'the "I" that is "We" and the "We" that is "I"',[3] mutuality is abstracted from the experience of life and death, and therefore from work and property relations.

To counter this abstraction Hegel demonstrates in paragraphs 185-9 how desire experiences life and death as self-consciousness – or how pure recognition 'appears to self-consciousness'[4] – and then, in paragraphs 190-6, he shows how the now self-conscious life-and-death relation takes embodied form as master and slave, or as property. The drama is of two desires meeting in a world of limited resources. They approach each other with the same indifference they have for the object they desire. They are not set on fighting for recognition or indeed on killing each other. Recognition is not the motivation for the struggle. That would put the cart before the horse, presupposing that recognition already exists before the struggle, whereas recognition only becomes an issue as a result of the struggle. They meet as desire in pursuit of desire, and they learn of their mortality in the experience – which is not planned – of risk. Risk is the negative experience that is carried in fear, and fear arises in response to the prospect of death, i.e. fear is prompted by the death of *this* life. *This* life is now a new awareness, a self-consciousness of life and death, or the I-life-and-death that is self-consciousness.[5]

The myth that this is a struggle for recognition gives rise to a further myth, found in Kojève and Hyppolite, that one of these desires refuses to risk its life and becomes slave to the master. For Kojève the slave 'did not want to risk his life'[6] and for Hyppolite the slave 'has retreated in the face of death, preferring servitude to liberty in death.'[7] Such views are part of the myth of counter-violence that Renault identifies, for it is this original defeat, due to cowardice, that the slave in the future must then reverse for its liberation. These charges of cowardice are unwarranted. The slave is the person who, in risking the life-and-death encounter, and in becoming I-life-and-death, becomes aware that living, not dying, is the truth of *this* life, even if not under conditions of its own choosing. The slave courageously preserves I-life-and-death while the master avoids it through property.

## The myth of *Aufheben*

Familiar readings of the third section (paragraphs 190-6) are themselves further determined by these myths of a struggle for recognition, and of cowardice in the face of danger. But the truth of master and slave in this section unfolds not just against immediate propertied violence, but also by way of a less familiar logic – one that expresses the necessity (evoked above) of life and death that is not the culture of mastery and property. This less familiar logic is that of life and death experienced as *learning* and expressed as *Aufheben*. In the familiar logic of (Aristotelian) non-contradiction and identity the master's independence is self-contradictory, for mastery is dependent upon the work of its enslaved. By contrast, the strange logic of the slave's 'mind of his own'[8] is that its lack of identity is some kind of truth, though not one that makes sense from within the logic of mastery that defines truth as independence or identity in-itself. The enslaved experiences the illogicality of being nothing in-itself as fear in the 'absolute melting away of everything stable.'[9] But it also lives true to this illogicality in its work, where it is actually nothing in-itself because it is wholly for-another. When mastery is for-itself it is so as an in-itself that is unsustainable. When enslavement is for-itself it is so as a sustainable, albeit unfamiliar, mind of its own.

What is modern thinking to make of this strange non-masterful sense of self? The key to this again lies in the most important of Hegelian myths, the myth of *Aufheben* defined according to the propertied logic of mastery. In this myth the result of the *Aufheben* is an in-itself, a mastery, that overcomes previous negations or oppositions or contradictions. It is within this same myth that the slave is believed to achieve a mind of its own *in-itself* which overcomes the master's self-contradiction and becomes the truth in-itself of a universal class. This myth of *Aufheben* is the logic and metaphysics of the myth of counter-violence that Renault highlights. But when life and death are not totally defined within this myth of *Aufheben* a different, un-propertied picture of humanity commends itself. I rehearse this now.

Life and death posit themselves in cultures of preservation and negation. But one such culture of the relation of life and death dominates all others, and that is life and

death preserved and negated as private property. Hegel's account demonstrates how life learns of singular death and singular self-consciousness in the risk necessitated by being for-another. But such self-consciousness is dependent for that self-consciousness upon its relation to death. How then, is this self-conscious life to preserve the relation to death that it needs for its experience of mortality, but without actually risking death in every encounter? How can it overcome death yet also preserve death? How can it live as preservation in-itself? The solution is to keep death alive and at a safe distance as the nothing in-itself of *property* which can live the master's vulnerability on his behalf. The slave, as property, is the living death that preserves life in a relation to death, but one that is removed, as Hegel says, from the risk that freedom requires.

Property creates and defines the myth of *Aufheben* in its own image. Negation is overcome, and preservation in-itself triumphs. Freedom is then defined in this logic of mastery as independence, just as enlightenment or myth-busting is defined as knowledge in-itself. Such propertied freedom and enlightenment are then reproduced in the cultures that base themselves on the myths of violence and counter-violence. Property determines the opposition to property in its own image and to its own advantage. Hence recent accusations that the tradition is exhausted and hence, too, the recent attraction of something messianic to break its hold.

But the propertied solution to mastery's contradictions is self-defeating. The necessity of this negation and its preservation has its truth not in having death again lived by a surrogate, but by living its own death. And it does this by means of an unfamiliar logic of education, one that is different from the masterful notion of enlightenment that enjoys victory over that which it defeats. Learning has its own logic or its own necessity in that learning must negate itself in order to preserve itself. Learning, here, is the risk that freedom requires and takes. It has 'the mind of its own' of the slave. Enlightenment is only propertied learning. But the Hegelian *Aufhebung* works not to a logic of mastery, not to a logic that overcomes what it negates, but to a logic of life and death that lives and dies, negates and preserves, as learning. Property will tempt this *Aufheben* back to the myth of counter-violence and challenge it to overcome property. If accepted, regardless of the outcome of such a challenge, mastery will win. If refused, mastery issues a renewed challenge: how will education get rid of property once
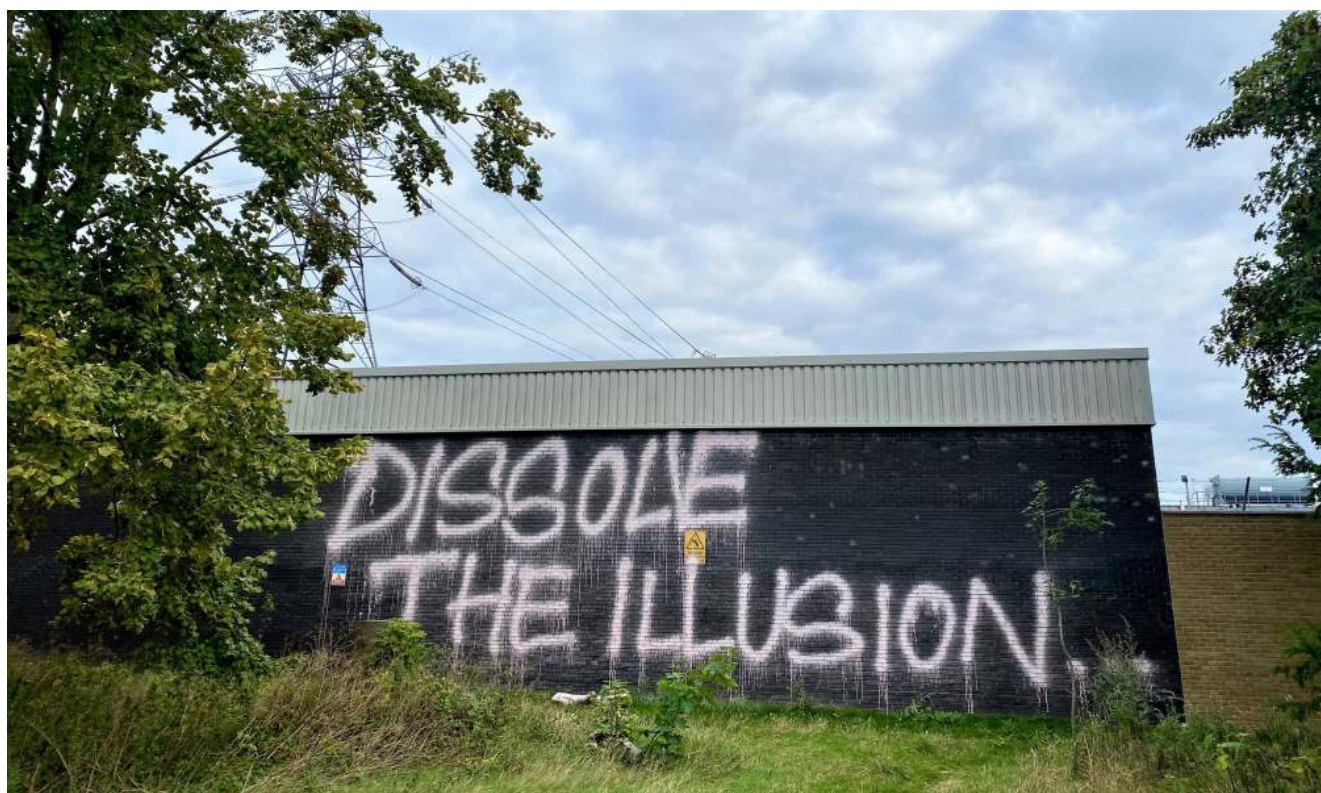
and for all? Education replies that when surrogates for negation and death, and for the risk of freedom, are no longer required, then property will have lost its *raison d'être.*[10]

## The myth of myth

One final remark. Renault ends his piece by acknowledging the openness of learning in trying to avoid the mastery of myth-busting. He knows that he and we have learned something about Hegelian myths. And he is rightly concerned that if this is seen as myth-busting, it will only repeat a logic of mastery in the form of enlightenment triumphing over myth. Myth will have 'revealed to itself' or 'made explicit' something previously unknown to it and will have overcome its negative condition (30). To avoid such enlightened counter-violence Renault prefers to call his meta-myth a continuing variation on a theme, or a 'new chapter in the history it tells' (30). But if this is to avoid the mastery of being seen to offer a 'conclusion' (30) or completion then it is only a counter-*Aufheben* that in effect reverses the mastery of the myth of *Aufheben*. The relativity of Levi-Strauss's variations on a myth reverses the closure of any final conclusion by overcoming closure *per se*. In this familiar theatre of dogmatism and scepticism, once again life and death are known only in their propertied form.

If closure in-itself is not also to be closed in-itself by the mastery of something like contingency in-itself, then something new has to be learned here about the logic of this propertied aporia of life and death. When what is newly learned is made counter-*Aufheben* by Renault then the negation and preservation of learning figure once again as master and counter-master. Alternatively, when what is newly learned is that learning is not learning and counter-learning, but learning living its own life and death, then it is open to a logic and necessity different to that of property, of mastery, and of myth-busting.

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### Notes

**1.** See Nigel Tubbs, *Socrates on Trial* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), books 8–11.
**2.** See Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 173.
**3.** Georg W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §177.
**4.** Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §185.
**5.** This phrase is used in Tubbs, *Socrates*, book 8.
**6.** Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James H. Nichols Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 22.
**7.** Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 173.
**8.** Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §196.
**9.** Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §194.
**10.** For a vision of such a city or a new Republic in which property becomes otiose, see Tubbs, *Socrates*, book 17.