The Hegelian Aesthetics of Martin Luther King Jr’s Non-Violent Philosophy

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Introduction

Among Black American leaders, Martin Luther King Jr was arguably the most Hegelian of all. Unlike Frederick Douglass, Booker T Washington, Marcus Garvey, and his contemporary Malcolm X, King made public pronouncements regarding the influence of Hegel’s ideas on his own philosophy. In an interview with Tom Johnson for the Montgomery Advertiser during the Montgomery Boycott, which lasted nearly a whole year, from December 1955 to August 1956, King singled out Hegel as his favourite philosopher. In his book-length reminiscence of the same boycott called Stride Toward Freedom (1958), he stated the same preference for the German master whose dialectic, he writes, helped to see that “growth comes through struggle.” (p.16) In his Autobiography, he tells the reader that Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, The Philosophy of History and The Philosophy of Right were some of the assigned books in a philosophical course that he attended under the direction first of Dr Brightman and then under that of L. Harold DeWolf at Boston University. Though he recognised that “There were points in Hegel’s philosophy I disagreed with,” (p.32) among which he mentioned his “absolute idealism,” King admitted that his intellectual method and modes of action were deeply steeped in Hegel’s philosophical thought.

We can expect that King’s recognition as Hegel’s influence on his socio-political thought will result in the critics’ interest in this influence. Yet so far, apart from sparse references here and there in articles and critical books on this influence, to our best knowledge, there are no studies which have addressed the aesthetic aspect of his non-violent philosophy with reference to Hegel’s Aesthetics, one of the works that King did not acknowledge to have read. Moreover, to date critics have contented themselves with digging up the Hegelian sources of his philosophy. The hunting for sources has made them overlook King’s creative use of Hegel in the formulation of his non-violent philosophy. How King trimmed off Hegel’s philosophy to accommodate it to his non-violent social and political revolution; in other words how he expanded the dialectic of the slave and master to make it fit with his Christian principles of love and understanding; how he made a synthesis of Hegel’s social philosophy and aesthetics to dramatise the struggle for freedom; and finally how he appropriated Hegel’s conception of world history to link it to Puritan providential history are important features of King’s philosophy that critics seem to have neglected in their pursuit of what some critics have called “King the plagiarist of Hegel.” (Cf. Cone James H, 1999) It is these Hegelian aspects, particularly the aesthetic one, which will be discussed with reference to King Jr’s Autobiography in the following paper

Discussion

Many critics of King’s non-violent direct protest have already pointed out that if this protest had the impact that it had at the time it is because King knew how to “manipulate” the media especially TV and bring the struggle for Civil Rights to American homes. But what these critics overlooked is the close similarity between the non-violent direct action to a street
theatre. Indeed, King realised the necessity to circulate information about the different campaigns for civil rights through TV. He considered it as the best medium to reach the conscience of the American people, and to shake their moral comfortableness. Yet apart from this necessity, King spoke about non-violent direct actions sometimes in terms of drama and at other times in terms of story. For example, he begins the episode of his *Autobiography* that he devoted to the Montgomery Bus Boycott by reminding the reader that the story that he is about to recount is not just another ordinary news story:

> While the nature of this account causes to make frequent use of the pronoun “I”, in every important part of the story it should be “we”. This is not a drama with only one actor. More precisely it is the chronicle of fifty thousand Negroes who took to heart the principle of non-violence, who learned to fight for their rights with the weapon of love, and who, in the process, acquired a new estimate of their own human worth. (p.50)

King considers that the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956 is “the first act of […] an unfolding drama”, (p.54) followed by other no less significant acts: the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom in Washington, D.C., in 1957, the Sit-in Movement in 1960, the Albany Movement in 1961, the Birmingham Campaign in 1963 and the March on Washington in the same year, the Freedom Summer Campaign in Mississippi in 1964 and the Selma-to-Montgomery March in 1965.

The emphasis that King puts in his *Autobiography* on words such as “drama”, “dramatise”, “stage”, “act”, “actor”, “play”, “preparation” for participation in non-violent direct action, “performance” and even the funding for the direction of the movement denotes his intention to aestheticise the non-violent protest and to elevate it to the level of Greek Tragedy through some kind of street theatre. There are two sources behind King’s impulse to give an aesthetic turn to his non-violent direct protest. One of these is his influence by Richard Bartlett Gregg the chronicler of Gandhi’s fight for Indian Independence, and the other source is Hegel. As it has already been said earlier in this chapter, King refined his understanding of Gandhi’s non-violent social philosophy by reading Gregg’s *The Power of Non-Violence* (1944), for which he wrote the foreword to its second edition in 1959. According to John S. Ansboro, King’s emphasis on the dimension of spectacle owes much to the importance that Gregg accords in his conception of the power of non-violence. Among the quotes that Ansboro included in his discussion of the link between King’s non-violent direct action and Gregg’s conception of non-violent struggle, we have the following one:

> Instinctively he [the assailant] dramatizes himself before them and becomes more aware of his position. With the audience as a sort of mirror, he realizes the contrast between his own conduct and that of the victim. (p.148)

Ansboro continues the discussion by suggesting that King might have learned the importance of dramatizing the struggle from Gregg. It is the audience in this drama that makes the whole difference between the non-violent resister and the violent assailant. Through the mediation of the audience or spectators, the assailant starts to reflect on the moral dimension of both his actions and those of his non-violent opponents and to recognise under the compulsion of public opinion his misjudgements about the situation. In the scale of moral values, the non-violent resister’s dignified, courageous and generous manners contrast with the assailant’s excessive, violent, and disrespectful behaviour. It is the behaviour of the
former that unsettles the latter and wins the support of public opinion and even the respect of
the assailant.

Ansboro is arguably to the point when he traces the spectacular dimension that King
accorded to his campaign to Gregg’s influence. Yet he neglects another equally important
source in King’s aestheticisation of the civil rights protest. That source is Hegel’s *Aesthetics*
(1983). It is true that the latter did not figure among the works that King admitted having read
while he was studying Hegel at Boston University School of Theology. But in his speeches
and *Autobiography*, King showed the same admiration for Greek tragedians like Aeschylus
and Sophocles as Hegel did his *Aesthetics*. King’s interest in Greek Tragedy, as it will be
argued, in what follows might as well be due to his reading of Hegel’s *Aesthetics*. Having
elevated Hegel’s saying that “the truth is the whole” into a maxim, it is likely that King had
proceeded to the reading of even the *Aesthetics* (1820) to be true to himself and to Hegel. No
matter whether these assumptions are correct or not, evidence in the *Autobiography* shows
that his notion of the struggle for civil rights as a drama owes much to Hegel’s theory of
Greek Tragedy.

What is Hegel’s aesthetic theory of Greek tragedy and where does it stand in relation
to his dialectic method? Hegel defines Greek tragedy as the “collision of equally justified
powers” (Hegel,1983:112) or laws. As a case in point, he referred to Aeschylus’ *Seven
Against Thebes* and Sophocles’ *Antigone* to illustrate his argument. He tells us that the
conflict in these plays is that between “the state, i.e. ethical life in its spiritual universality,
and the family, i.e. natural ethical life”. (Ibid.113) This conflict is embodied respectively in
King Creon who honours Zeus and the public life and social life that he stands for, and
Antigone, Creon’s niece, who defends the bonds of kinship best represented by the gods of
the underworld. The tragic complication of this dialectic opposition leads to a synthesis in
“the chorus which clearly assigns equal honour to all the gods.” (Ibid, pp.114-115) Unlike
Aristotle, Hegel did not consider the rising of pity and the purgation of feelings at the sight of
tragic suffering to be the final aim of tragedy. For him, what “excites our admiration” in
Greek tragedy is the “indestructible harmony” that results from the “cancellation of conflicts
as conflicts in the reconciliation of the powers […] which struggled to destroy one another in
their mutual conflict.” (Ibid, p.115)

The Hegelian idea of tragedy as a collision of equally justified powers finds its best
expression in the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” that King included as a whole chapter in his
*Autobiography*. This letter was written as a response to eight fellow Alabama clergymen who,
through a newspaper statement, took a stand against King for his Birmingham campaign.
These clergymen comprising nearly all Christian denominations and a Rabbi blamed King for
interfering in the affairs of the state of Alabama. Apart from not being a resident of Alabama
at the time, and therefore dismissed as an “outsider troublemaker”, King was taken to task for
having chosen the Easter period as a period for street demonstrations. On the whole the eight
clergymen called King to stop his activities because they are both “unwise and untimely”.
(p.188) From Birmingham Jail and in a Socratic tone, King responded to the clergy men’s
condemnations of the Birmingham campaign reminding them that the Southern Christian
Leadership Conference is not a state but a national organisation with an affiliate in Alabama
which is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. It was the behest at the latter
affiliate that King decided to launch the Birmingham campaign in 1963 and in his capacity as
the chairman of SCLC he could by no means be considered as an “outside agitator”. (p.189)
In addition, as a clergyman himself truthful to the prophets of the Old Testament and to the
Apostle Paul, he could not abide to the argument for respecting state boundaries when it came
to injustice.
Many critics, among whom figures James H. Cone, have argued that the Civil Rights Movement was a disguise for the recurrent struggle between the States and the Federal government. Admittedly, as King’s response to the clergymen above shows this view is not mistaken. But King was not just a pawn used by the Federal power to settle a problem that had existed since the creation of the American nation. We have to point out that the Civil Rights Movement started with the Supreme Court Decision of 1954 and this decision was met with threats of nullification from the Southern states similar to the ones that the same Southern States expressed in the first half of the nineteenth century whenever the Northern States dared to question the existence of slavery or its expansion to the West. There is no difference whatever between a John Calloun in his legal battle for maintaining slavery during the Abolitionist era and Governor of Alabama George Wallace –whose inauguration vow, King tells us, “had been a pledge of “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” (p.173) Indeed, there is strong evidence in the Autobiography that King looked upon the Birmingham campaign as another attempt to oblige the Federal government to intervene in Alabama to make it comply with the laws of the nation. But true to his dialectical method King did not take the position of the Federal government without formulating harsh criticism against it.

In answering his fellow Alabama clergymen’s criticism, King told them that the movement “seeks to dramatize the issue” of racial injustice in Alabama and to create “a type of constructive, non-violent tension which is necessary for growth.”(pp.190-191) The elaboration of this response increasingly assumes the shape of Greek tragedy as defined by Hegel. The interpretation of law emerges as the central issue in the Civil Rights struggle in Alabama. According to King, the clergymen’s anxiety over the willingness of the non-violent resisters to break state laws is legitimate but it is also paradoxical because the latter are obeying another superior law which is the Supreme Court’s decision of 1954. This represents the “collision of equally justified powers” of which Hegel spoke in his Aesthetics. The state segregationist laws and city ordinances enacted by the white majority constitute the natural ethical life. They honour, in the words of Hegel, the bond of natural kinship. According to King such laws are unjust because the racial segregation they maintain “distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority.” (p.193) In taking a moral stand against the maintenance of segregationist laws, King invoked constitutional laws such as the Supreme Court decision of 1954 and the Bill of Rights. For him these laws represent the laws of the land which Hegel characterised as the “ethical life in its spiritual universality.” The non-violent resister, according to King, is as morally bound to disobey segregationist state laws as to respect the Constitutional law of the land.

However, to say that King supported the breaking of segregationist laws by an appeal to national laws does not mean that he was some sort of King Creon. The ethical state that Creon defended against the affirmation of kinship ties by his niece Antigone in Sophocles’ play was a concrete reality. For King, it was a dream for which he prayed and which he hoped to realise by staging the drama of the Birmingham campaign. In King’s staged drama, the nation as it stood then was morally retrograde since it was not true to the moral principles that it announced at the beginning of its foundation. It was, therefore, the moral obligation of the non-violent resister to oppose its moral lethargy and bring it in alignment with the universal by calling to the conscience of the American people. The American people in King’s drama stand for the chorus in Hegel’s conception of tragedy. It is through the appeal to their conscience that King sought to push the nation to align itself with the universal principles that
it consigned in its major constitutional documents and to put an end to the tragic racial conflict bedevilling its moral foundations.

Several times in the *Autobiography*, King refers to what he calls “the stage of history.” This motif of history shows the influence that Hegel’s *The Philosophy of History* exerted on his view of the drama of racial conflict. Yet true to himself, King remained a Hegelian dialectician even in his interpretation of the Hegelian view of history. Like Hegel, King viewed history as an inevitable dialectic process leading to the extension of the boundaries of freedom. For example, in speaking about the victory of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party that brought out the desegregation of the Democratic Party Convention, King said that “those who sought to turn back the tide of history suffered a bitter defeat.” (p.253) With the election of the Black Democrat Barack Obama to the Presidency of the United States, we can fully measure today the extent of the defeat of racists by the inexorable progress of history. King also followed in the footsteps of Hegel in referring to history as a providential plan. In Hegelian language, King kept telling his audiences that the new age is coming and cannot be stopped because God wills the oppressed to be liberated. Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The urge for freedom will eventually come. This is what happened to the American Negro in the decades of the 1950s and 1960s. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom and something without has told him that he can gain it. Among the historical explanations that King offered for the inevitability of freedom are: the Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools in 1954, the Black man’s migration to the urban north, the participation of black soldiers in the two great wars, the rise of the literacy level among the black population, the relative economic prosperity of the Black man and the explosion of freedom movements abroad. For all these reasons, consciously and unconsciously, the Negro was swept in by what the Germans after Hegel call the *Zeitgeist*, or the spirit of the times.

King often used the word *Zeitgeist* to refer to his belief that “the universe is under the control of a loving purpose, and that in the struggle for righteousness, [we have] cosmic companionship.” This was what he had in mind when he said that Rosa Parks “had been tracked down by the *Zeitgeist* – the spirit of the time.” He had made a similar statement in relation to himself when he offered his resignation to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery after the success of the bus boycott there: “I can’t stop now. History has thrust upon me a responsibility from which I cannot turn away.” (p.136) King was referring to a historical movement of freedom that was rooted in ultimate reality and thus was not exclusively on human decisions. To use Hegel’s words, King poses himself as a “world-historical figure” chosen by God to bring about social change in human conditions. He keeps talking about the Black man’s freedom in terms of the Exodus analogy, an analogy based on the assumption that the Black Americans of the 1950s and 1960s, just like the early Puritans, were a chosen people charged with the divine mission of redeeming America. More importantly, King conceived of his destiny and that of his people as a divine call to allow America to assume the moral leadership thrust upon it by historical circumstances after the two great wars.

The international moral leadership that America was called to assume was predicated on the capacity of its citizens to bring to full completion the American dream through the reconciliation of white and black citizens as sisters and brothers in a “beloved community”. In King’s rhetoric the American Dream emerges as the Hegelian Idea, an idea, which in the words of Langston Hughes (1951), has long been “deferred” and which is likely to “fester” and “explode” if nothing is done to make Black Americans feel at home in their nation-state.
King pointed out a contradiction at the heart of the American society. This gap is between American scientific achievements and the failure in matters of morality. He lauded America’s great advances in science and technology that enabled Americans to “cure dreaded diseases, to carve highways through the stratosphere, and to build the greatest system of production the world has ever known. But in the midst of all our scientific and technological advances,” King told white ministers in Nashville, Tennessee, on 23-25 April, 1957, “we have not learned the simple art of loving our neighbours and worth of all human personality. Through our scientific genius, we have made the world a neighbourhood, but through our moral and spiritual geniuses, we have failed to make our Nation a brotherhood.” (Op.Cit. King 1957:19) The Negro’s gift of spirit to America and the world that DuBois talked of in *The Souls of Black Folk* assumes in King’s ministerial mind the shape of love and the art of loving.

In speaking about what Hegel calls the world-historical processes, King places the activities of the Civil Rights Movement within the context of resistance to colonialism. For him, segregation and colonialism have in common social injustice, political domination and economic exploitation. This parallel explains to a large extent the links that King established between himself and such post-colonial figures as Nkrumah and Gandhi. Indeed, King’s educational career resembles theirs. The three of them were educated in the North (the North of the United States for King and the West for Nkrumah and Gandhi). All three of them can be regarded as native sons returning to the colonial South their motherland (the Segregated South of the US for King, the colonised India and Ghana for Gandhi and Nkrumah) after having completed their process of education. All three of them had learned the main outlines of their liberationist ideologies in the North and sought to implement them in the South.

An indication about King’s identification with these post-colonial leaders shows in the way he structures his *Autobiography*. For example, chapter 10 which covers such important events as the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in February 14, 1957 is followed by a chapter entitled the “Birth of a New Nation”. This chapter is devoted to a biographical sketch of Nkrumah and the independence ceremonies of Ghana, which King attended at the invitation of Nkrumah. In writing about Ghana’s independence, King comes very close to what is known as the theory of internal colonialism. “Ghana,” he writes, “has something to say to us. It says to us first that the oppressor never voluntarily gives freedom to the oppressed. You have to work for it.” (p.110) In this quote, King makes no difference whatever between the oppression of the segregationists in the South and that of the British colonizers in the Gold Coast (Ghana). Nkrumah’s non-violent resistance to oppression, through his Convention’s People Party, is held as a concrete example to be followed in its strategies by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. It can be said that King came back from Ghana with a postcolonial dream. For him, “That old flag [the Union Jack] coming down doesn’t represent the meaning of this drama taking place on the stage of history, for it is the symbol of an old passing way. That new flag (Ghana’s flag) going up is the symbol of a new age coming into being.” (p.112)

King did not change his postcolonial posture even when he decided to move the activities of the Civil Rights Movement up to the North after the Watts Riots of August 11-15, 1965 in Los Angeles, California. The Watts Riots made King re-assess the political situation of America and came to the conclusion that the Northern Ghettoes as much as the South are colonies. King’s internal anti-colonialist rhetoric of resistance assumes an explicit form as he spoke of his Northern campaign against segregated housing in Chicago. This is what he says about his assessment of the situation of the Black people living in the Northern Ghettoes:
The Northern ghetto had become a type of colonial area. The colony was powerless because all important decisions affecting the community were made from the outside. Many of its inhabitants even had their daily lives dominated by the welfare worker and the policeman. The profits of landlord and merchants were removed and seldom ever reinvested. The only positive thing the larger society saw in the slum was it was a source of cheap labour in times of economic boom. Otherwise, its inhabitants were blamed for their own victimization. (p.301)

Without abandoning the non-violent method protest, King operates the last Hegelian synthesis in building his own concept of Black power. This synthesis emerges as a combination of Douglass’s socio-political agitation with Washington’s advocacy for economic power and DuBois’s cultural resistance, one of the songs of the protest movement is a sorrow song known as “We Shall Overcome.”. Dropped by the Northern liberals once the struggle was moved to the North, King met with less success in the North than in the South. King was behind the passage of at least two important Acts, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but his great expectation for the birth a beloved community or what Hegel calls universal consciousness remained in the domain of “unfulfilled dreams.” (p.356) Before he was assassinated on April 4, 1968, he committed himself more fully to the extension of Lyndon Johnson’s concept of Great Society by fighting poverty in the urban ghettos while fighting the escalation of war in Vietnam and other parts of the world. King undertook this double fighting for peace and the end of poverty that he undertook in the name of that universal consciousness that had been there since the beginning of his struggle against racial segregation and racism in the late 1950s.

Conclusion

The above analysis shows that among the five Black American writers who have been investigated, King made the most use of Hegel’s works in terms of both ideas and methodology. This pre-eminence accorded to Hegel is explained by the fact that King was more deeply steeped in the Hegelian philosophy with which he rounded off his education at the University of Boston School of Theology. I have tried to argue that the Hegelian dialectic method was implemented by King for the writing of his doctoral dissertation, and that he sought to extend its application to the social field. The synthetic approach to the racial problem culminated in the elaboration of the non-violent resistance to racial injustice. The study of King’s Autobiography as a spiritual autobiography similar to Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit also demonstrates that King looked back at his life, his educational and political career as a dialectic unfolding of the geist whose ultimate development led him to the stage of (world) history. On this stage of (world) history, King sided with the Hegel of the Aesthetics who saw in the chorus or the spectators a catalytic force likely to bring out the reconciliation of colliding forces for the realisation of a higher ideal.

The synthesising turn of King’s mind also shows itself in his attitude towards his predecessors on the Black American political scene. His urgent call for racial pride recalls that of Garvey whom he mentions by name in Why We Can’t Wait ?(1963) and Where Do We Go From Here? His emphasis on the necessity of doing well one’s work in order to achieve social recognition echoes Washington’s call for the rehabilitation of the ethic of work. His preference for classic literature especially Greek Tragedy reminds us of William E. B. DuBois’s elevation of culture as a means for the resolution of the racial problem in The Souls of Black Folk (1903).The legalist and moralist strands of his non-violent resistance philosophy evoke Douglass’s belief in the ethicality of the main constitutional documents as bases for waging a legal and moral struggle for racial justice. Yet as I have tried to show in
this analysis, King went beyond these predecessors in his elaboration of his socio-political plan for social integration and racial freedom. This plan backfired when he attempted to transpose it to the Northern Black ghettos in the mid-1960s. However, the election of a Black man, Barack Obama, to the Presidency of the United States in November 2008 shows that the backfiring of King Jr’s plan was, after all, only a temporary halt in the march of American history towards the realisation of the racial dream that he spoke of in 1963.

Notes and references


Harnack Justus, “Kierkegaard’s Attack on Hegel,” in John Walker, Ed. Thought and Faith in Hegel, Boston: Kluez Academic Publishers, 1991. Hegel and Kierkegaard represented two starkly different views of what it means to be a Christian. According to Harnack, to be a Christian [for Hegel] is definable in terms of objectivity, or reason and insight; to Kierkegaard, it is a question of subjectivity and passion. […] A person who with passion worships a false God is living in truth, but a person who is convinced of the truth and existence of the true nature, but worships Him without passion is living an untruth.” (p.130)


The editor Clayborne Carson says that King wrote six essays for a two-semester seminar on Hegel taught by Brightman and Peter A. Bertocci. The seminar studied many of Hegel’s major works in chronological order. During the second semester, they concentrated on Hegel’s *Encyclopaedia of the Sciences* and *Philosophy of Right*, although they may have read the *Philosophy of History* as well.

(PP.196-97) Among the term essays included in *The Papers of Martin Luther King* we can mention “An Exposition of the First Triad of Categories of the Hegelian Logic: Being, Non-being, Becoming”. This paper comments M. T. Stacy’s *The Philosophy of Hegel*, London: Macmillan, 1924. It brings further evidence that King did not only read Hegel’s works but also the vast literature that they generated.


_________________, *A Stride Toward Freedom*, New York: Harper and Row, 1958. In *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr., Vol. I and II*, Ed. Clayborne Carson, and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, claims in nearly the same terms Hegel’s influence on his social philosophy. He writes the following: “Just before Dr. Brightman’s death, I began studying the philosophy of Hegel with him [L.Harold DeWolf]. Although the course was mainly a study of Hegel’s monumental work, *Phenomenology of Mind*, I spent my spare time reading his *Philosophy of History* and *Philosophy of Right*. There were points in Hegel’s philosophy that I strongly disagreed with. For instance, his absolute idealism was rationally unsound to me because it intended to swallow up the many in the one. But there were other aspects of his thinking that I found stimulating. His contention that “truth is the whole led me to a philosophical method of rational coherence. His analysis of the dialectical process, in spite of its shortcomings, helped me see that growth comes through struggle.” (P.480)


