

## Hegel Prize 2024

**The City of Stuttgart, in collaboration with the Museum Hegel-Haus, awards the Hegel Prize 2024 to Professor Dr. Orlando Patterson.**

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## HEGEL PRIZE ADDRESS

### *Orlando Patterson*

*Honorable Lord Mayor, Dr. Nopper, Professor Dr. Menke and members of the prize committee, Director of the Hegel-Haus Museum, Ms. Elena Kaifel, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.* It is with profound gratitude and humility that I stand before you today to receive the 2024 Hegel Prize in the historic city of Stuttgart. To be recognized in Hegel's name is an honor that resonates deeply, for Hegel has long been both my teacher and adversary. Such is the paradox of engaging with a thinker of his stature: his ideas demand not blind acceptance but intellectual struggle. Hegel himself would insist that truth emerges dialectically—from contradiction and negation, not compliance. As he famously wrote: “Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face and struggling with it.”

It is this spirit of productive tension that has guided my engagement with Hegel throughout my career. I was introduced to him more than sixty years ago by the Caribbean intellectual C.L.R. James—a fellow Hegelian, a Marxist, and a towering mind of the West Indies. It is to James, my mentor and fellow West Indian, that I dedicate this prize today.

Freedom, as Hegel taught us, is the essence of history—a force unfolding through time, giving shape to human destiny. He famously claimed that history is nothing but the progress of freedom's realization, the evolution of human self-awareness as free beings. Such a claim, bold and idealistic, defined the very course of modernity and infused Western thought with an optimism that freedom would, eventually, prevail.

At the close of the 20th century, it seemed as though this vision had come to fruition. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the sweeping embrace of democratic ideals Francis, and Fukuyama's proclamation of the "end of history" suggested that humanity had arrived at its Hegelian endpoint: a world governed by rational, liberal states in which freedom would reign supreme.

How different the world looks today. The dialectic has taken a darker turn. The world is witnessing a reversal of this historical promise—a threatened collapse of democracy, the rise of populist nationalism, and the decay of the values that once underpinned the free world. Most alarmingly, these developments are unfolding in the very heartlands of freedom—France, Britain, and America—where leaders exploit the rhetoric of liberty while undermining its most sacred principles. Larry Diamond aptly calls this moment a “democratic recession.”

My task today is not to diagnose this decline—a challenge I gladly leave to political scientists—but to ask more fundamental questions, as Hegel himself would. In the few minutes I have with you I would like to return to first principles—to revisit the origins, the nature, and the meaning of freedom itself. What is this freedom that we cherish so deeply and now fear losing? How did we arrive here? What was the *geist*, the spirit of history, that brought us to this point?

To answer these questions, as Hegel taught us, we must begin at the beginning. We must follow freedom's journey from its inception, through its transformations, to its current state of fragmentation. W

Freedom, I argue, was not always an innate human aspiration. It was not a value universally pursued by all peoples at all times. If it had been, we would find freedom celebrated in every culture throughout history. Yet until the mid-20th century, freedom remained a largely Western ideal.

Why? Because freedom was born in opposition to its darkest antithesis: **slavery**. Without slavery, freedom as a cherished ideal would not have come into existence. The conditions of

slavery—its perverse degradation, its annihilation of the enslaved person’s humanity—created the yearning for freedom as liberation.

As Hegel wrote in the *Philosophy of History*: “Mankind has liberated itself not so much from enslavement, as through enslavement.” [Es ist die Menschheit nicht sowohl aus der Knechtschaft befreit worden, als vielmehr durch die Knechtschaft.] Slavery imposes a unique form of domination: the master holds absolute power over the life and death of the slave; the slave is alienated from their ancestry and community, a condition I term *natal alienation*; and the slave is reduced to a state of *social death*, stripped of all recognition, honor, and autonomy.

Hegel understood the existential implications of this condition. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he makes the fear of death the central motif of the master-slave dialectic. The slave is subjugated by the master’s will, denied recognition as a human being. Yet out of this subjugation emerges a profound contradiction: not of recognition, but of motivation. A socially dead person lacks all motivation to serve well and to enrich the agent of his social death. To solve this problem the enslaver exploits the one thing the slave most desires—to escape his condition of social death—to be reborn into social life, to reclaim their personhood. In this struggle for motivated worker and rebirth into social life, the first note of freedom is jointly constructed by master and slave: negative freedom—the freedom to be free from domination.

But the dialectic of slavery creates another value. The master, in exercising absolute power over the slave, discovers a new ideal: the freedom to dominate, to impose one’s will without constraint. Here emerges freedom’s second note: positive freedom—the freedom to exercise power. Such complete freedom of power, over slave and then over grateful freedman, is found in no other relationship outside of slavery.

Finally, in the shadow of slavery arises the status of the *freeman*: the native whose identity is defined in opposition to the enslaved outsider. Linguistically, this truth is embedded in the very word “freedom.” Its Indo-European root, *prei*, means “beloved” or “belonging to a group”—a group whose members are *not enslaved*. Thus, the third note of freedom is born: the collective freedom of belonging and solidarity.

Freedom, then, is not one thing but a *chord*—a triadic harmony of three interwoven notes: liberation from domination, the power to act as one desires with another, and the solidarity of collective belonging.

The question arises: If slavery was a universal institution, why did freedom emerge as a supreme value only in the West? Hegel himself grappled with this question. He saw the emergence of freedom as the unique product of the Western *geist*, a restless spirit that propelled humanity toward self-realization. I agree with Hegel's historical conclusion—that freedom became central to the West—but my explanation of how and why this happened differs from his own.

Freedom did not emerge from some inner rational necessity. Rather, it was forged through specific socio-historical conditions and struggles unique to the West. For freedom to become institutionalized as a shared value, three developments were necessary:

1. A large population of slaves yearning for liberation.
2. The centrality of slavery to the economic and social life of the community, creating the need for manumission.
3. A social structure in which freed persons could carve out space for themselves and participate in the life of the community.

This is what historians of slavery have come to call slave society or large-scale slavery.

These conditions first emerged in ancient Greece, particularly Athens, beginning in the 6th century BCE. Slavery became integral to Greek society, sustaining its economy and creating a sharp division between the free and the enslaved. Out of this tension emerged the value of *eleutheria*—personal freedom—as a bond of solidarity among free men, defined in opposition to slaves and outsiders.

But Greece's legacy did not end there. In the 4th century BCE, philosophers like Plato began to reinterpret freedom as an inner ideal. Outer freedom—freedom from domination—became a metaphor for inner freedom: the mastery of reason over the soul's basest desires. For Plato,

the unfree person was enslaved to their passions, he can have true belief but cannot know the truth of his belief, while true freedom meant the rational discipline of the self.

After the Greeks there were two further great moments in the founding and institutionalization of freedom. One was the rise of ancient Rome; the other the emergence, within Rome, of Pauline Christianity. The Roman Empire, the most vast and complex slave society in history, played a critical role in further institutionalizing freedom. By the height of imperial Rome, the very concept of *libertas*—personal freedom—had become a cherished value, particularly among freed slaves and their descendants. Unlike the Greeks, Roman freedmen were not ashamed of their former slave status; on the contrary, they celebrated their liberation. Tomb inscriptions proudly bore the marks of manumission, depicting freedom as the pinnacle of personal achievement.

For Rome's elite, meanwhile, freedom was inseparable from power. The freest man was the most powerful man—most notably, the emperor himself. Thus, the Roman ideal of freedom fused its two central notes: freedom as personal autonomy and freedom as the capacity to exercise dominion over others. Freedmen, in turn, found their own place of power and recognition within the imperial system, particularly as priests in the *seviri Augustales*, custodians of the emperor's cult.

The Roman Empire thus amplified and solidified freedom's chord: liberation from slavery, the exercise of power, and solidarity within the community. It also created the socio-historical space for Christianity to flourish. As the Gospel spread through the cities of Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome, Paul's message of spiritual liberation resonated deeply with freedmen and the enslaved alike. Indeed, the Roman freedmen's passion for negative freedom and its security in the worship of the absolute freedom and power of the divine emperor, were to become the model of Christian doctrine.

Jesus of Nazareth spoke not of freedom but of salvation, preparing his followers for the coming Kingdom of God. Yet as Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, it absorbed and transformed the language of freedom. It was Paul, the apostle to the gentiles, who reinterpreted Jesus's message as a theology of freedom. Paul's brilliance lay in his use of slavery—so pervasive in Rome—as a metaphor for spiritual bondage. Sin, Paul argued, was a

form of slavery. To be saved was to be *redeemed*—a word rooted in the Latin *redemptionem*, meaning “to buy back” or “to ransom.” Christ’s death on the cross was the ultimate act of liberation, a divine manumission that freed humanity from the bondage of sin.

For Paul, death was no longer an end but a dialectical process—a passage into new life. As he writes in *Romans*: “The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.” In the letter to the *Romans*’ too, Paul introjected the freedman’s principle that the freedom of salvation, celebrated in the earlier letter to the *Galatians*, found protection and its greatest expression in surrender to the absolute freedom and power of God.

With Christianity, the Western world’s concept of freedom attained a new and profound depth. Freedom became a condition not just of the body or the community, but of the *soul*. In this vision, liberation was not only from domination but also from the slavery of sin and death. The enslaved spirit, Paul taught, could achieve true freedom through faith in Christ—a freedom that transcended worldly suffering and temporal conditions.

Hegel, steeped in Christian philosophy, understood this synthesis well. Christianity, for him, represented a profound reconciliation of freedom’s dialectical tensions: the individual’s freedom, the collective unity of the Church, and the rational, ethical structure of divine order. In this way, the Christian legacy embedded the idea of freedom into the very consciousness of the West.

The synthesis of Greek philosophy, Roman liberty, and Christian salvation formed the bedrock of Western freedom. Yet freedom’s development did not end there. Each epoch in the West has reinterpreted and redefined freedom in response to its own struggles and contradictions.

From its inception, there were contradictions inherent in both the content and harmony of this great cultural triad. Each note had both good and evil possibilities. Positive freedom achieves goodness in its Platonic aspect of self-control, power over one’s baser, selfish instincts, and the capacity to realize the good ends one defines for oneself, what today we call empowerment. However, in freedom as power over others, we see the potentially evil side of positive freedom.

Likewise, freedom as emancipation, negative freedom, has a good side in the independence of one's being. But negative freedom, as Hegel saw, can become the pursuit of selfishness, the complete neglect of one's obligation to one's community. Hegel had much to say on the dangers of selfishness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Finally, democracy, the third note of freedom, can also deteriorate into hatred and contempt for those who do not belong, seeing others as inferior and not worthy of incorporation into the beloved community of free citizens. When democracy becomes an inclusive form of exclusiveness, it descends into the evils of chauvinism and the dehumanization of the outsider, something we saw in America's most recent elections.

A second kind of problem in the triad of freedom is the danger of its fragmentation. For freedom to thrive, all three notes of the chord must play in harmony. When one note becomes dominant, captured by certain groups who play it at the expense of the other two, the chord is shattered, and disharmony ensues.

Of course, how it was to be interpreted, which note of the chord was to achieve preeminence remained a source of conflict, a dialectical tension, both in the inner and outer realms, and this accounts for the extraordinary appeal of freedom to both the powerful and the weak and oppressed, to enslaver and enslaved alike. But whatever note of the chord prevailed at any given period, the fact remains that that note was only one in the triad of freedom, always ultimately requiring, however agonistically, the other two notes of this most defining of chords in the culture of the Western world. Where this unity was threatened, where one or two notes came to dominate the other, the chord of freedom was fragmented and tyranny threatened.

During the Enlightenment, freedom underwent another profound transformation. Philosophers such as Locke, Rousseau, and Kant secularized freedom, anchoring it in reason, natural rights, and the emerging ideals of democracy. The Enlightenment's emphasis on individual autonomy and self-determination laid the groundwork for modern liberalism and the revolutions that would shape the modern world—from the American Revolution to the French Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Hegel, writing in the wake of these upheavals, sought to reconcile freedom's conflicting dimensions. For Hegel, true freedom was not merely the absence of constraint (negative freedom) or the ability to exercise power (positive freedom); it was the integration of individual autonomy with the rational, ethical structure of society. Freedom, he argued, achieves its highest form in *Sittlichkeit*—the ethical life realized through the family, civil society, and the state. In this way, Hegel's vision transcended both liberal individualism and authoritarian power, offering a synthesis that remains as relevant today as it was in his time.

Where does this leave us now?

At the height of the post-war era, the West came closer than ever to achieving freedom's triadic harmony. The welfare states of Europe, and to a lesser extent America, provided a balance between negative freedom (the right to do as one pleases), positive freedom (the capacity to achieve one's goals), and collective freedom (democratic solidarity and the rule of law).

Yet, as we entered the 21st century, this harmony began to unravel. Neoliberalism—an ideology that prizes individual autonomy at the expense of community and equality—has distorted the chord of freedom. Negative freedom, the freedom *from* constraint, has been elevated to such an extreme that it now undermines the other notes of the triad. The rich and powerful have exploited this imbalance, using their positive freedom to accumulate obscene levels of wealth and power while eroding the freedoms of others.

In America, this distortion is especially stark. Three billionaire individuals now own more wealth than the bottom half of all Americans. Entire regions—once thriving industrial heartlands—have been hollowed out, leaving communities impoverished and despairing. The result is not freedom, but alienation. For the working poor, for those suffering from deaths of despair, for communities fractured by economic collapse, freedom has lost all meaning.

This fragmentation has opened the door to the false gospel of populist authoritarianism. Leaders promise to restore the "beloved community," to reclaim the spirit of freedom, even as they erode the very institutions that make freedom possible. In this moment, we see the



consequences of a freedom untethered from its ethical foundation—a freedom divorced from responsibility, solidarity, and reason.

Hegel would have been appalled by this state of affairs. For him, freedom is not the absence of obligations but the alignment of individual will with rational, ethical principles. True freedom, he taught, is self-determination—a freedom grounded in recognition of one's place within the larger, rational order. It is also self-realization—the capacity to become fully oneself, to achieve the life one values. And finally, it is reconciliation—the harmony between personal autonomy and societal obligation.

What we face today is the breakdown of this reconciliation. Trust in institutions has eroded; inequality has deepened; and communities have fractured under the weight of economic and cultural despair. In such conditions, the ethical life—*Sittlichkeit*—becomes impossible.

*Honorable guests*, we stand at a crossroads. The story of freedom, as Hegel reminds us, is a story of struggle—of contradictions that demand resolution. Our task now is not to despair but to act: to reclaim freedom's triadic harmony, to restore the balance between liberation, empowerment, and the solidarity of the demos, and to renew our commitment to this most sacred of Western values.

*Lord Mayor, ladies and gentlemen*, I thank you for this extraordinary honor and for the privilege of sharing these reflections with you today. May we, in the spirit of Hegel, commit ourselves to the work of freedom's renewal.