

## Dostoevsky Reads Hegel in Siberia and Bursts Into Tears

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Maybe you were reading the *New York Times* reporting on Gaza and burst into tears. Maybe you were reading the latest science from the United Nation's Panel on Climate Change and burst into tears? Maybe you were reading findings from Minnesota Attorney General, Keith Ellison, and University of Minnesota civil rights professor, Myron Orfield, showing how public money for housing is steered almost entirely to subsidizing housing for white households while African Americans are steered to housing in North Minneapolis, as the Twin Cities is becoming racially segregated faster than any other place in the country.<sup>1</sup> Maybe you were reading that report and burst into tears?

Imagine Dostoevsky reading Hegel in Siberia and bursting into tears, asks the Hungarian scholar László Földényi, who stands in the tradition of public intellectuals offering a counternarrative to that offered by dominant culture.<sup>2</sup> Imagine Dostoevsky in the spring of 1854, years before his masterworks of Russian literature, exiled and sentenced to a Siberian prison camp for revolutionary conspiracy against the government, and now forced into military service at an unnoticed and forgotten outpost in southern Siberia, far removed from the high-cultured society of what was considered not *Asiatic* Russia but *European* Russia. Here, according to historical records, Dostoevsky made friends with a local public official who supplied him with books, with mention of one author in particular—the great, towering 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher of history, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. We do not know which works of Hegel were ordered for Dostoevsky, but it's very likely that among the works were Hegel's celebrated lectures on the philosophy of history, delivered between 1822 and 1831 at the University of Berlin, because in it, Hegel mentions Siberia in passing, to explain why he would *not* be discussing Siberia: “[In our consideration of world history] We must first of all eliminate Siberia,” writes Hegel, “for it lies outside the scope of our enquiry. The whole character of Siberia rules it out as a setting for historical culture and prevents it from attaining any [significant] form in the world-historical process.”<sup>3</sup>

Hegel similarly dispenses with the continent of Africa as having no history worth considering. “At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again,” he writes. “For it is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit... What we properly understand by Africa, is the unhistorical, undeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature,”<sup>4</sup> devoid of

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<sup>1</sup> Al McFarlane, ed., “Lights On!”, *Insight News*, Minneapolis, March 17, 2022, [https://www.insightnews.com/news/lights-on/article\\_eb582c16-a667-11ec-abea-e7dd5abc48be.html](https://www.insightnews.com/news/lights-on/article_eb582c16-a667-11ec-abea-e7dd5abc48be.html)

<sup>2</sup> László Földényi, *Dostoyevsky Reads Hegel in Siberia and Bursts into Tears*, trans. Otilie Mulzet (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 191.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed., “Hegel” in *Great Books of Western World*, vol. 46 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1952), p. 199.

morality, religions, and political constitution. Hegel continues: “*We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality if we would rightly comprehend [the African]... They have not reached the necessary level of consciousness and thus devoid of morality.*”<sup>5</sup> Here is Hegel, among the great framers of Western modernity, giving racist justification for Europe’s enslavement and colonization of Africa.

Imagine Dostoevsky encountering Hegel’s erasure, exclusion, and repudiation of Siberia and Africa as having any part in the progress of history and culture after the Greeks. Imagine Dostoevsky’s despair, exiled not just from the rest of Russia but in the eyes of Hegel and the dominant ideologies of the Enlightenment, entire places of the world and an entire race of people exiled and cut off from recognition in world history. Haven’t we heard echoes of this in the vulgarity of the question, “Why can’t we have more immigrants from Norway than from Haiti and Africa and El Salvador?”

Imagine Dostoevsky listening to the learned historian, when the proofs, the figures, were arranged in columns, when shown the charts and diagrams to much applause in the lecture room, feeling sickened and exhausted by it all, he wanders out into the mystical night air and looks up in perfect silence at the stars.<sup>6</sup> Exiled in Siberia, in this no-man’s land supposedly excluded even from divine providence, Dostoevsky bursts into tears as he realizes that the great Hegelian gaze cannot see the whitewashing of history, cannot see the suffering of the vanquished, of the exploited and enslaved by empire’s conquest of land and colonialism’s extraction of resources and people.

And Dostoevsky has a revelation: *What if the truth of our distorted human history only reveals itself to those who have been cast out?*



We stand on the homelands of the Dakota Nation. We honor with gratitude the people who have stewarded the land throughout the generations and their ongoing contributions to this region. We acknowledge the ongoing injustices that we have committed against the Dakota Nation, and we wish to interrupt this legacy, beginning with acts of healing and honest storytelling about this place.<sup>7</sup>

And honest storytelling about our history.

How could it be that no epoch in human history has concealed and denied the fact of human suffering and degradation of the earth so conspicuously as the modern era? Our modern era whose origins commenced with the Enlightenment. Wasn’t the Enlightenment the project of

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<sup>5</sup> Ronald Kuykendall, “Hegel and Africa: An Evaluation of the Treatment of Africa in the Philosophy of History,” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 4, (1993), p. 572.

<sup>6</sup> Reference to liturgical reading of poem, “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” by Walt Whitman.

<sup>7</sup> Land acknowledgement of Unity Church-Unitarian.

radically reframing our place in the cosmos, rooting us in reason and the power of science to make plain the laws of nature and demystify the observable natural world? Where once the farmer prayed for rain, now there was irrigation. Where once the villagers offered tributes to placate the volcano god, now there was seismology to free us from medieval superstition and the constraints of religion. Everything was now explainable within the immanent frame, with no need for transcendence or God or revelation, as the light of reason would illuminate all corners of mystery, making the world in all aspects more available, attainable, accessible, predictable, mappable, engineerable, controllable under our sovereign gaze, down to our sleep habits and step counts. The human animal, no longer finite bounded creatures like the rest of the creatures of the earth, but omnipotent creators with sovereign dominion over all of life. What an astounding vision of human progress and civilizational greatness!

So how could it be, asks László Földényi, that an epoch with a vision of such unfettered human progress could also conceal and suppress the fact of immense human suffering and degradation of the earth? How could it be that the charts and diagrams, the proofs and figures arranged in columns, would be deployed in the racialized classification and the earliest profiling of people? How could it be that the era of new knowledge and the origins of what we call enlightened modern thought—built upon scientific discoveries, new overseas trading routes, and the beginnings of a global multicultural possibility—includes the barbarous, grotesque story of colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, the hubris of Manifest Destiny, and a modernity built upon the enslavement of people and the enslavement of land?

Perhaps if we were to zoom in, in acts of honest storytelling, we may notice the distinctive rise of cartography during this era. “As much as guns and warships, maps have been the weapons of imperialism, the universal instrument for securing what has been ‘discovered’,” writes J.B. Harley, a historian of cartography. Maps used for sighting, landing, appropriating, naming, certifying of one’s right or legitimacy. Maps commissioned and created for exploration, warfare, settlement, property allocation, and establishment of territories and borders. But if we look closely, we will see surveyors marching alongside soldiers, initially mapping for reconnaissance, but eventually as a tool of exploitation in the colonies. Maps have always anticipated empire.<sup>8</sup> Mapmaking and colonialism performing two seemingly contradictory things. One the one hand, bringing faraway unknown places and people near, but on the other hand, rendering such places and people reductionistically, abstractly, as commodities. Maps which were meant to overcome distance actually having the effect of installing a profound sense of separation and alienation.

Just consider the way discovered places are named to reflect European power and European conquerors, like *Lake Calhoun* with little regard for the mutuality between the land and people, compared to *Bde Maka Ska*, the name which reflects the intimate relationship of the indigenous people with the white clay of the earth. The land as alive, as animate and

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<sup>8</sup> J.B. Harley, “Maps, Knowledge, and Power,” in *The Iconography of Landscape*, eds. Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 282.

communicative, as opposed to the GPS-mapped world with *locations* given to move about, manipulate, drill into, and purchase and own; but locations which do not draw us deeply into the *land* to shape us as creatures intimately bound to a *place*. In fact, the various forms of “built environments” we live in, with the many conveniences they afford us, are designed so that we do not have to engage directly with the sources of food that feed us or the energy which powers our lives. Our economies are designed to be anonymous, so that the contexts and histories that produce the food and goods we want are hidden behind a veil of ignorance. Ours is a world in which we are exiled from the land and people, our contact with real places and people mediated through switches, buttons, credit cards, and screens, all from our comfort-controlled offices and homes.<sup>9</sup>

Forgive me, as any summary of the Enlightenment runs the risk of oversimplification, but surely our modernity is formed within this Enlightenment logic, with the machinery of its rationality and its myth of unlimited progress, where everything designated sacred, divine, and transcendent is subordinated to the supervision and sovereignty of the human being who above all else thinks for himself. Not just “I think, therefore I am” but “I think *for myself*, therefore I am.” All the while, the creatures of the earth who remember their embeddedness within the meshwork of life speak otherwise, that “I am thought of, therefore I am.”



What if we sacrificed more than we know of transcendence at the altar of modernity? Not transcendence as otherworldliness or the supernatural beyond this world, but transcendence as a dimension of depth, of what resides in the substratum of this very world that we have yet to humbly understand. Not an otherworldly transcendence but an *immanent transcendence* stirring, impending, and acting more deeply within our very world and history than our scientific tools and enlightened methods have yet to fully recognize. A transcendence and sacrality beyond what the modern, white sense of plausibility has dared to imagine.

Have you really considered the lilies of the field, of plants which teach us how mistaken we have been about our place in the world? Plants which by far exceed animals and humans in their complete exposure and attentiveness to what is going on around them, to air and moisture, soil and temperature, movement and vibration, because their very life and growth are inseparable from their attentiveness to where they are. Plants are embodied sites of receiving and sharing of that life-creating source we know as sunlight. Plants make the sun live on earth. “*They transform the Sun’s breath—its energy, its light, its rays—into the very bodies that inhabit the planet,*” writes the scholar Emanuele Coccia in his celebrated work *The Life of Plants*.<sup>10</sup> What are plants but the solar skin of the Earth, creating our atmosphere, our first

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<sup>9</sup> Norman Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity’s Place in a Wounded World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 104.

<sup>10</sup> Emanuele Coccia, *Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), p. 87.

world, the sacred sphere of breath through which the dust of the earth comes to life and touches transcendence?

Imagine Dostoevsky reading Hegel in Siberia and bursting into tears, for contrary to Hegel, what he finds in the place and people and stories banished from the history books, is a revelation of a more radical, prophetic truth than what the whitewashed version of modern history has yet to truly confess. A revelation of the diseased colonial imagination within which we still remain captive. A revelation of a different way forward, a way that summons us to move close to people and places and stories exiled from history, to those who have not forgotten the *“direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder... which moves us to a renewal of spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life”* as the first source of our living tradition testifies. A revelation that is given to those who have been cast out.

As the faultlines of modernity become apparent everywhere about us—in the ecological crisis, the crisis of democracy, in the crisis of mental health and moral exhaustion—we are still living inside the colonial wound sanctioned by the Enlightenment project. What will help us find a way out of our captivity to a diseased and disfigured social imagination, forged in the enslavement of people and the enslavement of land? How will we navigate to another way of seeing our place in the world when the very distorted framing of reality has expanded so that it covers the horizon and presents itself as the horizon?

The voices of wisdom, the voices of those exiled and banished, teach us this: What you have to do is to look at the corners, look closely and attentively at the corners, and see if you can see the layers just sticking out from beneath the dominant frame covering it up. Maybe it's a question about where you live, about ownership of stolen land and private property as the franchising of empire. Maybe it's a nagging conversation about not equating the identity of a senior ministerial candidate with their capacity to serve in that role. Maybe it's the less-than-desired score on your Intercultural Development Inventory that surprised you and annoyed you to no end. Just look closely at the corners where the horizon doesn't quite cover over everything and you notice something sticking out. Don't try to pull the whole horizon up, because it's too massive. It covers nearly everything you know. It frames your whole reality. But if you can put a finger on the corner and catch even a little piece of the edge, you can see how thick it is, how sticky it is. And if you can just grab hold and pull a piece of it up, you might glimpse something actually there that you could not have imagined before. A revelation that changes everything. And you bring others to those corners to glimpse the deeper truth with you, as together you burst into tears at the relentless hardship... and its prophetic possibility.