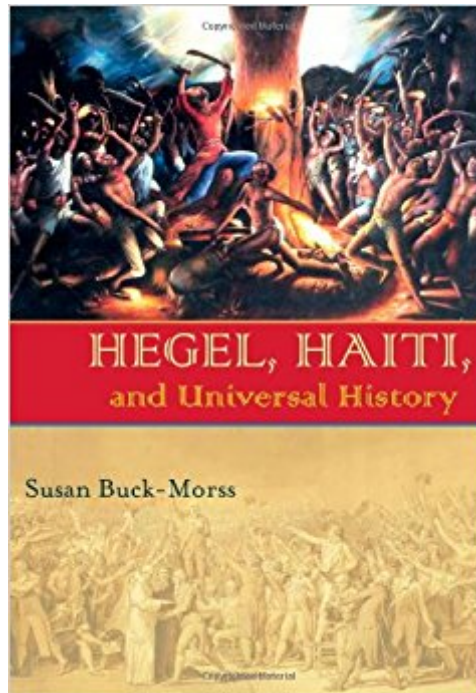


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# Hegel, Haiti, And Universal History (Pitt Illuminations)



## Synopsis

In this path-breaking work, Susan Buck-Morss draws new connections between history, inequality, social conflict, and human emancipation. *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* offers a fundamental reinterpretation of Hegel's master-slave dialectic and points to a way forward to free critical theoretical practice from the prison-house of its own debates. Historicizing the thought of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and the actions taken in the Haitian Revolution, Buck-Morss examines the startling connections between the two and challenges us to widen the boundaries of our historical imagination. She finds that it is in the discontinuities of historical flow, the edges of human experience, and the unexpected linkages between cultures that the possibility to transcend limits is discovered. It is these flashes of clarity that open the potential for understanding in spite of cultural differences. What Buck-Morss proposes amounts to a "new humanism" — one that goes beyond the usual ideological implications of such a phrase to embrace a radical neutrality that insists on the permeability of the space between opposing sides and as it reaches for a common humanity.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

*Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* packs a powerful punch. Its strength lies in the development of a specific claim in the history of philosophy into a general theme concerning universality and politics. —Bookforum— This brief review cannot do justice to the many ways [Buck-Morss's] provocative and beautifully written book forces us to reexamine our academic labors. Buck-Morss

also deserves praise for placing the Haitian Revolution firmly at the center of modernity”and insisting that scholars in many fields contemplate its lessons.” • “The Americas” Susan Buck-Morss provides a decisive reframing of Hegel in this wonderful book. The supposed idealist becomes a hard-headed realist whose concepts are formed while reading the morning newspapers. The idea of emancipation from slavery is itself emancipated from a model of noblesse oblige to one of struggle, risk, and sacrifice on the part of the slave. This is a thoroughly brilliant scholarly work that turns Hegel upside down in a new way, revealing this time that he was always already standing on his head.” • “W. J. T. Mitchell, University of Chicago” • “Few books . . . contain as much fascinating material, new interpretations, intriguing possibilities and intellectual stimulation.” • “Marx and Philosophy Review of Books” • “Among the most innovative and stimulating critical assessments of the Haitian Revolution.” • “New West Indian Guide” • “A revelation, on both scholarly and performative levels. . . .” • “Among the most innovative and stimulating critical assessments of the Haitian Revolution.” • “New West Indian Guide” • “A provocative book and one that will be of interest to scholars in the field of race AND philosophy.” • “Black Cultural Studies

Susan Buck-Morss is Jan Rock Zubrow '77 Chair of Social Sciences, and professor of political philosophy and social theory in the department of government at Cornell University. She is the author of *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left*, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, and *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*.

highly recommended for anyone interested in studying race history and its constructions in western thought and modernity. It is also accessible and engaging.

I came to this book having vigorously debated within a Hegel reading group alternate approaches to reading the *Phenomenology*: either by decoding the abstract language for concrete historical references (with guides such as Kojève's) or by allowing the language to remain formal and transcendental in character. Unfortunately Hegel's style invites readers inclined to remain in theoretical abstraction to overlook and lazily avoid the investigation of concrete history (which brings philosophy truly to life). Susan Buck-Morss here seems to share my view that Hegel was hedging for metaphysical appeal, while the substantial referents of his terms are a radical array of historical

circumstances more numerous than has even been supposed so far. Buck-Morss puts forth a convincing argument that Hegel's master-slave dialectic was inspired and written not only by consideration of ancient Greek slavery (as is conventionally understood) but also by the contemporary event of the Haitian revolution, which Hegel understood to follow from colonial domination by early Western capitalism. Buck-Morss examines Hegel's critical reading of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* as particularly important for shaping his general critique of modernity in the modern economy's instrumentalizing of people. One might suspect that this too-conveniently pulls Hegel into Left post-colonial studies, but actually a reading in good faith will prove her right: Hegel studies heretofore (especially by philosophy specialists) have been woefully neglectful of a contemporary historical event - the Haitian revolution - whose significance Hegel couldn't (nor wouldn't) have overlooked as an avid reader of all the news being published and available to him. Also vital to the book is the author's argument aimed at Left post-colonial studies: that they should reconsider the value of a Universal History for progressive politics. The postmodernist rejection of Universal History has proven, over the last thirty years of conservative rule in the West, to be a great aid to neoconservative forces of division against progressive politics. Thus it is vital for anyone of a progressive persuasion to reconsider the value of a Universal History as argued for here by Buck-Morss.

Placed the event into a new light by presenting relevant details and historical context. Dealt with complex subject matter in a precise but engaging manner. Quite something.

Susan Buck Morss is a hero. She has said some very confrontational and painful-to-hear truths about western imperialism and dynasty and its effects on Haiti and the rest of the world. This is a must read!

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