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REFLECTION

Fanon's psycho-politics of decolonisation

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SUMMARY

This article explores Frantz Fanon's psycho-politics of decolonisation, arguing that his revolutionary project extends beyond material liberation to include the transformation of consciousness. Situating Fanon's thought as part of Marxist theories of subject formation and anticolonial praxis, it traces how colonialism's structures produce compliant and complicit subjects, and how liberation must therefore involve dismantling the psychic effects of these structures. Through Fanon's critique of colonial psychiatry and his reworking of psychoanalysis as a tool for emancipation, the essay shows that decolonisation demands both external and internal struggle: the rejection of the coloniser's recognition and the creation of new, anti-imperial modes of being. Engaging Fanon alongside thinkers from Césaire to Martín-Baró and contemporary liberation psychologies, the article argues that the ongoing work of decolonisation lies in the dialectical relationship between material conditions and consciousness in our neocolonial world.

KEYWORDS

Frantz Fanon; decolonisation; psycho-politics; subjectivity; anticolonialism; liberation psychology

'There must be no waiting until the nation has produced new men; there must be no waiting until men are imperceptibly transformed by revolutionary processes in perpetual renewal', Fanon writes, before one sets out 'to make explicit, to de-mystify,

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and to harry the insult to mankind that exists in oneself' (Fanon 2001, 304). He says this near the end of 'Colonial War and Mental Disorders' in *The Wretched of the Earth*, having just summarised, and dispelled, a variety of pseudoscientific theories held by his colleagues at the time (including the alleged 'permanent criminal tendencies' of the Algerian, and 'the African['s little use] of his frontal lobes') (Fanon 2004, 226). Fanon the psychiatrist has no time for these racist fantasies. But Fanon the revolutionary turns them into a teaching moment on dismantling that which is 'an insult to mankind' that 'exists in oneself' (Fanon 2001, 304).

How can we understand this assertion? At first glance it seems to confront a materially violent phenomenon – racist ethno-psychiatry – with a rather existential, and even discomfitingly accusatory, directive. Why speak of the 'insulting' inner desires of the colonised, when it is the brutality of the coloniser that must more urgently be confronted in the context of anticolonial struggle? This becomes clearer when we understand that, by this point in *The Wretched of the Earth*, it is the reconstitution of subjectivities out of colonialism – to 'try to set afoot a new man' (Fanon 2001, 316) – that, for Fanon, will spell the total end of imperialism. It is in the context of this revolutionary task that his call to face head-on, demystify and agitate against that which serves colonialism within 'oneself' must be understood. What Aimé Césaire once presciently called 'a good decolonisation, without aftermath' (Césaire 1959, 126) – a decolonisation that is not easily reversed after a flag is raised – depends also on a psycho-political process that must happen within, and between, the colonised.

That a transformation of consciousness is a component of any qualitative transformation in the economic foundations of societies is well-trodden territory in various schools of Marxist thought. The production of subjectivity – the manner in which relations of production produce ways of thinking and living – is at the centre of what Louis Althusser once called Marx's new way of 'doing' philosophy itself, arguing for 'distinguishing between (ideological) philosophy and Theory (or Marxist philosophy constituted in rupture with philosophical ideology)' (Althusser 2005, 162). A dialectical materialist approach understands 'the production of subjectivity' in the sense both of being produced by the relations of production and by ideology and of 'producing effects that exceed the production and reproduction of capital' (Read 2022, 2). These effects affect us in various ways. Indeed, they make and remake the 'I' and the 'us'. As such, revolutionaries in the midst of anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggles in Africa, Asia and Latin America understood this as a problem they needed to address – and to do so as part and parcel of the practical conditions of struggle and liberation. While it is beyond the purpose of this article to analyse the successes and failures of individual case studies, the historical record shows that – from Che Guevara's pedagogical work in Bolivia and the DRC (Holst 2009), to the consciousness-raising of PAIGC (the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde) (Davidson 1993) – anticolonial actors knew that a major component of struggle would be about resisting colonialism's production of uncritical, reconciled, despairing or domineering subjects who had internalised imperialism's imperatives.

This problem was intimately intertwined with the socioeconomic and political challenges faced during the era of decolonisation and national independence. Fanon called them colonial 'inferiority complexes' that he argued were, 'first, economic',

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then 'epidermal' (Fanon 2008, xv). Césaire called them a 'cunningly instilled … fear' that '[taught people] to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair, and behave like flunkeys' (Césaire 2001, 143). Space and place were the objects of colonial domination, but the reformation of minds was where subjectivities could be, and were, shaped. From Thomas Macaulay's recommendation of English literary education in India (Macaulay and Young 1979 [1835], 34) to France's dedicated Commission for Overseas Cinema in West Africa (Genova 2006), the psycho-political tools for 'hammer[ing] into the heads of the indigenous population that if the colonist were to leave they would regress into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality' (Fanon 2004, 149) were important means of producing comprador classes and pacifying labour. This makes the categorisation of human societies under colonialism and the formation of the modern psychoanalytic subject inseparable. As such, I do not minimise the role of European psychoanalysis in the fortification of colonial hierarchies around race, class, gender and sexuality. One has only to think about how the above pseudoscientific pronouncements that Fanon challenged 60 years ago (the alleged 'simplicity' of the African and 'criminality' of the Arab) are still reproduced today in white supremacist and Zionist worldviews.

The vocabulary of psychoanalysis was complicit in some of these historic injustices. Its foundational assumptions (later challenged) included that non-white peoples and women were so-called psychic 'dark continents' (Freud 2001 [1926], 212) with no, or at best non-normative, interiority. However, as Ian Parker and David Pavón-Cuéllar argue in *Psychoanalysis and Revolution*, 'beyond its questionable applications, psychoanalysis needs to be recreated by us as a tool of radical work on subjectivity that is necessary if there is to be a successful overthrow of existing conditions' (Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar 2021, 26). Imperialism's politically expedient refusal to 'imagine the psychic sovereignty of the colonised individual' (Anderson, Jenson and Keller 2011, 4) was always challenged by the very peoples its assumptions denigrated, often for precisely the purposes of this 'successful overthrow'. Fanon, trained in the French colonial psychiatric school but critical with this material in his own thought and practice, and Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994), who applied Paulo Freire's liberation pedagogy in a clinical context, are only two examples of anticolonial psychiatrists who sought a psychoanalysis bent towards an emancipatory project. Robert Beshara (2021) has examined the theoretical links between Sigmund Freud and Edward Said, while Elizabeth Danto (2007), Daniel José Gaztambide (2019) and Ankhi Mukherjee (2022) have all drawn attention to how socialist psychoanalysts sought to implement free clinics in the early to mid twentieth century (in the understanding that psychic strife cannot be thought of separately from poverty, racism, war and colonialism).

The self as having a psyche that can be analysed and can be intervened with in some way is therefore not a category mutually constitutive with neocolonial governmentality alone, but also with histories of anticolonialism and anti-imperialism. The continued relevance of some kind of category of the 'self' to decolonisation is vital, because the creation of economic and sociopolitical conditions that sustain anticolonial ways of being and relating to one another have concurrent processes within that must not be overlooked. We cannot 'make explicit' and 'de-mystify' (Fanon 2001, 304) these processes, Fanon reminds us, without understanding the relationship between the (neo)colonial conditions in which we are situated and the interiorised

teachings of these conditions. Far from just a theoretical exercise, to understand this is to begin addressing the 'insult to mankind' that 'exists in oneself'. It is the difference between reaction and resistance, and between violence that destroys everyone, versus violence that serves to 'keep the knife at [colonialism's] throat' (Fanon 2004, 23). The clinical case studies he chooses to discuss from the Algerian War of Independence highlight the importance of this revolutionary task. They include, for example, the harrowing cases of an Algerian peasant who turns homicidal after surviving a French rampage, and of two Arab children who kill a white French playmate without fully comprehending their actions (Fanon 2004, 199–205). An end to such psychic strife can only come in the form of conscious action, which not only organises against the coloniser, but also against its teachings within, which tell us that becoming 'free' equals becoming master over others.

This could not be further from the psycho-political work that today's capitalist 'psy professions' (Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar 2021, 16) promote for the purposes of adapting and reconciling people to their alienation and oppression. Fanon warns of these techniques as they previously existed in the form of colonial pseudoscience, insisting that no psychiatric intervention alone can challenge material injustices. He writes, 'since 1954 we have drawn the attention of French and international psychiatrists in scientific works to the difficulty of "curing" a colonized subject correctly, in other words making him thoroughly fit into a social environment of the colonial type' (Fanon 2004, 181–182). Fanon here points out what should be self-evident to his fellow practitioners: that the opposite of subjectivity-constitution (reconciliation to objecthood) is what indicates so-called health in an 'environment of the colonial type'. Fanon reaffirms here that the psychoanalytic language of subject constitution available to him is implicated in making invisible the colonial structure of the environment at hand. But an investigation of psychic dynamics cannot be done away with, given that the ontological questions that colonial power raises are also political questions relevant to the struggle for decolonisation. In fact, it is this investigation that reveals paradoxes such as 'the Slave [reaffirming] the Master's exclusive right to give rights' (Harfouch 2019, 143) by awaiting his recognition – which, in turn, is an important problem for liberation strategy. Abandoning the notion of achieving subject-status (or a 'healthy' psychic 'fit') with the same order that renders people objects is, from a Fanonian perspective, the psycho-political starting point of anti-colonial struggle. If, in his words, the current (colonial) world at hand is a world where 'there is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white' (Fanon 2004, xiv), then decolonisation begins when one refuses to take that world as a given. When they recognise that, although that world has partly constituted their subjectivity, this implicatedness also makes them a historical agent of change within it.

This is a generative, not a resigned, place. From here, the unnamed Black protagonist (read by Lewis Gordon (2015), among others, as Fanon himself) of *Black Skin, White Masks* seeks out what – if not the Master's recognition ('becoming white') – one becomes *for*. He lands upon the future as the reason: both a future world rid of colonialism and a future self in that world. 'I am not merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else', Fanon says (2008, 170), pointing away from a Hegelian mutual recognition and out towards a 'somewhere and something else' – towards a future, in other words, that is free from

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imperialism. While the subjectivities of Fanon's *damnés* have historicity – they are changed and formed by their lived experiences in the material world, across time – that does not mean they are reducible to the conditions they are subjected to by that (colonial) world. In pivoting from an abandonment of recognition to embracing an indeterminate future, Fanon here describes a choice we all have within our still colonial present: a choice to live knowing your dignity and freedom is bound up with that of others. It is the choice to act – with others – as if that world free from imperialism, which we '[are] for' (*ibid*.), is already here in our minds and in our intersubjective relations.

The contexts of these investigations in *Black Skin, White Masks*, to recall, are the societies of mid-century Martinique and France: two locations of the same imperialism with different but related race, class and gender dynamics. These intersect in various ways to delimit the subjectivities of those who are racialised, as in the Martinican who believes 'that one is white if one has a certain amount of money' (Fanon 2008, 26). However, his observations go beyond their time and place, highlighting how (neo)colonial structures – from the denial of resource sovereignty to the imposition of European curricula in a postcolony – can lock psycho-political energies into a perpetual cycle of reaction. In an environment where becoming less or more 'white' is the only becoming that is reinforced as available to the colonised, the self's capacity to recreate itself, in dialectical relation to its own concrete conditions, suffers. Fanon treats this an oppression both psychically and politically consequential at an altogether different level to isolated acts of injustice or racism. The protagonist of *Black Skin, White Masks* must instead reorient his actions towards a future beyond colonialism as the place and time that 'he is for' (Fanon 2008, 170). Subject-constitution, thus historicised, can be in dialectical relation with the material world, instead of with the oppressor's misrecognition or lack of recognition (Jilani 2024, 40). Although the latter, too, shapes the world, the colonised must not mistake it for the world.

Putting into conversation various Fanon scholarship and attempting to synthesise some of his psycho-political ideas can never make claims to comprehensiveness or closure. Fanon's works and life continue to be interpreted and also misinterpreted with counter-revolutionary intent – the latter especially in light of the ongoing genocide in Palestine (Hamouchene 2024). But what emerges repeatedly in his approach to problems of subject-formation is that the creation of economic and sociopolitical conditions that sustain anticolonial ways of being, and of relating to one another, have concurrent processes of transformation within. The colonised having subjectivities that change not through desiring the Master's recognition, but through their own lived experience over time, means they become historical agents through a dynamic relationship with their concrete conditions, which in themselves contain the seeds of the 'somewhere and something else' after imperialism. This dialectical movement within will always deeply threaten an imperialism that seeks to reconcile people to the insidious notion that there are some human beings who are not human beings – that 'humanity [is] unevenly divided among groups that [appear] to be human' (Maldonado-Torres 2017, 439).

Colonialism, Blackness, racialisation and their intersecting structures did not, do not, look the same everywhere. What subjectivities and societies emerge from anticolonial struggle depend on the specific historical, social, economic, cultural and political contexts of colonialism within which the colonised and the neocolonised find themselves, and the methods they deploy. Fanon's psycho-politics does not circumscribe singular outcomes applicable to all contexts. But it does illustrate why the material for becoming cannot be anything but that which is found in the reality of engaging with our still-colonial world, in all of its constituent parts – as one seeks those means best suited to the context within which one is trying to free others.

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