



Understanding Franz Fanon: Colonialism and its Aftermaths

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Abstract

*Franz Fanon's work has been one of the cornerstones of thinking the process of decolonisation of Africa and his books are predictably, some of the key texts of postcolonial studies. In both *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skins White Masks*, Fanon makes frequent mention of Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic in an attempt to understand the effect of decolonisation on the psyche of the hitherto colonised native population. This paper analyses Fanon's appropriation of that Hegelian strand of thought and outlines Fanon's understanding of the ontological dimension of decolonisation. Further, it goes on to explore the link between such an ontology and Fanon's exhortations of violence which become a prerequisite for a genuine process of decolonisation to take place.*

Keyword: Fanon, Postcolonialism, Hegel, Self-consciousness, Master-Slave Dialectic, Violence, Lumpen-Proletariat

Franz Fanon's work is recognised as one of the founding theorisations of the psychological aspects of colonialism and the historical effect of colonial power on the colonised subject. As the tone of *The Wretched of the Earth* suggests, his are not distanced reflections written in the aftermath of a movement. Instead they are polemic tracts, whose virulence stems from the violent process of decolonisation that took place in the fifties and sixties, culminating in the Algerian Revolution against the French colonisers. The structuring principle of *race* in his work makes his theorising of (de)colonisation different from an orthodox Marxian one which would focus on class in its global economic conditions. However, Fanon's conception of the resistance to decolonisation and his expounding of violence needs to be understood within larger theoretical domains which step outside of a race-centric discourse. While a lot of his theoretic can be classified under what is generally understood as identity politics, Fanon was not oblivious of an economic understanding of colonialism. His emphasis was however

fragmentation of the native¹ psyche by way of colonisation which would not disappear by the mere withdrawal of the white coloniser or undone by the accommodation of the native within the existing system of social relations. The experience of a collective *loss of being* in colonialism suggests that the healing of the hitherto-colonised nation would have to undergo a specific process of ontological redemption.

I

Fanon's book *Black Skins White Masks* helps us understand some of his formulations on the 'problem of the native' where he affirms an importance "to the phenomenon of language" (8). The coloniser's language was never introduced to solely facilitate an effective communication link. As is well known from Macaulay's minute in the Indian context, language became a hegemonic inscription of the ethos of the dominant onto the local cultural norm. The imposition of French onto Algeria (or English onto India) caused a *split in the self* in the colonised subject. The colonised subject started to aspire to live and think like a Frenchman (European) and sought to reject any affinity with native culture. As Fanon says, "[t]o speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all the assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilisation" (9). However, the native's will to ape Western culture and distance himself from his origins was not only to climb the social ladder. The *white supremacy* rampant in the colonies conversely negated the native population's claim to humanity (or civilisation) itself. Only by impersonating the white could the native actually *attain* a sense of humanity.

Every colonised people –in other words,
every people in whose soul an inferiority

¹ Fanon uses the word 'native' or 'Negro' to refer to the local African (Algerian) population.



complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilising nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonised is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards (Italics mine; 9)

While the acquisition of the manner, custom and language of the coloniser was a mode of climbing the social ladder and a mark of cultural prosperity, for the colonised subject it also became the only mode of becoming closer to becoming a *real human being*. Prior to that acculturation the “negro is a stage at the slow evolution of monkey into Man” (8). Impersonating the coloniser, brought with it affluence, but also the possibility of realising one's being. Ironically then, a process of humanisation was possible only by attempting to perpetuate colonial power and transcend one's status of being a colonial subject.

II

In this Manichean formation, one of the fundamental causes of psychological anxiety for the native was the perpetual entrapment of being an unrecognised entity in the system in which he was interpellated. Fanon better explains this phenomenon by explaining the ‘dependency complex’ of the ‘Malagasy.’ “A Malagasy is a Malagasy; or, rather, no, not he is a Malagasy but, rather, in an absolute sense he “lives’ his Malagasyhood. If he is a Malagasy, it is because the white man has come, and if at a certain stage he has been led to ask himself whether he is indeed a man, it is because his reality as a man has been challenged.” Taking recourse to the Hegelian Lordship-Bondsman confrontation (which we shall discuss in detail later), Fanon suggests that before the colonial encounter, there had not occurred the primary differentiation required for identification. The identity of the native is evoked at the moment of (violent) confrontation with the European. In other words, the ‘native’ as a category exists only in *relation* to the settler/white/master. Fanon states that the “Negro is comparison” (73) whose values are contingent on the presence of the Other. It is clear that Fanon's notion of being was based on the discourse of identity, and while pertinent to his context, fails to think being in a manner more grounded in material reality.

For instance Marx's conception of being as laid out in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, posits Man's labour as central. In Marx's words, “it is just in his work upon the objective-world, therefore, that man really proves himself as a species-being. This production is his active species life. Through this production, nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of labour is, therefore, *the objectification of Man's species-life*, for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he sees himself in a world that he has created” (73). His active life as it were, determines consciousness. Man realises himself through labour or life activity, outside of which he ceases to have a conception of himself.

III

The final section of *Black Skin White Masks* explicates Fanon's understanding of Hegel's Lordship-Bondsman (Master-Slave) dialectic and the clause of recognition it entails.

Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognised by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognised by the other, that other will remain the theme of his actions. It is on that other being, on recognition by that other being, that his own human worth and reality depend. (Fanon, 169—170)

Fanon asserts that an “absolute reciprocity” exists within the Hegelian dialectic in which one's own humanity is realised only in the *mutual recognition* of the other.² It is only when one self-consciousness steps beyond its immediate being and apprehends the *human reality* of the other that its own existence can be recognised. Fanon states that under colonialism, the white master only recognises the *natural reality* of the native, not the human reality. Fanon posited, rather problematically, that the decolonising process in

² “Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come *out of itself*. This has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self... [self-consciousness] must proceed to supersede the other independent being in order thereby to become certain of itself...” (Hegel, 111)



Africa often took place without conflict which suggested a grant rather than fight for independence.

There is not an open conflict between white and black. One day the White Master, without conflict, recognised the Negro slave....But the former slave wants to *make himself recognised*. (Fanon, 169)

For Fanon, Hegel's theoretic applies to the African context only at the inception of the process of decolonisation; to be understood as a stage when the Master of his own accord *granted* humanity to the slave. Prior to that moment, the Negro was simply a natural reality (in one with nature, similar to a beast) and the very question of self-consciousness did not arise. Decolonisation implied that the native now strove to "*make himself recognised*." But attaining "a world of reciprocal recognitions" was not straightforward. Fanon asserts Hegel's premise that for self-consciousness to be realised action cannot be one-sided, the other (in this case the Negro) has to perform the same action.³ What would follow is a confrontation between Lord and Bondsman, which according to Fanon, is the point at which desire is evoked. Desire is necessarily desire 'of something' (in Hegel, it is the desire for the other's desire).

³ "...this movement of self-consciousness in relation to another self consciousness has in this way been represented as the action on one self-consciousness, but this action of the one has itself the double significance of being both its action and the action of the other as well. For the other is equally independent and self-contained, and there is nothing in it of which it is not itself the origin. The first does not have the object before it merely as it exists primarily for desire, but as something that has an independent existence of its own, which, therefore, it cannot utilize for its own purposes, if that object does not of its own accord do what the first does to it. Thus, the movement is simply the double movement of the two self-consciousnesses. Each sees the other do the same as it does; each does itself what it demands of the other, and therefore also does what it does only in so as the other does the same. Action by one side only would be useless because what is to happen can only be brought about by both." (Hegel, 112) In realizing oneself through the 'other,' Hegel reminds us that both entities undergo the same process. There is no privileged subject imposing recognition on a un-reciprocative object. Both entities "recognize themselves as *mutually recognizing each other*."

Hence, when desire is evoked at the point of 'resistance' from the other, the individual entity is not merely 'here-and-now', sealed into thingness. "I am for somewhere else and for something else. I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity insofar as I pursue something other than life; insofar as I do battle for the creation of a human world...." (Fanon, 170) Desire necessitates a conflict or fight with the other between two entities. The ensuing struggle then becomes one where self-consciousness puts its life at stake in order to obtain freedom.

The human reality in-itself-for-itself *can be achieved only through conflict and through the risk that conflict implies*. This risk means that I go beyond life toward a supreme good that is *the transformation of subjective certainty of my own worth into a universally valid objective truth*. (Italics mine: Fanon, 170)

For self-consciousness to be realised one's association with reality cannot be with an inert world. The mutual recognition attained (not conferred) through the *human other* is necessary to realise the objective truth of my existence.

Fanon's interpretation and use of Hegel however entails a problematic. Hegel's Lordship-Bondsman dialectic was not to be understood as a real confrontation that happened with each one of us. It was to be understood as a primordial relation that constituted *the human*. Fanon posits that this realisation of being/self-consciousness can occur once the process of decolonisation was underway and the Negro, now removed from natural reality, is gradually accommodated into human reality. The moment of decolonisation seems essential in this *path to humanity*. Such a theorisation however, begs the question of why Fanon is unable to conceive of a realisation of self-consciousness within a native community, *without* the existence of the European. One answer is what we have already hinted at earlier: that the *native* is itself a product of colonialism and it is this self-consciousness that is being understood by way of the Hegelian dialectic. But the fact remains that Fanon not being able to conceive of a native identity without a white man is part of the problem with simply dealing with identity and consciousness as reified determinants, rather than understanding them as entities stemming from Man's relationship with the world in terms of labour. Or in other words, is not Fanon guilty of



perpetuating the colonial perception of the native by excluding the native from an originary (Hegelian) understanding of what constitutes the human?

These limitations apart, there is an important aspect of Fanon's work that can be understood by his appropriation of the Lordship-Bondsman dialectic and his exhortations to violence. For Fanon, as stated earlier, freedom or recognition cannot simply be granted by the benevolent Master; it *has to be fought for*. One needs to stake one's life for freedom; the 'staking' itself being a necessary part of the path to freedom and self-consciousness.⁴ According to Fanon, the Negro however had not fought for freedom; he had the benevolence of the coloniser to thank for handing over power to a grateful Negro population.

One day a good white master who had influence said to his friends, "Let's be nice to the niggers....The other masters argued, for after all it was not as easy thing, but then they decided to promote the machine-animal-men to the supreme rank of *men*." (Fanon, 171)

The basis for an authentic freedom which was a violent *fight to death* had not occurred leading to the irony of being granted freedom. There was no fundamental change in the attitude of the native, his dependency-complex on the white master had not altered. "...the Negro knows nothing of the cost of freedom, for he has not fought for it. From time to time he has fought for Liberty and Justice, but there were always *white liberty* and *white justice*; that is, values secreted by his masters" (172; italics mine). A well-known argument about the fate of countries that have gotten rid of colonial rule is that the misery and exploitation of the population continued under the native bourgeoisie. That the only difference independence had made was that the rulers had changed colour and the new rulers continued the old scheme of exploitation. Even though Fanon seemed to have given national movements less credit than was due one understands where such an argument stems from. Fanon argued that the birth of a new consciousness that could come only via violence had not taken place and the native was

⁴ The individual who has not risked his life may well be recognised as a *person*, but he has not attained to the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness." (Hegel, 114)

still steeped in the manners and values of European society, and hence the newly formed nation was still very much within a colonial framework.

IV

At this stage, we must turn to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* for a more nuanced understanding of how he saw the colonial/postcolonial situation in Africa. Fanon begins by positing the centrality of *race* in the colonial context but we see a gradual shift towards a more nuanced understanding of a *collective*, especially when he refers to the post-colonial situation. Fanon asserts that the compartmentalisation of colonised societies was most evident on the basis of race.

"When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species. *In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure*. The cause is the consequence; *you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich*" (italics mine). (*The Wretched*, 31)

To the mind of a native, colour is *reified* into the ultimate determinant of privilege or misery. This is furthered by the inherent systemic violence that he was constantly subjected to at each moment of his existence within the colonised space. The violence was more explicit than implicit in the colonial world. The Althusserian category of Ideological State Apparatuses were not prominent in the colonial world, even though the part played by the Church is well known. In a capitalist paradigm, the "atmosphere of submission and of inhibition" and respect for the established order was ensured by moral counsellors, the educational system etc. Whereas in the colonial countries, the Repressive State Apparatus through the army and police was more at work forcing the native not to budge. The upside so to speak, of repressive violence was that the native itself imbibed that same violence and would eventually counter colonial violence with its own violence. Fanon's theoretic implies that natives are not even *colonial subjects*; to be a subject would be to attribute humanity to the native, something we have seen, was denied. Instead a more precise phrase to understand the native would be *colonial property*.



V

As one analyses Fanon's idea of a collective it seems there is a blind spot in his work. He posits the colonial world as a Manichean world but is not entirely clear on how individualism (vested interests) and inter-tribal conflicts cease, and become part of a collective movement against the white settlers.

The native's muscular tension finds outlet regularly in bloodthirsty explosions –tribal warfare, in feuds between septs and in quarrels between individuals....While the settler or the policeman has the right to strike the native, to insult him and to make him crawl to them, you will see the native reaching for his knife at the slightest hostile or aggressive glance cast on him by another native; for the last resort of the native is to defend his personality vis-à-vis his brother...Thus collective auto-destruction in a very concrete form is one of the ways in which the native's muscular tension is set free...." (Fanon, *The Wretched*, 42)

The settler encourages such tribal hostility so as to dissipate any possible collective resistance that he might face if the different tribes were united. Fanon suggests this animosity within the natives which was prevalent enabled the displacement of all blame from the oppressor. The cause of poverty etc. was attributed to transcendent phenomena like God and Fate, thereby absolving the real cause, the exploitative settler.

Though it is never quite clear how the native takes the massive step from understanding the white settler as a deified entity to someone to be opposed and gotten rid of, one preliminary step towards a change in consciousness takes place with the advent of decolonisation when the settler population is all but abandoned by the *mother-country*. Once the colonialist bourgeoisie in the European mainland realises it cannot maintain its hold over the colonies it tries to ensure that the native and the settler can at least live in peace after the withdrawal of their rule. This would ensure a white presence even after the supposed decolonisation. But what is often missed is "that the settler, from the moment that colonial context disappears, has no longer any interest in remaining or coexisting" (*The Wretched*, 35). The European liberal (colonialist bourgeoisie) tried to encourage

the settler population to remain or take what Fanon calls "a concrete jump into the unknown." Witnessing this 'discarding' of a segment of the white population makes the native realise that:

...his [Settler's] life, his breath, his beating heart are the same as those of the settler. He finds out that the settler's skin is not of any more value than a native's skin; and it must be said that this discovery shakes the world in a very necessary manner. *All the new revolutionary assurance of the native stems from it.* For if, in fact, my life is worth as much as the settler's his glance no longer shrivels me up nor freezes me, and his voice no longer turns me into stone; in fact I don't give a damn for him. (Italics mine) (Fanon, *The Wretched*, 35)

The very thought that the white settler can be opposed is a novel discovery for the native and Fanon emphasises the cultural impact of such a revelation. The barrier as it were which earlier deified the white falls once the native becomes aware of the settler's dispensability. Another major breakthrough as far as the overcoming of the colonial structure is concerned is the realisation of the collective dimension of the village assemblies and the people's committees. The native intellectual, earlier so enamoured by the individualism expounded by the West is unable at first to grasp the cohesion and strength of these bodies. Hence forward, Fanon asserts, the intellectual will discover that "the interest of one will be the interests of all, for in concrete fact *everyone* will be discovered by the troops, *everyone* will be massacred –or *everyone* will be saved" (37). Again we see here that Fanon's theoretic hints at an appreciation of the fact that the road to independence is predicated on the complete solidarity of the collective. But the problem remains of how individual aspirations are given up for the sake of the collective. At times Fanon hints at traditional structures (village assemblies etc.) being the foundation of a collective consciousness but this is countered by his equally forceful assertions that colonialism had destroyed most of the traditional forms of authority and governance.

Fanon had an implicit faith in the revolutionary consciousness of the masses, though it too, was often not explained clearly. That is coupled with the fact that he affirmed on occasion the necessity



to go beyond a Marxist theoretic to understand the colonial situation. He posits that as the native intellectual mingled with the masses he was surprised to encounter what he felt were considered judgements. "...the unemployed man, the starving native do not lay claim to the truth; they do not *say* that they represent the truth, for they *are* the truth" (38). Another task that the intellectual would have to train himself to do was to not lose sight of the movement as a whole, something Fanon claimed the native masses never did. The reason was that while the intellectual could get "carried away by the multitudinous aspects of the fight," the natives never lost sight of what was most important to them. They took "their stand from the start on the broad and inclusive positions of *Bread and the land*" (39).

Hence one sees that the native (Fanon posits the peasantry as the revolutionary class) had a constant will to understand the movement within a larger totality. If this were the case then what Fanon meant by the *starving natives* understand that *they are the truth* resonates Lukacs' understanding of the proletariat being the class that understands themselves as the Totality of the system. The proletariat takes cognisance of the fact that they are both the subjects and object of capitalism since it is the appropriation of their labour that lies at the heart of Capitalism.⁵ Similarly the peasantry understood themselves to be the expropriated mass of people on which colonialism thrived. This is however not to

⁵ For the proletarian to satisfy his daily necessities, he (like anyone else) needs to labour (work). But through his work he not only satisfies his needs, he by incorporating his labour into commodities, thereby becoming the premise of exchange, also produces and reproduces capital itself. The surplus value he creates is the foundation of capital as well as being the reason of his own exploitation. His labour itself is the basis of his own destruction. Hence, *self-realisation* for the proletariat implies understanding himself as a commodity (labour-power), which is dialectically related to understanding the Totality of the capitalist order itself. His existence as merely a form of labour-power which he *sells* 'freely' in the market is the foundation of capitalism. What Lukacs is asserting is that the proletariat's understanding of himself and his own activity is actually taking cognisance of Totality itself. See Lukacs, Georg. 'The Standpoint of the Proletariat.' *History and Class Consciousness*. Also see Jameson, Frederic. 'The Case for Georg Lukacs'. *Marxism and Form*.

subsume Fanon's theoretic under the Marxian paradigm. For Marx, Capitalism had to be overthrown by the specifically proletarian class. Here we are simply suggesting that Fanon too was aware that the onus of resistance lay with the class that found itself outside the system; according to Fanon, in the African context, this class was the peasantry (and the lumpen-proletariat).

"...it is clear that in the colonial countries the peasants alone are revolutionary, for they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The starving peasant, outside the class system, is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays." (Fanon, 47)

The lumpen-proletariat were a class of people who had left the rural hinterland but found themselves outside not accommodated by the urban centres as well. It was this mass of people uprooted from their clan that Fanon saw as the spearheads of the urban space. Like the peasantry, they had nothing to lose in a revolutionary struggle.

VI

Now that the revolutionary class and the cause (anti-colonialism) has been identified, it is pertinent to end with some remarks on the specificity of the role of violence for Fanon. He states very clearly that colonialism was "violence in its natural state, and [would] yield only when confronted with greater violence" (48). The violence of the coloniser was to repeat itself, but this time in the hands of the native, against the coloniser. One reason for the reciprocal violence that was showcased by way of spontaneous outbursts was caused by the destruction of older traditions and rituals of the natives. These forms of activity lead to a catharsis of any violent impulse that men within the community might have had. The youth however had lost respect for such ancestral cults when faced with the reality of colonial violence, something they had to contend with to survive. Hence the pent-up aggression that was earlier contained by ritualistic myths were unleashed after their destruction, thereby becoming a potent weapon against the oppressor.

Violence was not however solely a combative mode of resistance, but something that was to have a psychologically redeeming/liberating impact for



the native. Judith Butler in her essay 'Sartre on Fanon' states:

Violence holds out the possibility of acting, of agency, and it also rebels against a social death, even as it cannot escape the parameters of violence and potential death. Indeed, under these conditions of colonial subjugation, violence is a wager and a sign that there is an ongoing psychoeffective struggle to be. (Butler in Judaken, 218)

But Butler also affirms that one needs to look at the violence not only as a *realisation of being* or as only a reaction to the settler's violence but as one that stems from a real political movement against the colonisers. Fanon too understood that while spontaneity was necessary in terms of the psychological effects it had, disorganised violence would exhaust itself. For the violence to be channelled towards a revolutionary end, the masses needed to be politically educated so as to, among other things, identify the enemy correctly.

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