

# The International Marxist-Humanist

Journal of the International Marxist-Humanist Organization

Summary: An examination of Frantz Fanon's writings helps us to transcend one-sided class-reductionist analyses and equally one-sided affirmations of identity that bypass or ignore class. First appeared in [Historical Materialism 20:2 \(2018\)](#) - Editors

## Racism and the Logic of Capitalism: A Fanonian Reconsideration

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June 17, 2018



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## I.

The emergence of a new generation of anti-racist activists and thinkers battling police abuse, the prison-industrial complex and entrenched racism in the US, alongside the crisis over immigration and growth of right-wing populism in Europe and elsewhere, makes this a crucial moment to develop theoretical perspectives that conceptualise race and racism as integral to capitalism while going beyond identity politics that treat such issues primarily in cultural and discursive terms. The last several decades have produced a slew of important studies by Marxists of the logic of capital as well as numerous explorations by postcolonial theorists of the narratives that structure racial and ethnic discrimination. Far too often, however, these two currents have assumed different or even opposed trajectories, making it all the harder to transcend one-sided class-reductionist analyses and equally one-sided affirmations of identity that bypass or ignore class. In light of the new reality produced by the deepening crisis of neoliberalism and the looming disintegration of the political order that has defined global capitalism since the end of the Cold War, the time has come to revisit theoretical approaches that can help delineate the integrality of race, class and capitalism.

Few thinkers are more important in this regard than Frantz Fanon, widely considered one of the most creative thinkers on race, racism and national consciousness of the twentieth

century. Fanon's effort to 'slightly stretch' (as he put it) 'the Marxian analysis ... when it comes to addressing the colonial issue'[1] represented an important attempt to work out the dialectic of race and class through a coherent theoretical framework that does not dissolve one into the other. This may help explain the resurgence of interest in his work that is now underway. At least five new books on Fanon have appeared in English over the past two years[2] – in addition to a new 600-page collection in French of his previously-unpublished or unavailable writings on psychiatry, politics and literature.[3] Although Fanon has remained a commanding presence for decades, the extent of this veritable renaissance of interest in his thought is striking. It is no less reflected in the many times his words have appeared on posters, flyers and social media over the past year by those protesting police abuse, the criminal-injustice system, and racism on and off college campuses.[4]

These ongoing rediscoveries of Fanon's work mark a radical departure from the tenor of debates among postcolonial theorists over the past several decades – when the prevailing issue seemed to be whether or not he was a 'premature poststructuralist'.[5] If one were to limit oneself to such academic discussions, one might come away thinking that the validity of Fanon's body of work rests on the extent to which he succeeded in deconstructing the unity of the colonial subject in the name of alterity and

difference.[6] Yet these approaches – some of which went so far as to sanction even the discussion of capitalism or its unitary logic as representing a capitulation to epistemic imperialism – could not be further from what drives the renewal of interest in Fanon’s legacy today.[7]

What makes Fanon’s work especially cogent is that contemporary capitalism is manifesting some of the most egregious expressions of racial animosity that we have seen in decades. One need only note the attacks on immigrants of colour in the US and Europe, the revival of right-wing populism, and most of all, the ascendancy of Donald Trump to the US presidency. This raises the question of *why* there is such a resurgence of racial animus at *this* point in time. At least part of the answer is the work of groups like Black Lives Matter, Black Youth Project 100 and many others, which, in engaging politics from a ‘black-feminist-queer lens’, has put the spotlight on issues of race in as creative a manner as the Occupy movement did for economic inequality.[8] In reaction, a section of bourgeois society has decided to drop the mask of civility and openly reassert the prerogatives of white male domination. ‘Whitelash’ is in the driver’s seat – and not only in the US. This should come as no surprise, since the forces of the old always rear their heads when a new challenge to their dominance begins to emerge.

Not unconnected to this is the growth of reactionary challenges to neoliberalism. This calls for a serious reorganisation of thought, since many have focused so much attention on critiquing neoliberalism that they have had rather little to say about the logic of capital as a whole. It is often overlooked that neoliberalism is but one strategy employed by capitalism at a particular point in time – as was Keynesianism at an earlier point. And just as Keynesianism was jettisoned when it no longer served its purpose, the same may be true of neoliberalism today. What brought down the Keynesian project was the crisis in profitability faced by global capital in the 1970s. Capitalists responded by embracing the neoliberal stratagem as a means to restore profitability. This made perfect sense from their point of view, since it is profitability – *not* effective demand – that in the final analysis determines the course of the development of capitalist society.<sup>[9]</sup> Profit-rates did go up from the early 1980s to 2000 as the forces of global competition, free trade, and privatisation were unleashed, but most of these gains were in real estate and finance – whereas manufacturing profitability remained at historically low levels. And since much of the profit from real estate and financialisation has not been invested in the real economy, there has been a decline in recent decades in the rate of growth in the productivity of labour.<sup>[10]</sup> This at least partly explains the anaemic rate of growth in today's world economy, which is causing so much distress – not only among those most

negatively impacted by it, but also to sections of the ruling class that increasingly recognise that the neoliberal ‘miracle’ has proven to be something of a mirage.

In many respects, this established the ground for Trump. His electoral victory (pyrrhic as it may well turn out to be) is a sign that a significant section of the Right has found a way to speak to disaffected segments of the working class by draping criticism of neoliberalism in racist and misogynist terms – while ensuring that capitalism goes unquestioned. Hence, opposition to such tendencies must begin and end with a firm and uncompromising rejection of any programme, tendency or initiative that in any way, shape or form is part of, or *dovetails*– no matter how indirectly – with racist and/or anti-immigrant sentiment. Any other approach will make it harder to distinguish a genuine critique of class inequality, free trade, and globalisation from reactionary ones.

For this reason, holding to the critique of neoliberalism as the crux of anti-capitalist opposition no longer makes much sense. Needed instead is an explicit attack on the inner core of capitalism – its logic of accumulation and alienation that is inextricably tied to augmenting value as an end in itself. *And racism has long been integral to capital’s drive for self-expansion.*

Capitalism first emerged as a world system through the anti-black racism generated by the transatlantic slave trade, and it

has depended on racism to ensure its perpetration and reproduction ever since.[\[11\]](#) Marx argued,

*Slavery is an economic category like any other ... Needless to say we are dealing only with direct slavery, with Negro slavery in Surinam, in Brazil, in the Southern States of North America. Direct slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that gave the colonies their value; it is the colonies that created world trade, and it is world trade that is the precondition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance.*[\[12\]](#)

Marx was clearly cognisant of the peculiar role played by race in American slavery – and he was no less aware of how integral race-based slavery was to capitalism’s origins and development as a world system. But does this mean that racism is integral to the logic of capital? Might racism be a mere exogenous factor that is only built into specific moments of capitalism’s contingent history? To be sure, it is possible to conceive of the possibility that capitalism could have emerged and developed as a world system without its utilising race and racism. But historical materialism does not concern itself with what *could* have occurred, but with what *did* occur and *continues* to occur. According to Marx, without race-based slavery ‘you have no modern industry’

and no ‘world trade’ – and no modern capitalism. Hence, the *logic* of capital is in many respects inseparable from its *historical* development. I am referring not only to the factors that led to the formation of the world market but to the role played by race and racism in impeding proletarian class consciousness, which has functioned as an essential component in enabling capital accumulation to be actualised. Marx was keenly aware of this, as seen in his writings on the US Civil War and the impact of anti-Irish prejudice upon the English workers’ movement.[\[13\]](#) He took the trouble to address these issues in *Capital* itself, which famously declared ‘labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin.’[\[14\]](#)

Racism is not and never has been an epiphenomenal characteristic of capitalism. It is integral to its very development. The time is therefore long past for holding onto such notions as ‘there is no race question outside the class question’[\[15\]](#) or ‘the race issue, while important, is secondary to class’. Since capitalism was shaped, from its inception, by racial factors, it is not possible to effectively oppose it without making the struggle against racism a priority. And for this very reason, the present situation also makes it increasingly anachronistic to hold onto forms of identity politics that elide issues of class and a critique of capital. The effort to elevate ethnic identity and solidarity at the expense of a direct confrontation with capitalism is

inherently self-defeating, since the latter is responsible for the perpetration of racism and the marginalisation of peoples of colour in the first place. Since race and racism help create, reproduce and reinforce an array of hierarchies that are rooted in class domination, subjective affirmations of identity that are divorced from directly challenging capital will inevitably lose their critical edge and impact over the course of time.

Class struggle and anti-racist struggle have a common aim – at least from a Fanonian perspective. It is to overcome the alienation and dehumanisation that define modern society by creating new human relations – termed by Fanon a ‘new humanism’.<sup>[16]</sup> But the path to that lofty goal is not one of rushing to the absolute like a shot out of the pistol. It can be reached only through ‘the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labor of the negative’.<sup>[17]</sup> Re-engaging Fanon on *this* level can speak to us in new ways.

## II.

Fanon repeatedly emphasises that anti-Black racism is *not* natural but is rooted in the *economic* imperatives of *capitalism* – beginning with the transatlantic slave trade and extending to the neo-colonialism of today. As he writes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, ‘First, economic. Then, internalization or rather epidermalization of his

inferiority.’ [18] At the same time, he held that racism cannot be combatted on economic or class-terms alone, since racialised ways of ‘seeing’ and being take on a life of their own and drastically impact the psychic, inner-life of the individual. Both the black and the white subject are impacted and shaped by class domination, but they experience it in radically different ways. Any effort to ignore or downplay these crucial differences for the sake of a fictive ‘unity’ that abstracts from them is bound to fall on deaf ears when it comes to a significant portion of the dispossessed. On these grounds, Fanon insisted that *both* sides – the economic and the cultural/psychic – have to be fought *in tandem*. As he put it, ‘The black man must wage the struggle on two levels: whereas historically these levels are mutually dependent, any unilateral liberation is flawed, and the worst mistake would be to believe their mutual dependence automatic ... An answer must be found on the objective as well as the subjective level.’ [19]

For Fanon, what makes racism especially deadly is that it denies recognition of the dignity and humanity of the colonised subject. As a result, the latter experiences a ‘zone of nonbeing’ – a negation of their very humanity. He calls this ‘an extraordinary sterile and arid region, an incline stripped bare of every essential form from which a genuine new departure can emerge.’ [20] It is a zone of depravity that renders implausible any ‘ontology of Blackness’. The black

is not *seen* as *human* precisely by *being* ‘*seen*’ – not once, but repeatedly – *as black*. The colonial mind does not ‘see’ what it thinks it sees; it fixes its gaze not on the actual person but on a reified image that obscures them. For the coloniser, the black is indeed *nothing*. However, this zone of non-being in no way succeeds in erasing the humanity of the oppressed. The denial of the subject’s subjectivity can never be completely consummated. This is because, as Fanon never ceases to remind us, ‘Man is a “yes” resonating from cosmic harmonies.’ [\[21\]](#)

On this issue, there are striking parallels between Fanon’s works and Marx’s – even if it is rarely acknowledged. In the first essay in which he proclaimed the proletariat as the revolutionary class, Marx defined it as ‘the class *in* Civil Society that is not *of* Civil Society’ [\[22\]](#) The proletariat lives *in* civil society, but unlike the bourgeoisie its substantiality is not *confirmed* in it. Since workers are robbed of any organic connection to the means of production in their being reduced to a mere seller of labour-power, they find themselves alienated from the *substance* of civil society. This is because what matters to capital is not the subjectivity of the living labourers but rather their ability to augment wealth in abstract, monetary terms. There is only one ‘self-sufficient end’ in capitalism – and that is the augmentation of (abstract) value at the expense of the labourer. Insofar as the worker’s subjectivity becomes

completely subsumed by the dictates of value production, the *worker inhabits a zone of negativity*. He is *dehumanised* insofar as his ‘activity [is] not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self.’ [23] *Self-estrangement* is therefore integral to the domination of capital. This makes for a living hell, but it is also what makes the proletariat potentially revolutionary, since it *has nothing to lose but its chains*. But what does it have to *gain*? The answer is *communism*, defined by Marx as ‘the *positive* transcendence of *human self-estrangement* ... the complete return of man to himself as a *social* (i.e., human) being – a return accomplished consciously and embracing the entire wealth of previous development.’ Since capitalism *dehumanises* the labourer, the alternative to capitalism is nothing less than a *new humanism*: ‘This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism.’ [24]

This is a far cry from any classless, abstract humanism, since for Marx only the proletariat ‘has the consistency, the severity, the courage or the ruthlessness that could mark it out as the negative representative of society.’ It alone possesses ‘the genius that inspires material might to political violence, or that revolutionary audacity which flings at the adversary the defiant words: “*I am nothing and I should be everything.*”’ [25]

But how could *everything* arise from *nothing*? It is only possible if it is not labour that takes the form of a commodity but rather the *capacity* for labour – labour-power. As Luca Basso puts it, ‘the capitalist buys something that only exists as a possibility, which is, however, inseparable from the living personality of the *Arbeiter*.’ [26] If labour were the commodity, the worker’s subjectivity would be completely absorbed by the value-form and any internal resistance to it would be implausible. Marx’s entire critique of value production – rooted in the contradiction between concrete and abstract labour – proceeds from recognition of the irreducible tension between the subject and the continuous effort to subsume its subjectivity by abstract forms of domination. Here is where the so-called ‘esoteric’ and ‘exoteric’ converge in Marx’s work.

There is more than an echo of this in Fanon’s declaration in *Black Skin, White Masks* that, ‘Genuine disalienation will have been achieved only when things, in the most materialist sense, have resumed their rightful place.’ [27] But Fanon also points to a key difference between racial and class oppression, in that the former cuts deeper than the traditional class struggle insofar as people of colour are denied even a modicum of recognition when structures of domination are over-determined by racial considerations.

Fanon's insights on this issue are most profoundly posed in his discussion of Hegel's master/slave dialectic in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Hegel maintains that the master wants to be recognised by the slave, for without it he is unable to obtain a sense of self-certainty and selfhood. Hegel acknowledges, of course, that what the master mainly wants from the slave is *work*. Yet the master still aspires to be recognised by his subordinates, since he, like all human beings, wants to obtain a substantive sense of self – and that is something that can only be provided by the gaze of the other. So what happens when the master/slave dialectic is structured along racial lines – something that Hegel does not consider? Fanon argues that the situation becomes radically altered. The master is no longer interested in being recognised by the slave, just as the slave is no longer interested in recognising him. *This is because when the master is white he does not see the black as even potentially human.* [28] Like all masters, he wants work from his slave; but when race enters the picture, that is *all* he wants – he denies the slave even the most primordial degree of recognition.

To be sure, matters are hardly pristine when race does not inform the class relation. The capitalist 'cares' about the worker only to the extent that she provides work – and if the latter can be attained without her, the capitalist will gladly lay her off and employ a machine. However, the capitalist

knows that a worker, like any human being, cannot be worked to the point of extinction – otherwise there is no source of profit. And as much as the worker detests the capitalist, she knows that she may well be out of a job if the capitalist is unable to earn any profit. The two antagonists recognise each other's existence, even as they battle against each another. But when class relations are structured along racial lines even the most basic level of recognition is blocked, since when the other is seen *as black* it is not 'seen' at all.

Since consciousness of self and identity-formation depend on recognition by the other, its absence produces an *existential* crisis. In Hegel's text, the slave obtains 'a mind of his own';[\[29\]](#) but when the slave is black the lack of recognition blocks the formation of an independent self-consciousness. *The general class struggle does not lead immediately to consciousness of self when the slave is black.* Instead, the slave aspires for 'values secreted by the masters'.[\[30\]](#) Denied recognition, but hungering for it all the same, the slave tries to mimic the white. She has an inferiority complex. But her efforts are futile, since no recognition will be forthcoming so long as the class relation is configured along racial lines. This *is* a veritable hell, since her very *consciousness* is dependent on the will of the master. We have reached a level of reification of consciousness that would startle even Lukács. There seems

to be no way out if the master totally dominates the very *mind* of the oppressed. So what is to be done? The black slave must turn away from the master and *face her own kind*. She makes use of the socially constructed attributes of race to forge bonds of solidarity with others like her. *Only then does the master's dominance begin to be seriously challenged*. Through social solidarity born from taking pride in the very attributes that are denigrated by existing society, she gains 'a mind of one's own'.

However, as Hegel notes at the conclusion of the master/slave dialectic, the slave's independent self-consciousness does not overcome the diremption between subjective and objective. The achievement of *subjective* self-certainty brings to view the enormity of an objective world that it has not yet mastered. Hegel says that unless the subject confronts objectivity and overcomes this diremption, 'a mind of one's own' turns out to be 'little more than a piece of cleverness'.[\[31\]](#) Fanon's argument in *Black Skin, White Masks* follows a similar trajectory. Fanon views Negritude – at least initially – as the pathway by which the black subject affirms pride in themselves as part of reclaiming their dignity. However, Fanon is wary of aspects of Negritude in *Black Skin, White Masks*, since it tends to essentialise the racial characteristics forged by colonial domination. This is evident in Senghor's statement that 'emotion is Negro as reason is Greek'[\[32\]](#) – which, as Lewis

Gordon has shown, is actually a phrase from Gobineau!<sup>[33]</sup> Negritude runs the risk of becoming so enamoured of its independent consciousness that it turns away from confronting the social realities of the objective world. Identity-formation is a vital moment of the dialectic that cannot be subsumed or skipped over, but it also carries within itself the possibility of becoming fixated on its subjective self-certainty.

The struggle against racism is therefore not reducible to the class struggle; nor is it a mere ancillary or ally of it. The class relation is fundamentally reconfigured once it presents itself through the ‘mask’ of race. Like any good Hegelian, Fanon points to the positive in the negative of this two-fold alienation in which class and racial oppression overlap. Thrown into a ‘zone of non-being’, yet retaining their basic humanity, the colonised are compelled to ask *what does it mean to be human* in the very course of the struggle. To be sure, they do so by taking pride in the racial attributes created by a racist society. But since it is society, and not nature or ‘being’ that creates these attributes, the subject can cast them off once it obtains the recognition it is striving for. However, this result is by no means predetermined. There is always a risk that the subject will treat socially constructed attributes as ontological verities. Fixation is a serious risk. It is easy to get trapped in the particular, but there is no way to the universal without it.

The nuances of this position are addressed in a striking manner in Fanon's critique of Sartre's view of Negritude. Although Sartre praised Negritude in *Black Orpheus*, he referred to it as a 'weak stage' of the dialectic that must give way to the 'concrete' and 'universal' fight of the proletariat. Fanon is extremely dismayed by Sartre's position, stating, 'The generation of young Black poets has just been dealt a fatal blow.'<sup>[34]</sup> Fanon rejects the claim that racial pride is a mere way station on the road to confronting the 'real' issue – proletarian revolution. He credits Sartre for 'recalling the negative side' of the Black predicament, 'but he forgot that this negativity draws its value from a virtually substantial absolutuity'.<sup>[35]</sup> As against Sartre's effort to relativise the moment of black consciousness, Fanon contends, 'this born Hegelian, had forgotten that consciousness needs to get lost in the night of the absolute.'<sup>[36]</sup> Claims to liberation cannot find their voice if they are treated as arbitrary; they must present themselves in *absolute* terms ('I am nothing and I should be everything!'). But since the black subject inhabits a 'zone of non-being', its absolute is imbued with *negativity*. Hence, consciousness of self *in this context* contains the potential to reach out beyond itself, toward universal human emancipation.

It is not just that negativity is the font from which the individual is impelled toward the positive. It is that upon being subjected to *absolute* denial and lack of recognition,

the individual finds it necessary to draw upon the substantial reservoir of hidden meaning that it possess as a human subject. ‘That which has been shattered is rebuilt and constructed by the intuitive lianas of my hands.’ [37]

Sartre’s problem was not in viewing Negritude as a particular, but in rushing too fast to get past it. By the time he writes *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon is long past it as well. But he does not leap there like a shot out of a pistol. He *endures* the labour of the negative – by dwelling on the specific ways in which the colonised subject can make its subjectivity known in a world that has become totally indifferent to it. Fanon never takes his eyes off the creation of the positive from out of the negative, of absolute positivity from out of absolute negation, of a new humanism from out of total dehumanisation. As Alice Cherki has noted, he was an incurable humanist. [38]

Given the aborted and unfinished revolutions of his time and since, Fanon’s insistence on neither getting stuck in the particular – that is, pride in one’s race and ethnicity (the mark of identity politics) – nor skipping over it in the name of affirming an abstract, colour-blind advocacy of ‘proletarian revolution’, takes on new significance. Hubert Harrison’s conception (voiced in the 1920s) that struggles of African-Americans against racism represent the ‘touchstone’ of American society [39] – later re-cast in Raya Dunayevskaya’s Marxist-Humanist conception of Black

masses as the vanguard of US freedom struggles[40] – reflects a similar understanding of the relation of race and class to that which we find within Fanon’s lifelong effort to grasp their dialectical interconnection.

In some respects, the debate between Fanon and Sartre is being replayed today, as seen in the impatience of some on the left who urge anti-racist activists to ‘get to the real issue’ – as if that were the state of the economy. This is not to deny that the economy is of central importance. But so is the psychic impact of racism and discrimination upon the inner-life of the individual. It is only by approaching those struggling for freedom from the particular nexus-point that defines their lived experience as potentially revolutionary subjects that we can work out the difficult question of how to surmount the matrix of contradictions that define modern capitalism. Just as there is no road to the universal that gets stuck in the particular, there is no reaching-it that rushes over the particular.

### III.

The fullest expression of these insights is found in *The Wretched of the Earth*, whose focus is the actual dialectics of revolution – the struggle for national culture and independence against colonialism. One of its central themes is the ‘Manichean divide’ that defines the colonial

experience. So great is this divide between coloniser and colonised that Fanon speaks of them as if they were two ‘species’. It would appear that the racial divide is decisive, replacing class dominance as the deciding factor. For some commentators, Fanon’s discussion of the Manichean divide indicates that he has rejected or supplanted the Marxian view of class.[\[41\]](#) However, the appearance is deceptive. First, Fanon is not *endorsing* this divide; he is describing it. Second, he does not pose this divide as stable or impermeable. As the revolutionary struggle progresses, he shows, it begins to fall apart. He writes,

The people then realize that national independence brings to light multiple realities that in some cases are divergent and conflicting ... it leads the people to replace an overall undifferentiated nationalism with social and economic consciousness. The people who in the early days of the struggle had adopted the primitive Manicheanism of the colonizer – Black versus White, Arab versus Infidel – realize *en route* that some blacks can be whiter than the whites ... The species is splitting up before their very eyes ... Some members of the colonialist population prove to be closer, infinitely closer, to the nationalist struggle than certain native sons. The racial and racist dimension is transcended on both sides.[\[42\]](#)

We see here how the struggle for national liberation unites the people and breaks apart the racial dichotomies that

define colonialism, thereby pointing the way to the death of race and racialism as socially defining features.

Clearly, Fanon does not set aside class relations in his critique of colonialism. James Yaki Sayles, a New Afrikan political prisoner who spent 33 years in a maximum-security prison and wrote what I consider to be one of the most profound studies of *The Wretched of the Earth*, put it this way: ‘The existence of Manichean thinking doesn’t make economic relationships secondary to “racial” ones – it does exactly what it’s supposed to do: It masks and mystifies the economic relationships ... but doesn’t undermine their primacy.’ [43] He adds, ‘When Fanon talks about the “species” breaking up before our eyes ... he’s talking about the breakup of “races” themselves – the “races” which were constructed as part of the construction of world capitalism, and which must first be deconstructed along with the deconstruction of capitalism.’ [44]

Does this mean that Fanon adopts Sartre’s position in *Black Orpheus* that class is primary and race a ‘minor term’ by the time of writing *The Wretched of the Earth*? [45] That may seem to be the case, since racial identity is not its guiding or central theme; it is instead the struggle for national liberation and the need to transcend its confines. Yet this is precisely what undermines any claim that he has changed the position outlined in *Black Skin, White Masks*. In it Fanon also connects racism to class relations by pointing

to the economic factors that drive its social construction. And in that work he also poses the deconstruction of race as the essential precondition of a new humanism. As he so poignantly put it, ‘Because it is a systematic negation of the other person, and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: “In reality, who am I?”’ [46]

Most important, Fanon held that while race is a product of class relations, which serves as their mask, it is *not* a secondary factor. While race *reflects* class formations, the reflection is not a one-way mirror image. The reflection is taken up in consciousness and performs a sort of doubling by *mirroring* its origin at the same time as *reshaping* it. Determinations of reflection are not passive but *actively* reconstructive. And since racial determinations are often not superstructural but integral to the logic of capital accumulation, efforts by people of colour to challenge them can serve as the catalyst for targeting and challenging class relations.

Whereas racial identity is the major focus in *Black Skin, White Masks*, national identity takes centre stage in *The Wretched of the Earth*. But the *structure* of Fanon’s argument remains very much the same. In both works, the path to the universal – a world of mutual recognitions – proceeds *through* the particular struggles of those battling

racial, ethnic or national discrimination. This separates Fanon's *new* humanism from an abstract humanism that skips over the lived experience of actual subjects of revolt.

As Fanon sees it, this humanism can emerge only if the colonial revolutions transcend the bourgeois phase of development. He writes, 'The theoretical question, which has been posed for the last 50 years when addressing the history of the underdeveloped countries, i.e., whether the bourgeois phase can be effectively skipped, must be resolved through revolutionary action and not through reasoning.'<sup>[47]</sup> Fanon is directly referring to the debates in the Second International prior to World War I and the congresses of the Third International in the early 1920s as to whether revolutions in technologically underdeveloped societies must endure the vicissitudes of a prolonged stage of capitalism. Building on the work of previous Marxists,<sup>[48]</sup> he emphatically rejects the two-stage theory of revolution, arguing, 'In the underdeveloped countries a bourgeois phase is out of the question. A police dictatorship or a caste of profiteers may very well be the case but a bourgeois society is doomed to failure.'<sup>[49]</sup> This advocacy of permanent revolution was a very radical position. It was not put forth by any of the political tendencies leading the African revolutions, *Algeria included*. Even Kwame Nkrumah and Sékou Touré refrained from such wholesome condemnations of the national bourgeoisie. Fanon was

nevertheless insistent on this point in prophetically arguing that if they did not ‘skip’ the phase of bourgeois nationalism, the African revolutions would revert to intra-state conflict, tribalism and religious fundamentalism.

How, then, did he envision bypassing the capitalist stage? Central to this was his view of the peasantry. The peasants tend to be neglected by the national bourgeoisie, which is based in the cities. They constitute the majority of the populace, vastly outnumbering the working class and petty-bourgeoisie. Although they are not included in the agenda of the nationalist parties, they turn out to be the most revolutionary. Fanon insists, ‘But it is obvious that in the colonial countries only the peasantry is revolutionary.’ [\[50\]](#) This is surely an exaggeration, which does not take into account the pivotal role of the Nigerian labour movement in the struggle for national independence, let alone the situation in countries like South Africa (where the labour movement later proved instrumental in forcing the elimination of apartheid). Although Fanon is painting with all-too-broad a brush, his view of the peasantry is not without merit. He argued that since most of the newly independent states in Africa had not undergone industrialisation on a large scale, the working class could not present itself as a cohesive and compact force. It has not been *socialised* by the concentration and centralisation of capital. The working class is dispersed, divided and

relatively weak. The peasantry, on the other hand, is socialised and relatively strong precisely because it has been largely untouched by capitalist development. Their communal traditions and social formations remain intact. They think and act like a cohesive group. They *live* the Manichaeic divide that separates them from the coloniser. Hence, the message of the revolution ‘always finds a response among them’.[\[51\]](#) They are therefore unlikely to put their guns away and enable the bourgeoisie to lord over them.

This issue of permanent revolution is also the context for understanding Fanon’s view of revolutionary violence. He did not subscribe (*contra* Arendt and others) to any ‘metaphysics of violence’. His advocacy of violence was *historically specific*. He argued that a people armed would not only be better equipped to evict the colonialists; most importantly, it is needed to help push the revolution beyond the boundaries set by the national bourgeoisie after the achievement of independence. It is no accident that one of the first demands of the leaders of the newly independent states was for the masses to give up their arms – the presence of which could impede their embrace of neocolonialism. Fanon also emphasised the need for a *decentralised* as against a centralised political and economic apparatus that could succeed in directly drawing the masses into running the affairs of society – including the

most downtrodden among them, like the peasantry. He warned against adopting the model of statist Five-Year Plans and advocated support for cooperatives and other autonomous ventures. No less significantly, he argued strenuously against a single-party state on the grounds that, ‘The single party is the modern form of the bourgeois dictatorship – stripped of mask, makeup, and scruples, cynical in every respect.’ [52] He conceived of parties in terms of ‘an organism through which the people exercise their authority and express their will’ and not as a hierarchical, stratified force standing above them. Most importantly, he emphasised the critical role of consciousness and revolutionary education in providing the most indispensable condition of socialist transformation – overcoming the *depersonalisation* of the colonised subject. He wrote,

It is commonly thought with criminal flippancy that to politicize the masses means from time to time haranguing them with a major political speech ... But political education means opening up the mind, awakening the mind, and introducing it to the world. It is, as Césaire said, ‘To invent the souls of men.’ [53]

Needless to say, Fanon’s strictures were not followed by the leaders of the national independence struggles, who found a comfortable place for themselves within the framework of the bourgeois phase of development – even when (indeed

especially when!) they anointed their rule as some form of ‘socialism’. But were there the material conditions present at that time which could have enabled the African revolutions to bypass the bourgeois phase? I am not referring solely to conditions of economic backwardness or underdevelopment, since these would not be decisive barriers if the newly independent nations were in the position to receive aid and support from the workers of the technologically developed world. Marx, after all, held at the end of his life that economically backward Russia could bypass a capitalist stage of development if a revolution centred on the peasantry linked up with proletarian revolutions in the West.[\[54\]](#) Yet in the context of the African revolutions of the 1950s and ’60s, such aid could not be expected – in large measure because forces like the French Communist and Socialist parties disgracefully supported French imperialism’s war against the Algerian Revolution (something that major left-intellectuals inside and outside the French CP at the time, such as Althusser and Foucault, never managed to find time to condemn).

This problem consumed Fanon’s attention in the final years of his life, and marks one of the most controversial aspects of his legacy. In the face of the failure of the established French leftist parties to support Algeria’s struggle for independence (with which he became openly identified by

1955), he issued a series of sharp critiques of the working class for failing to fulfil its historic mission. He writes,

*The generalized and sometimes truly bloody enthusiasm that has marked the participation of French workers and peasants in the war against the Algerian people has shaken to its foundations the myth of an effective opposition between the people and the government ... The war in Algeria is being waged conscientiously by all Frenchmen and the few criticisms expressed up to the present time by a few individuals mention only certain methods which 'are precipitating the loss of Algeria.'* [55]

In a colonial country, it used to be said, there is a community of interests between the colonized people and the working class of the colonialist country. The history of the wars of liberation waged by the colonized peoples is the history of the non-verification of this thesis. [56]

These statements are often taken as proof that Fanon dismissed the revolutionary potential of the working class *tout court*. However, only a year later Fanon stated in another piece for *El Moudjahid*, 'the dialectical strengthening that occurs between the movement of liberation of the colonized peoples and the emancipatory struggle of the exploited working class of the imperialist countries is sometimes neglected, and indeed forgotten.' [57] Might he have had himself in mind? He now considerably revises his earlier position, as he speaks of 'the

internal relation ... that unites the oppressed peoples to the exploited masses of the colonialist countries'. [58] And as *The Wretched of the Earth* (written a few years later) clearly shows, he did not close the door to the possibility that the working class *might* fulfil its historic mission even while criticising it for not yet having done so:

The colossal task, which consists of reintroducing man into the world, man in his totality, will be achieved with the crucial help of the European masses who would do well to confess that they have rallied behind the position of our common masters on colonial issues. In order to do this, the European masses must first of all decide to wake up, put on their thinking caps and stop playing the irresponsible game of Sleeping Beauty. [59]

Nevertheless, the hoped-for aid from the workers of the industrially-developed West never arrived – notwithstanding the heroic efforts of numerous individuals in France and elsewhere who spoke out in favour of the independence of the African colonies. In lieu of any significant support from the industrially-developed West, how were the African Revolutions going to obtain the resources needed to sustain genuine independence, let alone move further towards the creation of a socialist society?

Fanon responded by turning his energies to Africa as a whole. This is reflected in his decision to become a roving ambassador for Algeria's FLN, travelling to over a dozen

countries pushing for an ‘African Legion’ to come to the aid of the Algerian struggle and revolutions elsewhere on the continent. It is also reflected in his effort to create a ‘southern front’ of the Algerian struggle by procuring a route for the shipment of arms and other materiel from Ghana, Guinea, Mali and Niger. Concerned that the French might strike a rotten compromise with the FLN to keep it within its neocolonial orbit, he was trying to radicalise both the Algerian and sub-Saharan struggles by cementing closer relations between them.

It may be true, as Adam Shatz has recently argued, that Fanon’s efforts were rather quixotic, since ‘the southern Sahara had never been an important combat zone for the FLN, and there was little trust between the Algerians and the desert tribes.’ [60] However, this should not cause us to lose sight of his broader effort to convey the militancy of the Algerian struggle ‘to the four corners of Africa’ as part of rejecting any compromise with capitalism. As Fanon put it, the task is ‘To turn the absurd and the impossible inside out and hurl a continent against the last ramparts of colonial power.’ [61] This was no mere rhetorical declaration, since he spent the last several years of his life working incessantly to coordinate activity between the various revolutionary movements in Africa. He forthrightly stated, ‘For nearly three years I have been trying to bring the misty idea of African unity out of the subjectivist bog of the majority of

its supporters. African Unity is a principle on the basis of which it is proposed to achieve the United States of Africa without passing through the middle-class chauvinistic phase...’ In case there is any doubt about the provenance of this embrace of permanent revolution, he states on the same page: ‘We must once again come back to the Marxist formula. The triumphant middle classes are the most impetuous, the most enterprising, the most annexationist in the world.’[\[62\]](#)

For Fanon ‘it is no longer possible to advance by regions ... [Africa] must advance in totality.’ The key to that, he held, was Congo – since ‘a unified Congo having at its head a militant anticolonialist [Patrice Lumumba] constituted a real danger for South Africa’.[\[63\]](#) For if South Africa, the most industrially-developed country in Africa, was brought into the orbit of revolution, the material conditions might be at hand to push the continent as a whole beyond the confines of capitalist development.

Despite their verbal commitment to Pan-Africanism, virtually all the leaders of the newly independent states – including the most radical among them – were more interested in gaining acceptance and aid from the major world powers than in promoting pan-African unity. Close as he was in many respects to Nkrumah, Fanon was embittered at Ghana’s failure to provide material aid to Lumumba in the Congo, and he grew increasingly embittered at the failure of

the African Legion to get off the ground. It became clear that for the new leaders of independent Africa, the way forward was to ally with one or another pole of global capital – either the imperialist West or the so-called ‘communist’ East. Fanon was opposed to this approach.

It [is] commonly thought that the time has come for the world, and particularly for the Third World, to choose between the capitalist system and the socialist system. The underdeveloped countries ... must, however, refuse to get involved in such rivalry. The Third World must not be content to define itself in relation to values that preceded it. On the contrary, the underdeveloped countries must endeavor to focus on their very own values as well as methods and style specific to them. The basic issue with which we are faced is not the unequivocal choice between socialism and capitalism such as they have been defined by men from different continents and different periods of time. [\[64\]](#)

Fanon was clearly not satisfied with existing ‘socialist’ societies ‘as they have been defined’. He was aware of their deficiencies. But this does not mean that he conducted a thorough analysis of them or acknowledged their class basis and thoroughly oppressive character. This is unfortunate, since it has led some followers of Fanon to whitewash their crimes, which has only fed into the general discrediting of the Left for supporting regimes which were as exploitative

of their working class as imperialist ones. No less importantly, the lack of a thoroughgoing critique of ‘Soviet-type’ societies on Fanon’s part rendered his effort to conceive of the transcendence of the bourgeois phase somewhat abstract and even quixotic, since it was left unclear how technologically underdeveloped societies might skip the bourgeois phase if they could not depend on the beneficence of the purportedly ‘socialist’ regimes.

Fanon cannot be blamed for his rather inconclusive discussion of how to surmount the bourgeois phase of development in *The Wretched of the Earth*, since he was only beginning to explore the issue of permanent revolution and he passed from the scene only days after the book came off the press. However, we who today face the task of developing an alternative to *all* forms of capitalism – whether the ‘free market’ capitalism of the West or its state-capitalist variants – do not have that excuse. Fanon’s work may not provide the answer to the question, but it does provide resources that (in conjunction with the work of many others) can aid our effort to do so.

Today’s realities are of course far different than those that defined Fanon’s life and times – on an assortment of levels. But they also provide new possibilities for coming to grips with the problems he was addressing, especially at the end of his life. Fanon departed from the scene declaring, ‘Let us leave this Europe which never stops talking of man yet

murders him at every one of its street corners, at every corner of the world.’ [65] These words are hardly rendered obsolete by the fact that today many from the global South are trying to find their way *into* Europe, as is seen from the response of the European powers to an influx of refugees which is transforming the continent. It may turn out that the growing presence of the global South *inside* the global North provides a material basis for thinking out new pathways to the transcendence of neocolonialism and class society, just as the racist resurgence that has accompanied it gives new urgency to working out the dialectical relation of race, class and gender anew. Fanon’s work will live on so long as these problems continue to concern us.

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[1] Fanon 2004, p. 5.

[2] See Gordon 2015, Lee 2015, Bird-Pollan 2015, Hudis 2015, Zeilig 2016. See also Coulthard 2014.

[3] See Fanon 2016.

[4] For specific expressions of this, see Hudis 2015, p. 1.

[5] See Parry 1987, p. 33.

[6] See especially JanMohamed 1986 and Bhabha 1999.

[7] Of course, vital appropriations of Fanon's work occurred in recent decades that were outside the purview of most postcolonial theorists – as by South African youth during and after the Soweto Uprising in 1978. The impetus for this came from the Black Consciousness Movement and not the ANC – which adhered (as it still does) to the two-stage theory of revolution, which calls for a prolonged stage of national capitalist development while pushing a socialist transformation off to the distant horizon.

[8] For a fuller discussion of these developments, see Taylor 2016.

[9] For more on this, see Hudis 2012, pp. 169–82.

[10] For a substantiation of these claims, see Roberts 2016.

[11] For a pathbreaking study that put forward this thesis, see Cox 1948.

[12] Marx 1976, p. 167.

[13] See Anderson 2010, pp. 79–153.

[14] Marx 1977, p. 414.

[15] See Debs 1903 for a classic formulation of this position.

[16] Fanon 2008, p. xi.

[17] Hegel 1977, p. 10.

[18] Fanon 2008, p. xv.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Fanon 2008, p. xii.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Marx 1975a, p. 186.

[23] Marx 1975b, p. 274.

[24] Marx 1975b, p. 296.

[25] Marx 1975a, p. 185.

[26] Basso 2015, p. 4.

[27] Fanon 2008, p. xiv.

[28] It is therefore no accident that one of the most commonly circulated posters during the US Civil Rights Movement was the simple – albeit enormously profound – statement, ‘I am a Man.’ Curiously, thousands of virtually the same posters resurfaced, in a new form, during the street protests against police abuse in Chicago, New York, and other cities in 2015 and 2016 – although many of them also read, ‘I am a Woman.’

[29] Hegel 1977, p. 119.

[30] Fanon 2008, p. 195.

[31] See Hegel 1977, p. 119: ‘Having a “mind of one’s own” is self-will, a freedom which is still enmeshed in servitude.’

[32] Fanon 2008, p. 106.

[33] Gordon 2015, p. 54.

[34] Fanon 2008, p. 112.

[35] Fanon 2008, pp. 112–13.

[36] Fanon 2008, p. 112.

[37] Fanon 2008, p. 117.

[38] Cherki 2006, p. 64.

[39] See Harrison 2001, p. 54.

[40] See Dunayevskaya 2003, pp. 267–73.

[41] See Wyrick 1998, p. 132: ‘In fact, Fanon believes that colonialism causes the Marxist model of base and superstructure to collapse altogether because economic relationships are secondary to racial ones. That is, the Manichean thinking on which colonialism depends blots out other distinctions, hierarchies, logical patterns.’

[42] Fanon 2004, pp. 93–5.

[43] Yaki Sayles 2010, p. 304.

[44] Yaki Sayles 2010, p. 181.

[45] Shatz thinks that Fanon had already reached this position by the end of *Black Skin, White Masks* (Shatz 2017, p. 20). However, Fanon’s emphasis on ‘reaching out for the universal’ and creating ‘a new human world’ is better seen as a concretisation of his insistence (in critiquing Sartre) that black consciousness is the mediating term in the movement from the individual to the universal.

[46] Fanon 2004, p. 182.

[47] Fanon 2004, p. 119.

[48] Alice Cherki, who knew Fanon very well, reports that the transcripts of the proceedings of the first four Congresses of the Third International, which debated this issue, held ‘a great fascination for Fanon’. See Cherki 2006, p. 93.

- [49] Fanon 2004, p. 118.
- [50] Fanon 2004, p. 23.
- [51] Fanon 2004, p. 69.
- [52] Fanon 2004, p. 111.
- [53] Fanon 2004, p. 138.
- [54] See Marx and Engels 1983, p. 139.
- [55] Fanon 1967, p. 65.
- [56] Fanon 1967, p. 74.
- [57] Fanon 1967, p. 144.
- [58] Ibid.
- [59] Fanon 2004, p. 62.
- [60] Shatz 2017, p. 26.
- [61] Fanon 1967, pp. 180–1.
- [62] Fanon 1967, p. 187.
- [63] Fanon 1967, p. 192.
- [64] Fanon 2004, p. 55.
- [65] Fanon 2004, p. 235.