

Anti-colonialism and Humanism

January 11, 2020



This article on the differences between colonial-racist and emancipatory humanism, with a particular focus on Africa and on the writings of Frantz Fanon, is based on a presentation at a Los Angeles meeting of the International Marxist-Humanist Organization, June 2019. -Editors

Anti-colonialism is understood to be both a group of historical events and a critical analysis of past and ongoing imperialisms. Post-colonial studies (a field where much anti-colonial thought has found its home) and humanism have had an uneasy relationship for several decades. Most notably, post-colonial scholars Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (discussed in Spencer 2017), who produce the most widely accepted post-colonial studies, are leery of humanism, asserting that “the assumption that there are irreducible features of human life and experience that exist beyond the constitutive effects of local cultural conditions ... is a crucial feature of imperial hegemony.” Because of some of these prevailing attitudes, most of the work in this field focuses on the description of the colonial subject, its intrinsic worth, its expansive knowledge systems, hybrid structures produced by colonization, liminality, and an analysis of the sub-imperialisms that are emerging in the non-Western world. While these scholars are rightfully reacting to an imposed humanism from the enlightenment era that had narrow conceptions of humans, they often struggle to project what society can aspire to be both materially and ideally after colonial structures are dismantled.

This unease with humanism also extends to revolutionaries outside of post-modern post-colonial thought, with important thinkers condemning humanism of the western European variety. We see this in Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* (1972), where he offers a sharp repudiation of the “pseudo-humanism” he observed in the West, that is, the hypocrisy of Europeans who would exploit and kill indigenous populations in their colonies and appear to be shocked by the rise of Nazism on

their own lands. Even with their laws, reason, security, and prosperity, he argues that such civilizations are unable to uphold the rights of humans. Famed existentialist Sartre (1961) also criticizes humanism, stating that Europeans “must confront an unexpected sight, the strip-tease of our humanism. Not a pretty sight in its nakedness: nothing but a dishonest ideology of lies, an exquisite justification for plundering ... since the only way the European could make himself man was by fabricating slaves and monsters.”

This essay engages in a historical excavation and a philosophical exploration of anti-colonialism and humanism. I focus on the anti-colonial struggles of Africa. What I am suggesting is that we need anti-colonialisms that not only describe the “what” and the “how,” but also the structural “why” of colonialism and the “what comes next after colonization.” Ultimately, I am asking, “How can anti-colonial philosophical frameworks become not only a history and an analysis of colonial structures, but a potentially liberatory framework?”

Negritude, Black Consciousness, Pan-Africanism, and National Consciousness

“We believe the conscious, organized struggle undertaken by a colonized people in order to restore national sovereignty constitutes the greatest cultural manifestation that exists. ... After the struggle is over, there is not only the demise of colonialism, but also the demise of the colonized.” -Frantz Fanon

In the work first titled “An Essay on the Disalienation of Man,” which was released as *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon methodically describes the psychological-economic structure of colonization. His primary objective here is to philosophically work out the possibility for disalienation for colonized subjects and the potential for what he describes as a “new humanism.”

Fanon begins from the philosophical presupposition that humanness is not a fixed essence but that it is instead determined by our interactions with each other. He then moves on to explain how human relations become perverted in a colonizer-colonized relationship, particularly one that is racialized. Colonizers associate blackness with many negative qualities to justify the colonial structure and not because of any innate qualities the colonized possess. Blackness is a social construct so there is no pre-existing black essence for black people to fall back on, in this arrangement, to affirm their humanity. Of course, there is no such thing as a white essence, but the colonial structure obscures this truth. This obfuscation makes it appear as though Westernness or whiteness equals humanness. Blackness, then, can only exist in negative relation to whiteness. The colonizer sees the black person as black because of the distorted human relations produced by colonization and racialized oppression, and in the world of unrequited recognition, the black colonized subject sees themself as black because of the gaze of the colonizer. The lack of reciprocal recognition plunges the colonized black subject into an inferiority complex that Fanon calls “epidermalization.”

For Fanon, the colonial subject cannot escape the colonizer’s gaze. This situation goes beyond a self-other paradigm because the colonized is “overdetermined from the outside,” and because of this, the colonial black subject is not an other or even a no one but a “nothing.” From “inhabiting this zone of non-being,” the colonized subject initially wants the recognition of the colonizer desperately, to the point of taking on their attributes and values and desiring to be “white.” The recognition never comes from the colonizer, and the psychic disorder prevails. This construct has serious psychic consequences as the colonized will often accept their subjugated position as being the natural order of things and will aspire to be like the colonizer.

These insights would not have developed if Fanon had merely applied philosophy to his

understanding of colonial relations. Instead, to make his assertions, he looked at the situated lived experiences of human subjects and their struggles at that time. He reminds us that racism and colonial subjection must be fought both materially and psychically since epidermalization is experienced doubly, writing, "Genuine disalienation will have been achieved when things in the materialist sense have resumed their rightful place." It is indeed possible to break the cycle of irreconcilable recognitions because society makes the inferiority complex possible and because humanity creates society. Therefore, we have the capacity to "restructure the world and reach for a new humanism." For these reasons, Fanon was supportive of negritude and other related expressions.

Negritude, the black consciousness movement, Pan-Africanism, and other related movements have always placed an emphasis on self-determination, self-reflective praxis, addressing material conditions, and dismantling oppressive systems for black people everywhere. Colonization not only disrupts indigenous cultures and ways of life, it makes it difficult for the people of those colonized lands to access and value their own knowledge.

Steve Biko points us to the particulars of racial oppression that necessitated the South African black consciousness movement of his day. Like Fanon, he too understood that racism produces race and not the other way around. He describes the (un)logic of racism in his native South Africa. The black person in South Africa is considered inferior for all of the reasons associated with colonization and racial domination. The lack of access and opportunity and the systematic denial of humanity block the colonized from participating in civil society to acquire the skills and confidence needed to fight their colonizers. The white liberals, both in and outside of South Africa in Biko's time, acknowledged the diminishing potential of black human life within apartheid and were only willing to fight (from their armchairs, mind you) for an integrated, raceless society. Biko asserts that only by working through the first negation, that is, by creating a strong black solidarity network in direct opposition to this racism, can the second negation, the struggle for a universal humanism—or what Biko calls a "true humanism"—be made possible. For this dialectic to be worked out, it is even more important for the colonized to understand these truths since the white colonizer will not recognize the humanity of the black person anyway. Understood in this way, black consciousness is not only a struggle against internalized racism, or a form of collective consciousness building, but also a principled philosophical stance.

The first concern for a black consciousness movement then becomes the project of reclaiming the histories of colonized people. During the height of negritude, black consciousness, and Pan-Africanism, we see a proliferation of history books written by black folks and an explosion of black-created, African-centered art, music, crafts, and works of fiction almost everywhere that black people live. This was and still remains an important consciousness-building tool.

Not all aspects of these movements were or are progressive. Indeed, while it is of great importance, restoring the colonial subject as an agent of history still maintains the logic of the colonizer-colonized construct. Fanon warns negritude followers of the potential for race essentialism or even elitism, especially when it is expressed outside of material questions. This can be evidenced by the case of Senegal's post-independence leader Leopold Senghor, who asks Africans to reclaim oneness with nature, animism, sensuality, rhythm, and irrationality as though these are values that describe those of all black civilizations, or by Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah insisting on an "African Personality," which was supposed to be a characteristic possessed of all black people desiring freedom, regardless of their context or material needs. Furthermore, a negritude that does not consider the lived experiences of its supporters results in fragmentation in the movement. Fanon is quite aware of this, advocating for strong national consciousness over blind negritude and stating that "every culture is first and foremost national, and that the problems which kept Richard Wright or Langston Hughes on the alert were fundamentally different from those which might confront Leopold Senghor or

[Kenya's] Jomo Kenyatta."

National Consciousness and Nation Building

"National culture is the collective thought process of a people to describe, justify, and extol the actions whereby they have joined forces and remained strong. National culture in the underdeveloped countries, therefore, must lie at the very heart of the liberation struggle." -Frantz Fanon

The African anti-colonial movements of the 1940s and 1950s were highly influenced by the black radical thought emanating from the United States and the Caribbean at that time. During this period, the intellectual and grass-roots organizing work of figures like Marcus Garvey, W.E.B Du Bois, the abolitionists, and early black labor activists were revived. The articulations of artists from the Harlem Renaissance and the liberation music emerging from it were embraced. We also cannot forget about the inspirational activities of the U.S. black masses and their refusal to accept dehumanization in both the domestic and public sphere, their ongoing struggle with Jim Crow, or their anti-imperialist resistances in both World War I and II. Nor the resistance of the Ethiopians to Italian rule in the late 1930s. Nor the activities of black folks asserting their sovereign rights in places like Canada and Brazil during that same period. These life-affirming histories were pored over by African blacks eager to seize their freedoms and abolish colonial rule.

The prevailing liberal thought of the time suggested that anti-colonial nationalists would co-opt the existing concept of self-determination from the liberal internationalist tradition, which was understood to be a straight-line movement from being part of an empire, to constructing a self-governing nation-state, to participating in an international global capitalist society. Getachew (2019) rejects this premise, suggesting that most anti-colonial leaders were not participating in mere nation building but in "worldmaking," a process informed by national consciousness rather than opportunistic nationalism. Indeed, most of the African anti-colonial intellectuals of this time were fighting to uproot the colonial structure and to create new economic systems and ways of life because they knew that a straight-line progression would result in an international racial hierarchy that would hardly shift Africans or humans into new socio-political relations. Ideas proposed for a post-colonial Africa by leaders like Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta, and Tanzania's Julius Nyerere included state welfare initiatives, land revitalization plans, resource redistribution, recovering of land, and human rights. Black radical thought influenced not only the African intellectuals and leaders but also the masses, who became very interested in a socialist future for themselves. In this way, the African anti-colonial struggle was partly anti-capitalist and had a very strong class character. Many would eventually waiver on their commitment to anti-capitalism after independence.

Nation building after colonialism was not without its stumbling blocks. Even after many African nations won their independence, there was much work to be done before a new society could be realized. To begin with, those Africans who had acquired some intellectual and technological capital during colonization were not willing to give up their class interests for the collective whole. Many became administrators of new African nations and, in real middle-class bourgeois fashion, continued to enrich themselves. Some of our most hailed freedom fighters became leaders who instituted one-party states with authoritarian tendencies. Freedom struggles that were fought under the banner of "socialism" were abandoned once there emerged the sober challenge of building nations that had suffered decades of resource depletion and underdevelopment. And in most new nations, the ties with former colonizers would not and could not be easily severed, as that might result in economic collapse. Fanon anticipates this phenomenon, noting that bourgeois leadership in newly independent

nations does not in fact have the capital required to overcome the new nations' difficulties, resulting in some of the aforementioned problems. Unfortunately, his words are practically prophetic:

But if nationalism is not made explicit, if it is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words into humanism, it leads up a blind alley. The bourgeois leaders of underdeveloped countries imprison national consciousness in sterile formalism. It is only when men and women are included on a vast scale in enlightened and fruitful work that form and body are given to that consciousness. Then the flag and the palace where sits the government cease to be the symbols of the nation. The nation deserts these brightly lit, empty shells and takes shelter in the country, where it is given life and dynamic power. The living expression of the nation is the moving consciousness of the whole of the people; it is the coherent, enlightened action of men and women. The collective building up of a destiny is the assumption of responsibility on the historical scale.

Raya Dunayevskaya also understood the pitfalls that newly independent African nations needed to avoid, wondering in 1959 if the new socialisms proposed by freedom fighters now turned heads of state could "hide the old smell of exploitative capitalism." She acknowledges the challenges of new nation building, noting that "of course, industrialization of Africa is a necessity. Of course, this cannot be done outside of a relationship to technologically advanced industrial powers. But must the method be capitalistic?" If national consciousness leads to incomplete freedom from colonial structures, it can, if left unchecked, breed new forms of nationalism that only serve capital and its sergeants, and this is what happened.

There are many contradictions and questions to work out concerning the new independent African states of the 1950s-1970s that cannot be explored here. It is worth noting that not all of the revolutionary left supported the Africans' quest for independence on national terms and instead asked for the colonial subject to abandon aspirations for national identity for the sake of international solidarity and a commitment to the workers of the world. Here, Leninism (as less an ideology and more a strategic program) found a foothold in places in Africa because of the USSR and Eastern bloc support for Africans' struggles for independence. The question of eschewing one's national or local struggle for a collective international solidarity continues to plague the left. Demands for international solidarity must be required. It cannot simply be a request that the West makes of the colonial subject without a making a reciprocal commitment. These difficult conversations did not end after African independence but can be observed in some parts of the left's response to apartheid, the Rwandan genocide, the Arab Spring, and the most recent Sudan uprising. One question worth working out in the U.S. left for our time remains "What does critical international solidarity actually mean when human subjects are seeking liberation based on national terms?"

God, the African, and Humanism

God might be a strange discussion item for revolutionaries, but the topic cannot be discarded when discussing the lives of the colonized in Africa. Western leftists, even those espousing humanistic values, have historically had difficulties with their African counterparts because of leftists' dismissal of, or even open antagonism toward, religion and spirituality.

Africans were introduced to a white Christian God by early missionaries, who were acting on the basis of their *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission) or white man's burden. From the outset, the colonized masses in Africa could not fully accept a masculine, cruel, sanitized God who did not seem

connected to daily life. Many African communities rejected the Christian God because the religion did not meet their needs. Also, contrary to what many think, indigenous African religions are varied and are not always animistic. For example, the Kamba of Kenya worshipped a benevolent God on a mountain. They believed that God controlled all events both in the afterlife and on earth and so all activities were in some sense for the purpose of worship, thanksgiving, or atonement (Mbiti, 1973). Christians considered Kamba spiritual practices and traditional medicine evil, so when the group converted to Christianity, everyone was commanded to denounce their Kamba religious practices. Because the British favored an indirect-rule approach, punishments were administered by appointed African authorities. This did not deter many Kamba people from combining aspects of their religious practices with Christianity (Mbiti, 1973). Many communities across Africa practice Christianity but still hold on to aspects of their traditional religions to minimize the alienation produced by colonization.

Anti-colonial theorist wa Thiong'o (1986) makes a compelling argument for how Christianity continues to oppress, divide, and exploit Africans today as much as it did during formalized colonialism. Wa Thiong'o and others like him encourage Africans to locate authentic forms of their traditional religions, but they fail to articulate what it would really mean to reclaim and practice an indigenous African religion that so few currently practice or how that practice can usher in material liberation. Others (most of whom make up the clergy and upper classes) urge the masses to embrace a Christian God as a means to material prosperity. Here God is sold as a way to mentally overcome everyday suffering, not to challenge the conditions that produce it, and as necessary for societal progress. This messaging has been particularly persuasive. While Christianity is on the decline on other continents, Africa maintains the largest population of nominal and practicing Christians in the world, and this population will double by 2060 based on projected growth models. God is a business that thrives in Africa. With this understanding, no one should be surprised at the explosion of megachurches in Africa, complete with grocery stores, private schools, and banks. These projects line the pockets of a few and at best offer humanitarian assistance to their neighboring communities. But as we all know, humanitarianism in itself does not liberate the human.

If we are short-sighted, issues of God and spirituality for colonized folks are easily reduced to aspects of culture that need to be either reclaimed or completely discarded if we are to realize a human universal. Indeed, the culture wars surrounding African religiosity play out in this way. The African traditionalist is accused of being backward but is also romanticized for his honest attempt to reclaim his true African past. The Christian is vilified for his uncritical religious assimilation and is both admired and reviled for his desire to be in close proximity to whiteness, Westernness, and the material rewards that that can bring.

This is not to say that there are no progressive or even liberatory expressions of Christianity in Africa. There is indeed a rich tradition of African liberation theology that emerged in the 1960s and that was heavily influenced by important African Americans like Martin Luther King Jr. and James H. Cone. The black liberation theology of South Africa emerged with the black consciousness movement and was very influential in driving resistance against apartheid. Although less influential now, there remain vibrant liberation-minded Christian organizations across the continent.

There are and have always been revolutionaries and academics on the continent seeking alternatives that move espoused human values beyond the personal and the cultural. Es'kia Mphahlele, known as the father of African humanism, found it necessary to try and develop such a framework for our times. For him, an African humanism must not only be concerned with reason, centering the human and her ability to create her world, but must also be an active philosophical stance against the world as it is. This African humanism seeks to counteract Western hegemony and white supremacy and to rouse the colonial subject from his inferiority complex. For Mphahlele, humanism and Pan-African thought are closely related.

Others, like Michael Onyebuchi Eze, have proposed that Ubuntu, based on an eponym found in many Bantu languages, is the closest thing to an indigenous African humanism, with great potential to liberate not only the African but the human. Ubuntu is a philosophy emerging from South and East Africa that can be summarized as “I am because we are, we are because I am,” or “the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity.” Quite simply, Ubuntu is a philosophy focused on the mutual recognition of the other. Applied as a political philosophy, it has been used to mean collective responsibility, community equality, equitable distribution of resources, restorative over retributive justice practices, and upholding the rights of individuals while rejecting individualism.

Both of these humanisms wholeheartedly accommodate religion while they syncretically link private values and practices to collective political life. It should also be pointed out that these humanisms rejected the standard Marxist-Leninist two-stage theory, which asserts that nations must go through a Westernized capitalist stage before achieving a socialist, humanist future; instead these humanisms place value not on predetermined political programs but on human subjects and their ability to theoretically and practically work out their problems.

If we are to move together and take anti-colonialism seriously, and to have international solidarity, we must reckon with the spirituality of colonial subjects and those commitments have to shine through in the philosophies we are projecting.

Conclusion

Because we live in a North American context, where anti-colonial praxis revolves around issues of settler colonialism, I want to highlight some contributions from Glen Sean Coulthard, author of *Red Skins, White Masks* (2014). Like Fanon and others, Coulthard understands that colonized subjects engage in self-affirming artistic, cultural, and political activities to overcome their inferiority complex and to empower themselves. He is also aware that the politics of recognition can in fact be essentialist or bourgeois resulting in no real potential for true humanisms. Coulthard puts forth very important questions: “What role might these (cultural) forms and practices play in the construction of alternatives to the oppressive social relations that produce the colonial subject in the first place?” and “Can revitalized traditions play a role in the reconstruction of decolonized nations ... one that builds on the values and insights of the past to create a present and future non-colonialism?” This is an important area of consideration since we are finding more and more useful innovations from indigenous communal-based, land-based societies, who through their decolonization work have much to offer when it comes to theorizing our way to a new world, particularly in this current climate crisis.

I also raise this issue because there is a tendency among the standard Marxist left to treat the issue of decolonization or expressions like those found in black consciousness movements in the same way that class is treated, that is, that present-day class society is a determined transitional stage to move through before attaining the absolute, a classless society. We do not move from the particular to the universal in a linear march. Thinkers like Fanon and Coulthard encourage us to embrace the particular and assert it without reservations and as an absolute, or in Peter Hudis’s words, “Get in touch with your negativity. ... Posit your subjectivity not as a minor term but as an absolute,” because the absolute or universal is already imbued with it.

We live in worlds where the project of anti-colonialism lays unfinished. The particularities of coloniality, race, and indigeneity can still permeate and be meaningful even after we overcome perverted human relations. We need to work slowly through these particulars and to struggle with the negative in totality whilst we “reach out for the universal” and the creation of a new human world of “reciprocal recognitions.”

References

- Biko, Steve. 1972. *Black consciousness and the quest for a true humanity*. Reprint from a South African Students' Organisation (SASO) newsletter.
- Césaire, Aimé. 1972. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Trans. by Joan Pinkham. New York: Monthly Review Press. Originally published as *Discours sur le colonialisme* by Editeurs Presence Africaine, 1955.
- Coulthard, Glen Sean. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dunayevskaya, Raya. 1959. "The African Revolution, I." *News and Letters*, January 1959.
- Eze, Michael Onyebuchi. 2010. *Intellectual History in Contemporary South Africa*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fanon, Frantz. [1952] 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.
- Fanon, Frantz. [1961] 2004. *Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.
- Getachew, Adom. 2019. *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Hudis, Peter. 2018. "Racism and the Logic of Capital: A Fanonian Reconsideration." *Historical Materialism*, 26 (2)..
- Mbiti, John. 1990. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heineman.
- Mphahlele, Es'kia, et al. 2003. *Es'kia: Es'kia Mphahlele on Education, African Humanism and Culture, Social Consciousness, Literary Appreciation*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. Preface to F. Fanon. *Wretched of the Earth*. lvii-lviii.
- Spencer, Robert. 2017. "Post-colonialism Is a Humanism." In *For Humanism: Explorations in Theory and Politics*, edited by D. Alderson & R. Spencer, 120-162. Chicago: Pluto.
- wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. 1986. *Decolonizing the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. London: James Curry.