The politics of colonised subjectivity

A critical review of H A Bulhan's "Franz Fanon and the psychology of oppression (1985)

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The published studies of the work of Franz Fanon in the last twenty years reveal a glaring paradox. Despite the fact that Fanon was a trained psychiatrist and practising psychotherapist, hence deeply influenced by a range of psychological theories amongst other, critical studies remain dominated by historians, political theorists and biographers. The Fanonian legacy has occasioned a mere trickle of serious appraisals by psychologists themselves despite its wide ranging appeal amongst black intellectuals and its considerable influence on American and South African Black Consciousness movements. H. Bulhan's book is thus a particularly welcome contribution to Fanonian scholarship as it constitutes the first major attempt by a trained psychologist to systematise Fanon's psychological writings. It is clear that Bulhan sees himself both as the guardian and continuator of Fanon's work, truncated as it was by his untimely death at the age of thirty-six.

The nature of Bulhan's appraisal of Fanon's work may best emerge by briefly contrasting his project with that of another recent Fanon scholar : J McCulloch in his "Black Soul, White Artefacts" (1983). Starting from the assumption that Fanon's prolific but brief career has left us with a set of fragmentary and unsystematic sketches drawing from paradigms as diverse as Negritude, African Socialism, Hegel's philosophy and various psycho-analytic psychologies, McCulloch proceeds to painstakingly tease out the underlying epistemological structure which gives unity to Fanon's work and which allows us to grasp its dominant and contradictory tendencies. His book focuses more specifically on the difficulties and points of tension which emerge out of Fanon's effort to work in that intermediate terrain where the sciences of personality and society converge.

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McCulloch, writing from a neo-marxist perspective, is by no means unsympathetic to Fanon's overall aim of producing a sociogenetic psychology. His final evaluation, however, is that this intention is not realised. On the one hand, he argues that Fanon's reliance on the analytic categories of race/culture and nationality at the expense of that of class entails that what he presents as a general psychology of colonial oppression is in fact restricted to a specific class: the educated petty-bourgeoisie. Further, the contours of Fanon's fundamental psychology of colonial oppression, mapped out in his first text (Masks, 1952), is more relevant to the socio-existential experience of the educated elite than to the Algerian peasantry or the dispossessed peasants (the 'Wretched') which Fanon privileged as the truly revolutionary strata in the Algerian struggle for national liberation.

On the other hand, McCulloch argues, that Fanon, by virtue of his emphasis on psychological theory, tended to over-psychologise the concept of alienation and oppression at the expense of a more elaborate political economy and class analysis of colonial society. This tendency thus led him into a series of errors both in regard to his theory of revolutionary struggle and in his political strategy. If Fanon privileged the peasantry in the Algerian revolution it was not so much because of their position within the relations of exploitation, the labour process and their actual political consciousness. Rather it was due to their having retained a strong mode of cultural attachment to indigenous culture. It is this mode of cultural attachment which Fanon viewed as a radical source of oppositional identity and which allowed him to assert that individual and collective liberation fuse into an identical project : the anti-colonial struggle for national liberation.

Bulhan's book by contrast contains none of the critical distance which McCulloch sustains throughout. Disregarding the relevance of the race-class debate in an evaluation of both Fanon's sociology and of his psychology (see Bulhan, 1985:13), Bulhan remains at heart, and in theory, a Fanonian. His espousal of Fanon's framework leads him to assert three major interrelated theses.

In the first instance Bulhan asserts that Fanon's psychology contains an implicit break from much of eurocentric psychology (1985:ch.4,6). He further argues that this break is predicated upon the successful development of a socio-genetic paradigm in psychology (chs.6,7,8,9). Finally, this socio-genetic perspective ensures the way in which participation in political struggle, which Bulhan subsumes under the undifferentiated heading of collective liberation, also becomes a mass therapy for socially induced psychopathology (ch. 7,12).

In my opinion Bulhan's attempt to argue that Fanon's theses and his development of the latter herald a new paradigm in psychology is not

convincing precisely because it does not pay sufficient attention to problems inherent within Fanon's work itself, such as those suggested by McCulloch. In addition it appears that the feasibility of a project such as that of producing 'A Psychology of Oppression' should include a more thorough discussion of the dilemmas which have marred such ventures in the history of psychology itself. It is unfortunate that Bulhan shows a overhasty tendency to dispel almost all of psychology as eurocentric as if psychology, in this highly undifferentiated state, could fruitfully be approached under the ethnic headings of 'WASP' or 'Jewish' trends in psychology (1985:ch.2).

I am referring here more particularly to the significant history of the marxist-freudians (Reich, Fromm & Marcuse) which, although undeniably western in its focus, nevertheless reveals the impasses inherent within the project of reconciling a theory of mind/personality based on intrapsychic divisions and conflicts with a sociology based on class divisions and conflicts. This history (Gabriel, 1983; Coward, 1983) reveals that what was gained in terms of sociological and historical relevance was lost in terms of psychological complexity. For example, the uncritical slide between the psychoanalytic concepts of REPRESSION and the sociological concept of OPPRESSION is a notable feature of these psychologies. Conversely, the inclusion of a theory of personality to complement an otherwise reductionist and economistic marxism and to articulate the subjective or ideological components of social oppression never managed to convince those who espoused a radical sociological perspective. It seems that Fanon's work which emerged from within the post-war intellectual conjuncture of the 1950's as it were, bears many similarities with and faces a variety of dilemmas germane to the history of freudo-marxism.

A work of thorough comparison between Fanon and the marxist-freudians would take us far beyond the scope of this review. However, it would take into account three considerations, which I can only briefly enumerate here.

In a first instance the model of mind or personality operative in Fanon's psychology of colonial neurosis seems to owe its main theoretical allegiance to Alfred Adler's individual psychology. Fanon rejected Adler's notion that the sense of inferiority is inherent within the human condition (Fanon, 1952; Bulhan, 1985: ch.4) and proceeded to root the creation of the sense of inferiority amongst the colonised in the history of colonialism itself. Colonialism is thus responsible for a 'sacking' of indigeneous culture and the imposition of a manichean racist ideology which devalues black physical and cultural identity. The division within colonised subjectivity, however, rests centrally on the conflict between this internalised sense of inferiority and the compensatory manoeuvers to combat it: that is, the setting up of an ideal guiding fiction. In Fanon's psychology this Adlerian 'superiority complex' or 'masculine protest' takes the specific form of the 'desire for lactification'. It is

the desire for salvation through an identification with white values which is productive of alienation since it is discrepant and incongruous with a more fundamental black identity which the colonised attempts to disown.

The lineage between Adler and Fanon is in itself interesting given Adler's historic position as the first dissenter or deviationist in the early psycho analytic movement (Jacoby, 1975). Furthermore, although the deviation is often presented as emanating from a divergence in political outlook - Adler was a socialist and Freud not - such a presentation masks a more complex theoretical issue and this is that Adler was in fact the first formulator of an ego-psychology (Jacoby, 1975). As Jacoby points out, in Adler's work one witnesses a general theoretical drift which was to come to full flowering within the chorus of humanistic post-Freudians : "the replacement of an instinctual dynamic by social factors or interest, repression and sexuality by insecurity and goals, depth psychology by a surface psychology" (Jacoby, 1975:23). Thus Fanon's basic model of colonial alienation relies centrally on a division between a basic self-concept and an ideal-self fashioned by the ideological apparatuses of colonial society and within the fragmented mirror of racist ideology. In a nutshell it is a psychology of how the ego-ideal is socially constructed through the process of internalisation. It leaves untouched and untheorised the very notion of a basic self or that as to how there emerges a divison between a basic-self and an ideal one at all.

It is at this juncture that the comparison between Fanon and the marxist-freudians becomes interesting. As Gabriel points out, both W. Reich and E. Fromm in their respective attempts to introduce the missing historical dimension in psycho-analytic theory and conversely the human factor in marxism only managed to do so by reintroducing the notion of a core personality at the center of their respective psychologies (Gabriel, 1983). Reich replaced Freud's complex unity of psycho-sexuality by a genital sensuous being, dominated by biological forces and immanently striving towards non-neurotic harmony through the achievement of full orgastic potency. In contradistinction Fromm, standing at the opposite pole of the body-mind spectrum, introduces the notion of a deeply symbolic being in constant pursuit of meaning, identity and freedom. In both psychologies, underneath the oppressed layers of the personality there emerges 'a view of the individual over-integrated in his/her alienation, just as their imageries of a personality core entail a view of the individual over-integrated in his/her freedom' (Gabriel, 1983; 191).

I would like to suggest that Fanon's psychology is also built on just such a notion of a basic core identity or self. This basic self is intimately tied up with the notion that the culture of the colonised survives despite its atrophy owing to colonial domination. Although Fanon was critical of the concept of an African personality with its idealised attributes dating to the pre-colonial era

as put forward by Negritude poets and African Socialists, he nevertheless assumes the basic notion of a self formed in an other culture. This basic self is conceptualised as the overall product of an ensemble of cultural practices. Despite the fact that this cultural self acts as a source of oppositional identity both in Fanon's psychology and in his political analysis, his psychology leaves unchartered the process of its construction and development. As a result, despite the assertion that this self is a socio-cultural product capable of new definitions in the course of anti-colonial struggle it functions theoretically as a unitary category in Fanon's work.

It is at this point that the three psychologies of Fanon, Fromm & Reich reach their paradoxical similarity. For although they reject the individual-society dualism, they in fact rely on the notion of a core identity as a psychic infrastructure which lurks underneath the alienated layers of the psyche formed in an oppressive society. In Fanon's psychology more specifically it can be pointed out that it is just such a notion of a non-alienated, harmonious and unitary subject which feeds and sustains his utopian vision on the psychic valency of participation in counter-violent struggle. To quote Fanon himself: "Illuminated by violence, the consciousness of the people rebel against any pacification. From now on the demagogues, the opportunists, and the magicians have a difficult task ... the attempts at mystification become practically impossible" (Fanon, 1967:95). Having thrown off the mask of the falsely constructed superstructure of the self decolonised man restores the truth of its subjectivity with truth as its essence.

The variety of themes introduced above warrant a more thorough discussion but my main aim is introducing such themes has been to counter Bulhan's sustained assertion that Fanon's psychology heralds a successful sociogenetic perspective in psychology. I would argue that, while Fanon's psychology promises an interesting articulation of psyche and society and one which is important where national liberation struggles still loom large on the historical agenda, it is not without major dilemmas. Furthermore, I am also suggesting that Bulhan's knee-jerk ethnic approach to the history of psychology obscures potentially fruitful avenues of comparison which would assist in the analyis of the conceptual dilemmas at play within Fanon's work. This work of comparison, however, would stretch far beyond the scope of this review.

The value of Bulhan's book in my view lies not so much in his success at sustaining his claims of an epistemological break but rather in the rich variety of interrogations, considerations and materials he presents in his overall attempt at sustaining his major claim. I will enumerate only a few which I found particularly useful.

As mentioned earlier the book has the overall beneficial effect of integrating Fanon's psychology within the psychology discipline and thus of rescuing it

from the uncertain and inaccessible position in which it had been lingering for the last two decades.

Bulhan's first chapter on Fanon's biography is a crisp treatment of the highlights which marked his remarkable trajectory from his modest petty-bourgeois origins in Martinique to his status as consultant-in-chief in Algeria and his direct involvement with the Algerian Liberation Front. It provides some revealing background detail which suggests ways in which Fanon's first book (Masks, 1952) can be seen as a theoretical distillation of the conflictual elements which marked his own experience prior to settling in Algeria. Fanon's astonishingly early enrollment in the French Army as a result of De Gaulle's call to liberate 'the Fatherland' from Nazi occupation indicates the manner in which Fanon himself was interpellated into colonial ideology and of the power of such interpellations. This biographical detail resonates closely with Fanon's poignant description of the identification process at play in the subjection of the colonised child to the dominant ideology marked by its symbolic (manichean) divisions: "The young Negro ... invests the hero, who is white, with all his own aggression - at that age so closely linked to sacrificial dedication, a sacrificial dedication permeated with sadism. An eight-year-old child who offers a gift, even to an adult, cannot endure a refusal" (Fanon, 1952:104).

Biographic details aside, Bulhan's book contains excellent summaries of both Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic and of O. Mannoni's work on Malagasy colonialism (1985:ch.6). But one of the paradoxes of Bulhan's argument that Fanon's treatment of oppression contains a break from eurocentric thought emerges clearly in this chapter. In my view, while it is true that Fanon rejected Mannoni's notion of a dependency complex amongst the colonised for its ostensible conservative political implications and for its eurocentric underpinnings, it is equally true that Fanon's overall framework is indebted to a particular amalgam of Hegel and Mannoni. Thus Fanon accepts the general Mannonian notion that colonialism has to be understood by unravelling a specific psychology at play within it. He accepts explicitly (Fanon, 1952) Mannoni's notion of a Prospero Complex amongst the coloniser: a basic personality which utilises the projection of unacceptable impulses in the formation of the Negro myth. Furthermore, this psycho-analytic treatment of racist ideology as a collective personality meshes with Hegel's Master-slave dialectic to support the second Mannonian notion that colonialism is an encounter of two personality types. It is with the help of Hegel that Fanon makes the bridge between the 'collective consciousness' of the coloniser (the Prospero mentality) and what it yields at the historical level amongst the colonised : the mask-neurosis.

It can thus be argued that Fanon's critique of Mannoni's analysis of colonial racism does not shift the ground radically from under Mannoni's feet. I

concur here with McCulloch's conclusive remarks that: "Although it is only in his first book that we find a lengthy attack on Mannoni, the shadow of Prospero falls across all of Fanon's writings. It was Mannoni who, more than any single figure, set the boundaries of his life work" (1983:214). More particularly, Fanon's indebtedness to both Mannoni and Hegel, takes the specific form of the treatment of racist ideology as collective mind or consciousness or personality which is to be understood primarily with the help of the psychoanalytic theory of projection. Fanon thereby, and Bulhan reiterates the same position, does not treat ideology as an objective instance of the social formation, as a practice of representation whose determination is established in terms of its articulation to the mode of production and to the political struggles between antagonistic social groups and classes. The analysis of racist ideology as a set of symbolic practices, whereby white is constituted as sovereign and black as its transgression (manicheism), gains the upper hand almost exclusively over a socio-political analysis of ideology and its functioning within an ensemble of relations. It seems to me that it is Fanon's substantial indebtedness to Mannoni and Hegel which allows him to portray colonial domination as if its central and most determining feature is the symbolic process of manicheism. If the utilisation of psychological theory gains ground in this treatment of an oppressive ideology it is at the expense of a more elaborate sociology and political economy of colonial domination.

Bulhan's chapters 10 and 11 give a thorough presentation of Fanon's less well known psychiatric papers. These papers of transition, written after 'Masks' (1952) and before 'the Wretched' (1967), allow the reader to trace Fanon's shift from his early focus on the individual form racial oppression takes to one in which there is a greater emphasis on institutional racism. Colonial psychiatry as a body of knowledge and as a set of practices is critiqued for its ostensible functions in reproducing colonial relations. Behind Fanon's critique of the Ecole d'Algiers, in its attempts to demonstrate the inferiority of the African brain and its 'baser' personality traits, lies a more subtle analysis of how psychiatric theory individualises and pathologises a range of behaviour which have a complex social and cultural determinants. Fanon thus shifts from an analysis of individual psychopathology (the mask neurosis) to one in which the very nature of colonial psychiatry occasions ruptures amd dysfunctions. Thus in the psychiatric institution it is the institution itself which functions in a pathological manner.

These papers reflect the drift in Fanon's thinking which led him to give up his post as chief-consultant to become more directly involved in political struggle per se. In my opinion, what is not sufficiently dealt with by Bulhan, however, is the question of whether Fanon did not carry with him his critical analysis of the micro-politics of institutions to the sphere of primary political institutions. For it seems that there is an abrupt slippage, whereby both Fanon and Bulhan

move from a social critique of psychiatry to one in which participation in broader political struggle becomes equivalent to a form of radical psychiatry and therapy.

Bulhan's chapter 7 entitled 'Violence and Manichean Psychology' stands out as a key chapter in his book. It contains a thought provoking critique of the conventional, legal definition of the violent act which rests on five criteria: the use of physical force, the intensity of emotions, the grounds to infer intent, the illegitimacy of the act and the extent of its effects in terms of physical damage. Although Bulhan acknowledges the importance of such a definition he goes on to show its obvious limitations and inadequacies in taking into account forms of violence which have an institutional or structural character. Such forms of violence cannot be gauged by reference to individual intentions but rather in terms of the consequences of the functioning of a system. Bulhan thus proposes a redefinition of the concept of violence: "Violence is any relation, process, or condition by which an individual or a group violates the physical, social and/or psychological integrity of another person or group" (1985:135). Although Bulhan does not answer the questions of how to define this basic integrity of a person or group his redefinition has the value of providing a more structural approach to the concept.

At a more theoretical level, however, it seems to me that Fanon's treatment of the question of violence (Fanon, 1968) has become the operative concept and the one which gives ballast to Bulhan's entire work. He states: "Thus to study oppression is, in the last analysis, to delve into the problems of violence in both its subtle and crude manifestations" (1985:131). In this context it seems important to raise a theoretical question. Fanon's fundamental of colonial oppression is rooted in his early book (Masks, 1952). The specific conflict of the 'mask neurosis' occurs at the level of the identification of the colonised with a manichean ideology which consecrates white attributes and devalues black ones. In other words, his early model rests on this notion of conflict engendered by contradictory identifications. In his essay on violence, however, Fanon (1968) shifts register and employs a model of mind which is purely energetist or economic and in which violence is treated as psychic force. As psychic force it can be directed against the self, lateralised against the fellow oppressed, or re-directed within counter-violent struggle against the oppressor. It seems to me that it is this shift from the register of identification to that of psychic energy which allows Fanon, and Bulhan, to reduce all forms of violence and violations be they physical, social, political, economic, cultural, symbolic and epistemic to one fundamental substrate, that of psychic force or energy. Thus theorised, politics and history become a question of misplaced or rightly placed psychic energy and more particularly of violence. What recedes in the background is the political treatment of armed struggle in terms of the goals and aims of a political vision and the appropriate strategies to achieve them. In other words, what disappears is

the very stuff of politics: ideology, programmes, organization and a theory of struggles, their aim and goals.

Despite Bulhan's attempt to trace a distinction between the notion of 'cleansing' and that of 'detoxifying' (1985:147) ultimately both notions boil down to the same construct and that is the direct or unmediated expression of damned up aggressive energy. From a psychological perspective it is highly dubious that catharsis can be considered a significant therapeutic agent. From a political perspective it is equally arguable that the decision to resort to armed struggle can be sustained purely on ideological and strategic grounds and in terms of political goals and aims and gains little by ascribing a therapeutic or regenerative valency to it. It seems to me that Bulhan's attempt to maintain a psychological justification for counter-violent strategy is based on a double reduction. On the one hand, it assumes that psychological processes at play in individual psychology can be transplanted wholesale to the relations between social groups. On the other, it assumes that such psychological processes can be reduced to a mental economics.

Thus when Bulhan resorts to Pinderhughes' thoroughly Kleinian explanation of how projective identification is always at play within an interpersonal violent situation his case is weakened rather than strengthened (1985:151). In such situations, where persecutory anxiety dominates, and splitting and projective identification are deployed, the most untherapeutic stance to adopt is to join in the vicious cycle of retaliation and counter-retaliation and thereby increase the amount of persecutory anxiety. But then the argument is purely rhetorical anyway for it is not convincing in the first place that the most salient feature of a situation of oppression is best understood in terms of the psychological concept of manicheism, projection and the violence it engenders. Such an approach treats ideology as collective mind which can then be understood in terms of neurotic or psychotic processes. By the same token, since ideology is a social force, the social itself becomes assimilated to a mass psychopathology.

This last point needs to be further explored for it relates to a major lacuna in Bulhan's book. By focusing on the psychology of political action Bulhan manages to by-pass the political vision and positions which collective liberation entails. Are we to assume that the psychology of liberation operates independently of the political vision of the various organisations which usually compete for hegemony amongst the oppressed social strata?

My major aim has been to the difficulties arising out of Fanon's attempts to work in that interstitial terrain where the sciences of personality and society converge. More particularly, I have focussed on the centrality which both Fanon and Bulhan accord to the analysis of racist ideology as resting on manichean processes and on the unitary model of mind operative in Fanon's

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psychology of colonial oppression. Bulhan's book however in so far as it reflects the diverse preoccupations which marked Fanon's brief but prolific career cannot be grasped in its totality. The value of the book in my opinion is that it renders possible for psychology students a more serious confrontation with Fanon's theses. For if Fanon is often invoked, given his emblematic position within the chorus of radical third world nationalist thinkers, he is less often seriously read.

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