

Frantz Fanon's Critique of Colonial Structures

The Importance of Psychological Liberation

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POLITICAL THEORY | POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

ABSTRACT

*This article explores Frantz Fanon's critique of assimilation and its implications within political theory, particularly regarding colonial identity and liberation. Fanon argues that assimilation reinforces colonial domination by influencing the colonized to internalize the white gaze, leading to psychological subjugation and self-alienation. In contrast to W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of double-consciousness—which suggests the possibility of integration without the loss of cultural identity—Fanon asserts that true liberation is unattainable within colonial frameworks. Fanon's works, *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, provide a foundation for understanding decolonization as an active and transformative process that necessitates a complete rejection of colonial validation. This article examines Fanon's argument, emphasizing his view of psychological liberation as an essential aspect in obtaining self-determination. It also highlights the broader ideological implications of his theory, demonstrating how decolonization extends beyond structural change to include a radical reimagining of identity and power. This analysis highlights the necessity of radical decolonization as a means of dismantling oppressive systems and reclaiming agency.*

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon rejects assimilation as a strategy for overcoming oppression, arguing that it necessitates a surrender to what may be understood, through Fanon's framework, as the white gaze—a way in which colonial power structures are reinforced and the identity of the colonized is erased.¹ The white gaze imposes a racial hierarchy through a distortion of identity, forcing the colonized to view themselves through the lens of colonial perception. Fanon discusses the psychological weight of the white gaze, showcasing how the colonized internalize these externally constructed perceptions, establishing a harmful cycle of alienation.² Fanon instead broadly advocates for the psychological liberation of the colonized, arguing that in rejecting the white gaze, their identity, autonomy, and agency is reinforced. Furthermore, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon explores the importance of decolonization, showcasing it as an active process involving the participation of the colonized. Here, Fanon explains that decolonization is a transformative process that fundamentally changes the colonized, shifting them from the status of passive observers to active participants who shape their own identity.³ Fanon's rejection of assimilation offers a powerful critique of colonialism and its psychological foundations, emphasizing the necessity of rejecting colonial systems entirely. Responding to Fanon's arguments presented in both *Black Skin White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, I argue that Fanon's advocacy for psychological liberation is effective in overcoming oppression as it dismantles the psychological foundation of colonialism and its subsequent hierarchies, while encouraging the colonized to actively

participate in reclaiming their identity and agency.

Central to Frantz Fanon's critique of assimilation is the white gaze—a concept that imposes a distorted identity onto the colonized based on the perceptions of the colonizer.⁴ In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon introduces this concept to describe the oppression of Black individuals, where they are reduced to mere stereotypes and are stripped of their identity, forcing their self-perception to be shaped by the prejudices of colonizers. The colonized are then established as mere projections of the colonizer's perceptions, creating a cycle of alienation and dehumanization.⁵ This highlights the harmful dependency that is created between Black identity and colonial structures and domination. Through his own experiences, Fanon exemplifies that the white gaze imposes an identity of inferiority that subsequently reduces the individuality and value of the colonized, stating that his status as a non-white male “robs [him] of all worth.”⁶ For Fanon, this imposed inferiority becomes a foundational aspect in the assimilation of the colonized as it furthers a desire for the validation of the colonizer, resulting in deepened alienation.⁷

The white gaze becomes a transformative tool as it distorts the identities of the colonized, perpetuating cycles of alienation and discrimination.⁸ Fanon explains that this cycle is rooted in the subconscious acceptance and eventual belief in the perceptions imposed by the white gaze.⁹ This establishes a sense of self-alienation, as the colonized begin to question the legitimacy of both their authentic identity and the one imposed upon them.¹⁰ This highlights the imbalance in representational power, as whiteness determines meaning and identity for the colonized; Black individuals are denied the ability to define and assert their own existence and identity, as the white gaze robs individuals of their subjectivity and imposes distorted identities upon them.¹¹ These identities are directly shaped by white narrative, leaving Black in-

1 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 18-19 and 110, https://monoskop.org/images/a/a5/Fanon_Frantz_Black_Skin_White_Masks_1986.pdf.

2 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 12.

3 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 36, https://monoskop.org/images/6/6b/Fanon_Frantz_The_Wretched_of_the_Earth_1963.pdf.

4 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 18-19 and 110.

5 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 98.

6 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 98.

7 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 98.

8 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110.

9 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.

10 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112-113.

11 George Yancy, “Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19, no. 4 (2005): 222, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25670583>.

dividuals with no ability to resist and challenge this imposed meaning.¹² Furthermore, this process transforms the Black individual into an object of white imagination, reducing them to mere reflections of colonial prejudices.¹³ The Black body—and, in turn, identity—is stripped of any preexisting and authentic meaning and is instead used as a blank slate to impose white perceptions.¹⁴

The psychological and emotional impact of the white gaze extends beyond its internalization: it establishes a disconnection from one's sense of agency and, subsequently, their ability to resist oppression.¹⁵ These systems of oppression often foster what many might call a "culture of silence,"¹⁶ where the oppressed internalize their subjugation to the extent that they begin to view it as inevitable.¹⁷ This acceptance creates a cycle in which oppressed individuals not only adopt the imposed identities but become active in perpetuating the structures of their own oppression.¹⁸ This disconnection from their authentic selves leads to a reality where the oppressed are unable to imagine a reality beyond their dependency on colonial structures. Furthermore, this struggle reflects the important concept of "double-consciousness": a state in which colonized individuals are forced to view themselves through two opposing lenses—the authentic self and the imposed self.¹⁹ This concept can be viewed as an internal conflict that establishes a sense of "two-ness" as the oppressed individuals experience competing thoughts, values, and ideals that remain in constant tension and opposition.²⁰

Fanon generally believes that reclaiming identity begins with a rejection of the imposed identities that resulted from colonialism and its construction of the white gaze. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he compares the feelings of colonization and oppression to being treated

like an object, manipulated by the colonizers' perceptions.²¹ He goes on to explain that the colonized must break free from this cycle, and in doing so, reach a point of emotional and psychological "[explosion]."²² Fanon characterizes this explosion as a breaking point for the colonized individual—an intense and emotional reaction to the cyclical nature of colonization and its imposed identities.²³ This is not a mere reaction to oppression but rather a transformative process of reclaiming agency and identity.²⁴ Fanon views this as a necessary step towards liberation as it emphasizes the complete rejection of the harmful tie between the colonized and the colonizer.²⁵ In this process, the colonized individual begins to dismantle the psychological constraints of colonialism—a key step in the active process of decolonization.²⁶

In both *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon critiques assimilation as surrendering to the white gaze, completely dismissing the possibility of assimilation being a path to liberation. Fanon believes there is no proper way to preserve the authentic identity of colonized individuals while integrating them into the colonizer's society, as colonized individuals lack "ontological resistance" within the dominant colonial framework.²⁷ W.E.B Du Bois challenges this view, offering an alternative perspective by suggesting that integration does not necessarily equate to assimilation and, in turn, submission to the white gaze.²⁸ As mentioned earlier, Du Bois delves into the concept of the double-consciousness, giving validity and expression to both the authentic and imposed identity of colonized individuals, acknowledging the duality of their existence while arguing for the possibility of coexistence between the two.²⁹ In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois generally argues that individuals are able to participate

12 Yancy, "Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body," 222.

13 Yancy, "Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body," 222.

14 Yancy, "Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body," 222.

15 Mark Patrick Hederman, "Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed," *The Crane Bag* 6, no. 2 (1982): 60, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30023905>.

16 Richard Shaull, in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Penguin Education, 1972), 11-14, quoted in Mark Patrick Hederman, "Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed," 59, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30023905>.

17 Hederman, "Paulo Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed,'" 59.

18 Hederman, "Paulo Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed,'" 59.

19 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8-9, https://law.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0008/2282858/Du-Bois,-Souls-of-Black-Folk.Chapters-1-to-4.pdf.

20 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 8-9.

21 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109.

22 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 140.

23 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 36-37.

24 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 36-37.

25 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 36-37.

26 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 36-37.

27 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110.

28 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 9.

29 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 8-9.

in society while maintaining their cultural heritage, finding a balance in the double-consciousness. Du Bois states that the colonized individual “would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world,”³⁰ illustrating his belief that the unique identities and perspective of Black individuals can facilitate change and transformation in society.³¹ For Du Bois, this transformation involves emphasizing cultural pride and heritage to challenge and subsequently reform oppressive systems from within, rather than rejecting them entirely.³² Furthermore, Du Bois emphasizes the transformative power of education as he advocates for Negro colleges, explaining that the Black individual’s struggle to advance and overcome systemic barriers was attributed to a lack of education, and arguing that proper education would provide the opportunity for both individual and collective progress.³³ Ultimately, Du Bois advocates for the integration of colonized individuals into society, as he believes that coexistence is not only possible but essential for fostering mutual understanding and equity.

Although Du Bois’ approach to dismantling colonialism prioritizes coexistence and reform, it falls short in addressing not only the structural and psychological dependence perpetuated by colonial systems but also the deep-rooted nature of these consequences. Frantz Fanon generally argues that any attempt to coexist within the frameworks of oppressive and colonial structures is inherently flawed: it is not possible to authentically express and reconcile the identity of the colonized within a colonial society, as it perpetuates the very hierarchies that enable oppression. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon generally emphasizes that true liberation cannot come from mere reformation of colonial systems; instead, liberation can only come from the full dismantling of colonial systems. He argues that decolonization is simply not possible without violence.³⁴ Fanon’s emphasis here highlights the deeply rooted nature of colonial power and its consequences, showcasing that these systems are so entrenched that they cannot be overturned by reforma-

tion alone. Furthermore, Fanon would likely critique Du Bois’ advocacy for education and view Du Bois’ approach to education as a tool of assimilation rather than empowerment. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon explores the role of colonized intellectuals and their connection to the colonial elite, arguing that education would be intrinsically tied to the interests of the colonizer. The education provided within colonial frameworks would work to serve colonial interests rather than challenge colonial structures for the recognition of the colonized.³⁵ For Fanon, colonial education would not uplift society as a whole but would instead create a small group of individuals who would act as extensions of colonial power—distancing themselves from the struggles of their people.³⁶ Ultimately, Fanon argues that the only way to obtain true liberation is through a complete rejection of colonial structures as the systems of oppression are too deeply rooted to properly reform or coexist with.

For Fanon, violence is a crucial aspect of decolonization given that the oppressive structures of colonialism were established and maintained through violence.³⁷ In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon explores the exploitative and violent nature of these systems, establishing mere negation and reform as insufficient for obtaining true liberation. He critiques this approach because it assumes that the colonizer and the colonized can recognize each other as equal; however, in the colonial context, this is impossible.³⁸ Colonialism fundamentally denies the identity and humanity of colonized individuals and establishes unequal power dynamics.³⁹ By appealing to peaceful negotiations or mutual understanding, the very colonial structures that need to be dismantled would be legitimized, as non-violent approaches to decolonization would disregard and oversimplify the severity of colonization, creating a false narrative of unity.⁴⁰ Ultimately, a peaceful approach to decolonization would only reinforce the values of colonizers and perpetuate the same hierarchies while actively disregarding the continuous oppression of colonized individuals, illustrating the crucial role of violence in the efforts

30 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 9.

31 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 9.

32 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 9.

33 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 40-41.

34 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 35.

35 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 44.

36 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 44.

37 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 35.

38 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 35-36.

39 Oladipo Fashina, “Frantz Fanon and the Ethical Justification of Anti-Colonial Violence,” *Social Theory and Practice* 15, no. 2 (1989): 186, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23557066>.

40 Fashina, “Frantz Fanon and the Ethical Justification of Anti-Colonial Violence,” 189.

of decolonization.⁴¹ In his work *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon broadly establishes that it is through violence only that the deep-seated oppression of colonization can be dismantled; it is simply too large of a system of domination to be dealt with through peaceful means alone.⁴² He emphasizes the inevitability of violence, arguing that if the oppressed were to seek to overturn colonial order and put themselves “at the head of things,”⁴³ it would not be possible without the use of violence.⁴⁴

Moreover, Fanon emphasizes the psychological aspect of violence, particularly in the context of decolonization. He describes violence as a “cleansing force”⁴⁵ that frees the colonized individual from the constraints of oppression and the feelings of inferiority and passivity it causes.⁴⁶ Violence allows individuals to regain their self-respect in the dismantlement of physiological barriers that result from oppressive structures.⁴⁷ It is a transformative process that allows colonized individuals to rid themselves of the constructed identities that were imposed on them.⁴⁸ For Fanon, violence is an essential aspect of decolonization both practically and symbolically.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon generally emphasizes that the only approach to reclaiming humanity and collective agency is through radical decolonization—an approach that does not rely on the colonizer. For Fanon, decolonization requires a structural reconstruction of society and a complete overturning of societal power dynamics.⁴⁹ Many argue that decolonization may happen through a recognition of the identities and contributions of colonized individuals, resulting in an equitable society. However, this approach relies on the colonial narrative that colonized individuals are inherently controlled by colonizers—that they may only be recognized once the colonizers are ‘ready’ to recognize them.⁵⁰ This approach would simply reinforce the oppressive dynamics of colonial society, where colonized individuals are permanently tied to and dependent on the perceptions and control of colonization. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon generally argues that true

decolonization requires the colonized to end all ties to the colonizer, embracing an approach of self-determination. This involves the dismantling of internalized inferiority imposed by oppressive colonial ideologies and rejecting the systems of validation controlled by the colonizer. Fanon highlights the importance of a radical approach to decolonization, where colonized individuals must recognize their own humanity and act to reclaim it without relying on the colonizer.

Frantz Fanon’s critique of assimilation highlights the psychological and structural oppression of colonial systems, emphasizing the consequences of a surrender to the white gaze. Fanon’s exploration of this concept in both *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* reveals the dominating effects and harmful control it exerts on colonized individuals by highlighting the distorted identities imposed upon them. Fanon underscores the importance of psychological liberation by explaining the harmful consequences of internalized inferiority—a direct result of the white gaze. Du Bois’ concept of a “double-consciousness”⁵¹ from *The Souls of Black Folk* highlights the tension between opposing identities of colonized individuals; this interplay between an individual’s authentic and imposed identity emphasizes Fanon’s broader argument that psychological liberation is a necessary step in reclaiming agency and autonomy.⁵² The necessity of violence as a transformative tool to dismantle colonial structures and obtain decolonization is central to Fanon’s perspective. Fanon’s critique of assimilation is convincing as it effectively demonstrates how the white gaze perpetuates cycles of oppression and alienation. His broader emphasis on the importance of psychological liberation highlights the need to reject colonial structures entirely. Furthermore, Fanon’s general belief in the necessity of violence showcases the depth of colonial oppression, exploitation, and violence. Ultimately, Fanon provides a unique framework for decolonization, one that emphasizes the identity of colonized individuals and, subsequently, rejects dependency on colonial systems.

41 Fashina, “Frantz Fanon and the Ethical Justification of Anti-Colonial Violence,” 188-189.

42 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 37.

43 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 37.

44 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 37.

45 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 94.

46 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 94.

47 Fashina, “Frantz Fanon and the Ethical Justification of Anti-Colonial Violence,” 188-189.

48 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 94.

49 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 35.

50 Fashina, “Frantz Fanon and the Ethical Justification of Anti-Colonial Violence,” 190-191.

51 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 8-9.

52 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 8-9.