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The Evolution of Frantz Fanon's Manichean Logic

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Abstract

Frantz Fanon is one of the earliest thinkers in the decolonial school of thought. His book *The Wretched of the Earth* has a powerful message about the practical necessity of a decolonial revolution. However, I propose that because Fanon is reluctant to let go of 'Manichean Logic', his idea of a decolonial future is impossible because one hegemonic world, the colonial one, will simply be replaced with another, the decolonial one. We can use feminist scholars Chandra Mohanty and Maria Lugones to augment Fanon's somewhat flawed argument for decolonialism. While neither of these authors directly address Fanon's idea of Manichean Logic, they both argue that colonial society is dichotomous and hierarchical, which is functionally the same thing. Lugones posits that a decolonial revolution is composed of individuals who do not fit within clean dichotomous categories whereas Mohanty describes how all problems resulting from colonialism require their own unique solution motivated only by the people affected by said problem. While both scholars suggest that Manichean logic must be rejected in order to fully decolonize, neither of them deny that the colonizers themselves are homogeneous. Both Lugones and Mohanty argue for the intersectionality of decolonial society but hold on to Fanon's idea that colonial society is monolithic. They state that you can have a diverse "us", or decolonial society, but you cannot have a revolution without an enemy, and therefore colonial society continues to be depicted as one entity.

Keywords: Literature, Philosophy, Decolonization, Fanon

Frantz Fanon was one of the earliest decolonial philosophers. In his book “The Wretched of the Earth,” he details why colonialism is destructive and then explains how we must destroy colonialism and rebuild something past it. One of the many ideas he introduces in this book is Manichean Logic, which he describes as the compartmentalization of the colonial world. While Fanon does say that Manichean logic is antithetical to a post-colonial society, he argues that it is a necessity for the decolonial revolution. Later thinkers like Chandra Mohanty and Maria Lugones instead take a more nuanced approach to resolving the dichotomies enforced by the colonial project. Fanon’s focus on Manichean Logic dooms any decolonial revolution based on his theories by forcing decolonizers into the same mental and physical space as their oppressors, while Mohanty and Lugones focus on accepting others' experiences allows their theories to thrive by accepting differences between individuals and their circumstances.

Fanon describes decolonization as both necessary and violent. He argues for its necessity by pointing out the gross oppression and exploitation that has been implemented by the capitalistic forces which now govern our lives. He gives two reasons for this violence. He says that ideological violence is necessary for a decolonial revolution because colonialism is so deeply entrenched in the *episteme* of the West that the only way to excise it is violently. He then goes on to say that the revolution will most likely be violent because colonialism has imprisoned the colonized, because of this they dream of muscular and aggressive freedom. Fanon articulates the necessity of violence thusly: “decolonization is always violent” and “decolonization is the encounter between two congenitally antagonistic forces” (Fanon, pp 1-2). He then goes on to

describe how the colonized are imprisoned, how they can free themselves, and what comes after the revolution.

The Fight Against Manichaeism

While all of Fanon's theories have been incorporated in some manner or another into other thinkers' ideas, I will be focusing on his theory of "Manichean Logic" and how it has been used and changed by other thinkers (Fanon, pp. 6). Fanon describes this 'Manichean Logic' as a world system that enforces an us vs them mentality, a world ruled "by the dictates of mutual exclusion" (Fanon, pp. 4). You are either colonized *or* colonizer, white *or* black, man *or* woman, for example. Fanon articulates both why the colonizer implements this dichotomy and how it affects the colonized. This dichotomy allows for the colonizer to clearly and unequivocally state who is superior and who should be obeyed. The cis-gendered white heterosexual Christian man is good, while everything else is inferior. Without Manichaeism, colonization has to accept that people exist in all sorts of different, equally valid orientations. Furthermore, Manichaeism is what allows colonialism to be hegemonic and pervasive. It allows hegemony because it forces all other opinions out and allows it to be pervasive by discontinuing alternate theories of interpretation. Since the system is built on false dichotomies and oppression, the people who designed the system benefit and everyone else suffers; since the system is based on the superiority of one group, it can't be usurped by individuals from within. In a Manichean world, any disenfranchised individual's opinion is discounted, which prevents their voices and actions from changing the system. Therefore, Manichean worlds are self-propagating and self-protecting.

Fanon argued that the colonizer has created a world ruled by 'Manichaeian Logic,' which compartmentalizes its inhabitants mentally, spiritually and geographically. The colonizer has

forced the colonized into specific geographic areas and specific modes of thought (Fanon, pp. 6). To free themselves, the colonized must “[demolish] the colonists sector, burying it deep within the earth or banishing it” (Fanon, pp. 6). Fanon also discusses how a creation of a decolonial national culture is also necessary to fully separate people from colonization. Fanon is very clear that this is a creation of culture, not a return to the precolonial past. He is also very clear that the culture *must* be created by the people who are decolonizing and who have lived and learned together. It is very easy for people from outside the culture, such as the West, to enter into a culture or place and pretend to be a part of that culture based on cursory investigation or research. However, according to Fanon, culture is “a dense, subterranean life in perpetual renewal” and any attempt to copy this culture is merely a “visible veneer” (Fanon, pp. 160). Fanon describes culture as a living, evolving concept that can only be experienced by members of that culture. However, colonial Manichean Logic has destroyed many of these living cultures. From the perspective of the colonizer, other cultures are inferior and therefore should be destroyed.

This destruction of culture is why Fanon adamantly refuses to accept a return to the pre-colonial past. According to Fanon, all our records of the past are both influenced by colonial ideas and too shallow to fully reconstruct the culture from. This again ties into his belief that culture is a living thing. A dead culture can be viewed in a similar way to a skeleton. No matter how much we try, we cannot recreate the creature that left behind the skeleton. Even if we create a perfect replica of that creature, it would be irrevocably changed by existing at our time. Sadly, even a faithful recreation of one of these destroyed cultures would not accurately capture all of the depth that is necessary for cultures. So, the decolonizers must create a new culture based on “the collective thought process of a people to describe, justify and extol the actions whereby they

have joined forces and remained strong,” and one that uses the modern advances acquired in new and harmonious ways that do not destroy other cultures (Fanon, pp. 168). Implicit in his statement that these new cultures don't destroy other cultures is the belief that post-colonial societies must abandon Manichean Logic.

Fanon says that decolonization must move away from Manichaeism, because any world ruled by false dichotomies and hegemonies will invariably lead to more oppression and exploitation. However, Fanon also articulates that Manichaeism is necessary for the decolonial revolution. His argument hinges on the previous point that any individual not actively fighting colonization is tacitly supporting colonization. This belief forcefully creates an all-encompassing decolonial dichotomy that mirrors the Manichean Logic of the colonial world. Which, rather than removing the oppressive and hegemonic episteme, simply modifies it better fit with the majority of the decolonizers. This dichotomy makes sense once you realize that Fanon is not arguing for an intellectual and eventual revolution but a practical and immediate one.

According to him, an ideologically violent, and most likely physically violent, revolution is necessary to fix the wrongs of colonialism. Fanon's concept of a decolonial society includes many concepts and ideas that are antithetical to the colonial way of life. This means that any societal decolonial change must include an immense ideological change as well. Furthermore, since colonialism is monolithic and hegemonic, it is natural for those fighting it to fall into direct and dichotomous opposition. Fanon describes decolonialism as “two congenitally opposed forces,” with no ability for peaceful compromise (Fanon, pp. 2). While it is easy to understand why Fanon argues for this Manichean-esque revolution, it, in fact, directly goes against his broader ideas of a multi-faceted post-colonial society. This is evident in the fact that he does not go into detail of how the decolonizers escape from Manichean Logic. He says that Manichean

Logic is necessary to decolonize, but that the post-colonial world must not be Manichean. Instead it must be full of many unique cultures that exist in harmony with each other. The fact that he does not illuminate how the decolonizers are supposed to transition away from Manichean Logic after they have defeated the colonizers is why I believe any decolonial effort based solely on Fanon's works is doomed to fail.

Fanon argues that every individual is either for *or* against decolonialism. He believes that any individual not staunchly and clearly for decolonialism is tacitly for colonialism. In that, we see the hints of the Manichaeism present in colonizers. While perhaps the categories he would group people by are broader, Fanon is clearly arguing for an interim society very similar to the colonial one we currently have. Individuals who hold viewpoints not in line with others in this society would be punished, marginalized and excluded. To hold a viewpoint different from Fanon's is to support colonialism, the "congenitally opposed force," an unforgivable act (Fanon, pp.2). The largest and most worrying question Fanon leaves unanswered is the transition. If he had elaborated on a way to abandon this mode of thought after colonialism lay in shambles, then his argument would be easier to consider. As it stands, Fanon's description of his ideal revolution sounds eerily similar to the colonial conquests from our history.

This could be an overly rigid interpretation of Fanon. When he speaks of these opposed forces and who counts as an ally, these categories could be incredibly broad. Fanon could simply be decrying all of the individuals who sit back and do nothing, benefiting from a corrupt system. Furthermore, his group of decolonial revolutionaries could be referring to the myriad different ways of rebelling. However, other decolonial thinkers, such as Chandra Mohanty and Maria Lugones, have created other ways of viewing decolonialism that explicitly, as opposed to

implicitly, resolve this issue. They continue the thread started by Fanon and others and add a nuance that better explains the transition from decolonial revolution to postcolonial society.

The idea of dichotomies, the hegemony and Manichean Logic has remained a consistent thread in many decolonial works. Sylvia Wynter adds undeveloped *or* developed to the list of dichotomy categories, Vandana Shiva adds aggressive/masculine science *or* harmonious feminine science, and Kyle Whyte adds settler *or* indigenous, just to name a few. However, the biggest change from Fanon's concept of Manichean Logic, and one that addresses what I believe is its fatal flaw, comes from Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* and Maria Lugones's *Toward a Decolonial Feminism*. In these works, they both describe a new way of looking at the decolonial effort that allows for the inclusion of many different peoples and their perspective without destroying the core necessities of Fanon's original theory. They both discuss the necessity of allowing for and understanding different viewpoints and issues in the decolonial effort. Mohanty focusses on how to construct "imagined communities" and relationships between these disparate groups, while Lugones discusses how dichotomy enforced by colonialism is flawed, reductionist and useless.

Primarily, these two thinkers allow for a multicultural understanding of the fight or revolution against decolonialism instead of Fanon's method of lumping everyone into the same category. In fact, both Mohanty and Lugones believe such a method is antithetical to the very idea of decolonialism. It is ridiculous to think that every person fighting against decolonialism can be united under the same flag or the same methods. A U.S. decolonizer skilled in race and class studies will be useless in the caste-based system of oppression in India if they try to use the methods that they were taught. Mohanty articulates the idea that each decolonial situation requires its own solution that has arisen out of study and understanding of that particular

situation. Both add a level of nuance to Fanon's original theory of dichotomy. While Fanon presents accepting Manichean Logic as necessary to decolonize, but antithetical to rebuilding and with no clear explanation of how to remove it, Mohanty and Chandra propose a different version of the dichotomous reality Fanon implies. Where Fanon describes decolonialism as an us vs. them fight, where both categories are homogeneous (the colonized vs. colonizers), Mohanty and Lugones describe the decolonized as a group full of many different peoples and cultures which do not fit into one homogenous category. Mohanty describes how each colonial situation is unique and requires its own solution, Lugones posits that decolonization revolves around people who don't fit into the clear dichotomous categories. Fighting against colonialism requires one to accept that Manichean Logic cannot fully describe the world we live in. Therefore, once colonialism has been defeated or expunged, society will naturally fall into the disparate and harmonious cultures that Fanon discussed. Neither Lugones or Mohanty is denying the existence or effect of Manichean Logic, they are simply arguing against its application when decolonizing. Since Manichean Logic is so prevalent and important to colonialism, it makes sense that an effective way to decolonize would be to stop participating in Manichean Logic. However, even though both Mohanty and Lugones agree about a more nuanced approach to Manichean Logic, they have their own perspectives on how decolonialism itself should be implemented.

Mohanty focuses on the creation and application of distinct and different solutions to the colonial issues many people face all across the world. She argues for localized political analyses from within the context and situation which create effective strategies against the unique forms of exploitation and oppression (Mohanty, pp. 11). Because of this, Mohanty argues for a version of decolonialism that is not homogeneous (Mohanty 2003, p. 19). One issue with this version of decolonialism is that it makes it more difficult for disparate individuals to assist each other (e.g

how does a woman in the U.S help a woman in Zimbabwe or vice versa). In order to solve this issue, Mohanty introduces the concept of “imagined communities” and “potential alliances and collaborations across divisive borders” (Mohanty, pp. 46). She refers to these communities as “imagined” because they are not based on the classic conception of community like biological or sociological homogeneity and are instead based on common goals and aspirations, such as Christians, Muslims and Jews coming together to get clean water in Flint, Michigan (Mohanty 2003, pp. 46). Furthermore, Mohanty describes how these communities can come together to form a larger coalition. Mohanty says that just as common goals can unite people from drastically different walks of life, so too can large scale oppression unite communities across divisive boundaries (Mohanty, pp. 47). Overall, Mohanty argues for a form of decolonialism that both accepts that people are different and allows them to work together for something greater. Her theory argues that people should work together with those who have faced similar problems and who have similar aspirations, regardless of skin color, geographic location or any other limiting factor. Since the communities are formed by the people within them instead of by gathering all the people with an arbitrary characteristic, her theory also avoids the issue of people joining these communities just because they say ‘I have quality X, therefore you have to let me in,’ which allows for these many groups to be full of people who are invested and dedicated to removing whatever oppression they have come together to defeat.

In Maria Lugones' article *Toward a Decolonial Feminism* she expands upon Fanon's idea of Manichean Logic, specifically focusing on how it affects feminism. She also introduces the idea of a “fractured locus” from which people can fight against the hegemony. Lugones never directly references Manichean Logic, but she does say that “Modernity organizes the world ontologically in terms of . . . homogenous, separable categories” which I am treating as the same

as Manichean Logic (Lugones, pp. 742). Lugones holds many of the same views as Fanon, saying that the dichotomies were “imposed on the colonized in service of Western man” and that “judging the colonized . . . from the[ir] point of view. . . justified enormous cruelty” which mirrors Fanon's idea of colonial imposition and his ideas of the necessity of Manichean Logic (Lugones, pp. 743, 744). However, where Lugones and Fanon differ is their opinion of the decolonizers. Fanon believed that the decolonizers must be united and accept the hegemonic category of *us*; Lugones believes that “one resists it [colonialism] from within a way of understanding the world and living it that is shared and that can understand one’s actions,” or, that resisting colonialism is only possible through accepting that individuals live different lives and experience oppression in different ways (Lugones, pp. 754). Lugones furthers this by introducing the idea of the “fractured locus,” which allows individuals to “perceive doubly, relate doubly” and who exist “where the ‘sides’ of the locus are in tension” (Lugones 2010, pp. 748). Using this concept, Lugones reinforces the ideas that Mohanty discusses, specifically those of multiplicity and accepting differences. Overall, Lugones does her own examination of the dichotomies that Fanon introduces, and then finally decides that the only way to destroy these imposed dichotomies is for people to accept that they exist outside or in between the dichotomies and to embrace that identity.

By looking at Mohanty’s and Lugones’s new perspectives on Fanon’s concept of Manichean Logic, we can determine some of the flaws of this theory and how, while the core of his theory is still integral to decolonial theory, the applications of this theory that Fanon suggests are self-destructive and cannot be used to actually decolonize. Fanon argues that the colonizer imposed a dichotomous logic, which he calls Manichean Logic, on the colonized and that a decolonial society must extricate itself from these dichotomies to move past colonialism. These

are ideas that Lugones, Mohanty, and many other decolonial thinkers agree with. However, Fanon's next point, that Manichean Logic is necessary for the decolonial revolution, is rejected by both Lugones and Mohanty.

Fanon himself argues that Manichean Logic is antithetical to a post-colonial society, but he does make the connection that this means any decolonial revolution must not be Manichean in nature. Both Lugones and Mohanty express, in different ways, the idea that decolonialism can only be achieved by accepting the differences between individuals and their experiences. I second their opinion because I think that it will be more difficult to destroy Manichean Logic after an ideological or physical revolution (the path that Fanon suggests) than if we destroyed it as an act of rebellion (the path that Lugones and Mohanty suggest). In fact, it seems as if a possible outcome of Fanon's decolonial revolution is merely another form of colonialism. While we should not reject a theory merely because a bad outcome might happen, Fanon does articulate a reason why his revolution will not fall into the same traps as colonialism. An important thing to remember is that all three thinkers accept the premise that colonizers are a hegemonic and homogeneous group, what they disagree on is how the people rebelling can be categorized (or can't be). According to Mohanty and Lugones, colonialism is monolithic and the best way to fight against it is by accepting the differences between individuals.

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