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Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, 'psychopolitics' and critical psychology

Chapter

4

Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, 'psychopolitics' and critical psychology

Derek Hook

'Liberate yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves shall free our minds.'

Bob Marley

'The most powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.'

Steve Biko

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

▷   Define and understand what is meant by the colonial and the post-colonial

▷   Discuss what is meant by a 'psychopolitics', and hence elaborate on how Fanon's work may be understood as a kind of critical psychology

▷   Explain the concepts of political consciousness, psychological reductionism and Négritude, as important theoretical contexts to Fanon's thought

▷   Explain how Fanon adapts the theoretical notion of alienation, along with the concepts of estrangement, depersonalisation, internalisation and the sociogenetic basis of psychopathology to explain the damaging effects of a 'white mask psychology'

▷   Outline the basic tenets of Steve Biko's approach to Black Consciousness.

INTRODUCTION: THE 'PSYCHOPOLITICS' OF FANON

Perhaps Frantz Fanon's greatest source of originality as a critical theorist lies in *his combination of psychology and politics.* This overlapping of political and psychological forms of analysis is seen in the fact that Fanon approaches the problems of national liberation and social revolution *from the vantage point of psychopathology,* and the problems of personal identity *through a sustained focus on the violence of the colonial encounter* (McCulloch, 1983). To put this more precisely:

Frantz Fanon

> All of Fanon's work falls into that category where the sciences of personality and the sciences of society converge ... [in an attempt] to traverse the distance between an analysis of the consciousness of the individual and the analysis of social institutions (McCulloch, 1983, 206–207).

That Fanon moves between the sociopolitical and the psychological, each as a means of critiquing the other, means that his work has a lot to offer contemporary critical psychology, especially from within a South African context. This chapter focuses on what we might call the '**psychopolitics**' of Frantz Fanon as a way of exploring opportunities for critical psychology. The notion of 'psychopolitics' (as it has been applied by Lebeau (1998), amongst others) may be taken as referring to the *explicit politicisation of the psychological.* Such a politicisation can take at least three related forms. It may refer to the critical process by which we place a series of ostensibly psychological concerns and concepts within the **register** of the political and thereby show up the extent to which human psychology is intimately linked to, and in some ways conditioned or limited by, the sociopolitical and historical forces of its situation. Similarly, such a politicisation may refer to the critical process by which we employ psychological concepts, explanations and even modes of experience to describe and illustrate the workings of power. The hope in this respect is that by being able to analyse the political in such a psychological way, we may be able to think strategically about how we should intervene in 'the life of power'. Extending this idea (thirdly), it might be argued that we can put certain forms of psychology to actual political work, that we can use both the concepts and the understandings of psychology, *and* the actual terms of psychological experience, *as a means of consolidating resistances to power.*

Fanon's 'critical psychology', I shall argue, manages all of these objectives. By examining some of the debilitating personality and identity effects of trying to understand oneself, as a black man or woman within the system of values of white or European culture, Fanon shows how what might otherwise be understood within a purely psychological framework is far better explained in political terms, that is, with reference to understandings of violence, power and subordination. In doing this, Fanon is also, albeit strategically, *using*
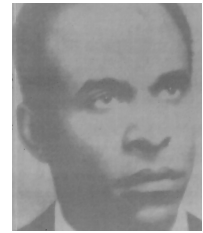
Psychopolitics: critical awareness of the role that political factors (ie relations of power) play *within* the domain of the psychological. An understanding of both how politics impacts upon the psychological and how personal psychology may be the level at which politics is internalised and individually entrenched.

Register: particular vocabulary, or conceptual framework, stemming from a particular school of thought and/or criticism.

psychological concepts to political ends, that is, to draw attention to the true extent and damage of colonial/political oppression.

Not only does Fanon bring politics into psychology; he also *brings psychology into politics* by analysing power through a series of psychoanalytic conceptualisations which help to dramatise the working and the logic of such forms of power, in particular that of colonial racism. The objective of such psychological descriptions is to subject such forms of power to critique, to understand them better so as to challenge them more effectively. Here I am referring to Fanon's analysis of the 'psychic life of the colonial encounter'. Fanon's work also urges us further to consider how we might explore psycho-logical concepts, like the terms of everyday experience, to be used as instruments of a progressive politics. Here, I shall argue, the objective is to understand how a kind of psychology might *inform a politics of resistance.* In this respect, as a way of both extending Fanon and integrating these debates into the sociopolitical history of racism in South Africa, I shall make reference to the writing of Steve Biko. This chapter will hence focus both on *the politics of psychology in the colonial context* (by focusing on the work of Fanon) and on *the psychology and the politics of resistance* (by focusing on Biko's approach to Black Consciousness). In the chapter that follows I consider Fanon's approach to the *'psychic life' of colonial power.* Before I move on to these discussions, however, it is useful to contextualise this chapter properly, first by providing some information on the work and history of Frantz Fanon and then by consid-ering the theoretical approach to criticism known as post-colonialism.

Why Fanon?

Frantz Fanon was a psychiatrist and revolutionary, born in the French colony of Martinique, who dedicated much of his life to the liberation of Algeria from France (see Julien, 1995; Macey, 2000a). Among other achievements, he was responsible for the influential books *Black skin, white masks* (1986, originally published 1952) and *The wretched of the earth* (1990, originally published 1961). These texts exerted a foundational influence on what would later become the field of post-colonial theory and criticism. (Although Fanon is typi-cally considered an *anti-colonial* theorist, his writings have come to bear such a formidable influence on the later generation of post-colonial thinkers that it is legitimate to group his ideas within this rubric, that is, that of the post-colonial.) Fanon is useful to us here not only because of the fact that he has been massively influential in constituting the field of post-colonial critique but also because of all the writers working within this field, Fanon has taken perhaps the most explicitly *psychological* analyses of race and racialised power. *Black skin, white masks* is Fanon's crucial text in this regard, and hence I shall treat it as the central point of reference in what is to follow. In addition I shall make ample reference to Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan (1979, 1980a, 1980b,

1985), a prominent scholar of Fanon, who has provided one of the most valuable commentaries on Fanon from within psychology.

How can we understand 'the post-colonial'?

Having briefly introduced Fanon, it is important to contextualise what is meant by the post-colonial. This is a difficult task, for there is a series of hard-fought debates as to the nature and value of 'the post-colonial'. Indeed, as Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (1995) and Macey (2000a) have reiterated, this term has come to mean many different things to many different people, so much so in fact that the term is in danger of losing its effective meaning altogether. Perhaps the most obvious use of the term is as a basic historical label to indicate a period of history immediately following the age of European colonial expansion. This is the period, largely coinciding with the end of the Second World War, in which colonial powers increasingly began to grant independence to former colonies. Importantly, the granting of independence did not simply bring to an end colonial politics or the forms of violence and conflict that had characterised them. As Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (1995) warn: 'All post-colonial societies are still subject in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination, and independence has not solved this problem' (2). So although the terms of Fanon's analysis are principally those of the colonial situation, they still usefully inform post-colonial periods, which are never fully separable from their colonial past.
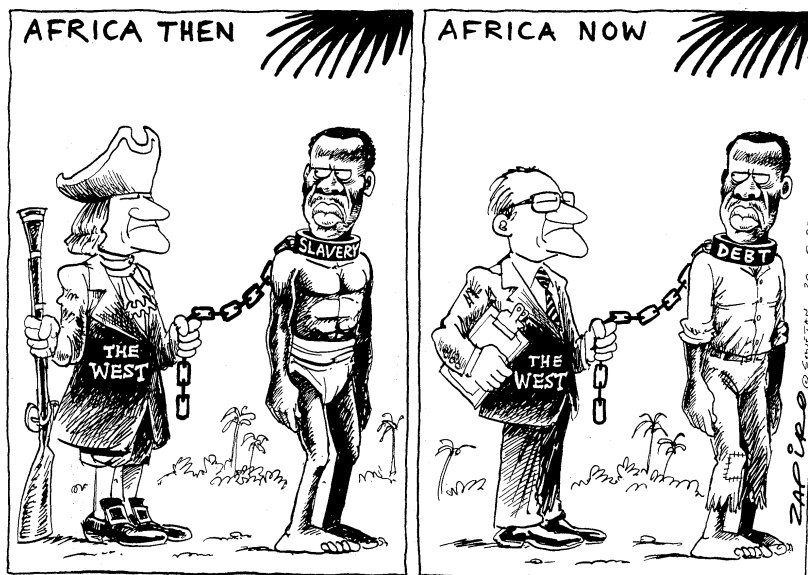
All post-colonial societies are still subject in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination.

More than just a historical period, the term 'post-colonial' denotes a partic-
ular critical orientation to understanding the relationship between colonisers
and colonised, and the psychological, material and cultural effects of these
relationships. Van Zyl (1998) provides one of the most useful shorthand defi-
nitions of the post-colonial from within a South African perspective. She
(1998) views post-colonialism as *a critical perspective* that aims to understand
the relationships of *domination* and/or *resistance* that manifest when one
culture (typically Western) 'owns' or controls another (typically Eastern or
African) culture, *even after the era of formalised Colonialism has ended.* Here
it is useful to add a further caveat, that is, a distinction between colonialism
and imperialism. Said (1978) distinguishes between the two by suggesting that
colonialism is the physical, material and typically violent practice of dispos-
sessing people of their native territory. Imperialism, by contrast, is the broader
theoretical and ideological basis that attempts to justify such actions (Said,
1978; 1993). A useful formulation, again drawing on Said (1979), is that *impe-
rialism is the theory, colonialism the practice* of forcibly appropriating and
controlling non-Western territories (of both physical and psychological kinds)
into subordinate versions of European or American society. This, incidentally,
is a helpful way of understanding how the legacy of colonialism continues into
the post-colonial era, because quite clearly, imperialism as an ideological form
of cultural and economic dominance continues far beyond the cessation of
formal colonial rule. Because this chapter focuses on Fanon's discussion of
colonisation, we shall follow his terminology as that of *colonial* dominance,
although the pertinence of his terms of analysis to more properly imperialist
contexts is obvious.

It is also important that we realise here the importance of this approach to
South Africa. For, as Bertoldi (1998) points out, apartheid may be considered
a particular extension or variation of the basic politics and conditions of colo-
nialism. Similarly, Wolpe (1975) considered South Africa a 'colonial society of
a special type', and saw apartheid as a form of 'internal colonialism'. In a
similar way, we might consider the current post-apartheid period as a particu-
larly South African variant of the broader post-colonial era; South Africa as
such is a very particular 'post-colony'.

THE POLITICS OF PSYCHOLOGY IN THE COLONIAL CONTEXT

Historical specificity

Fanon opens his analysis of racial identity in *Black skin, white masks* with two
vital qualifications. This first concerns the sociopolitical specificity of the
domain of his analysis. The second – extending the first – concerns the dangers
of making broad or universalising psychological generalisations. In definitive
terms he states '[m]y observations and my conclusions are valid only for the

Antilles' (1968, 14). Clearly, Fanon is acutely aware of the *time* and *place* of the objects of his analysis – here the colonial era of French-controlled Martinique *circa* the Second World War. What is important here is Fanon's insistence on strong, *historically grounded* terms of analysis in psychological theorising – a critical dimension often absent in universalising kinds of psychological theory. Also of note here is Fanon's awareness of *the variability of human subjectivity.* Indeed, for Fanon one cannot take up psychological questions, such as questions of identity, *outside the consideration of their specific social, historical, political and economic contexts.* These contexts are so much part of an individual's 'psychology' that, as Marxist approaches warn (see Grahame Hayes' chapter: Marxism and critical psychology), the individual does not exist apart from such contexts. Traditional psychology frequently isolates individuals from these contexts – examining them as if their own internal psychology was all that mattered. It is precisely this kind of approach that Fanon's work sets out to avoid. And it is in view of Fanon's attempt to involve political factors fully – that is, the role of relations of power – *within the field of the psychological* that his psychology might be thought of as a 'psychopolitics' (Lebeau, 1998).

BOX 1   Fanon in South Africa

Given the two warnings to psychology above, of *the importance of specific sociopolitical and historical forms of analysis*, and of *culturally appropriate, non-universalising forms of explanation and theory,* we should be cautious of applying too quickly the terms of Fanon's analysis to the South African situation. Fanon's concepts *do* provide us with a valuable starting-point, a basic conceptual vocabulary that we might choose to draw on where appropriate. Nevertheless, we should undertake our own forms of analysis and critique of racial identities in the particularity of the post-apartheid South African context.

One should note here, however, that both Fanon (1986, 1990) and Bulhan (1979, 1980a, 1985) make repeated reference to apartheid South Africa in their writings. Furthermore, as is discussed below, critical Fanonian concepts feature strongly in the work of Steve Biko and the *Black Consciousness Movement*. Not only did Fanonian concepts make their influence felt in South Africa, it was, as Gibson (2000) notes, the post-Soweto (1976) arrival of South African exiles in London (in particular here, members of the Black Consciousness Movement) that began to revitalise and popularise elsewhere Fanon's ideas as forms of practical politics.

The politics of racial identity

Although Fanon emphasises that his analysis in *Black skin, white masks* is necessarily *psychological* in nature, psychoanalytic even, he also reiterates that the 'effective disalienation of the black man entails an immediate recognition of social and economic realities' (1968, 12–13). Fanon's point is that, if we are to understand the disruptive or psychopathological nature of racial identity, we will need to understand it as the outcome of a *double process.* Racial identity, for Fanon, is primarily sociopolitical, and only subsequently – once

such effects have been internalised – *psychological* (Fanon, 1986). Sociopolitical factors hence set limits of sorts to the kinds of identity we have available to us. Not only is Fanon's a very social conceptualisation of identity, it is also a very political and materialist conceptualisation, one that he will develop significantly in his later writing such as *The wretched of the earth.* Importantly, although Fanon continually emphasises the importance of external social, historical and political factors in the formation of racial identity, he does not 'reduce away' a focus on psychological questions.

The point of Fanon's 'psychopolitics' is exactly to take into account both factors (that is, the psychological and the political) *and their reciprocal and combined effects.* Crucially, one should understand, first, *how politics impacts upon the psychological.* More than this, though, one should similarly attempt to understand *how personal psychology may repeat, internalise and further entrench such political effects at the level of personal identity.* Fanon's project in *Black skin, white masks,* then, might be seen as tracing the interchange between personal psychology, on the one hand, and social-political forces of influence, on the other. The unique challenge of this task lies in not separating these two 'poles' – these two points of analysis – too far. The objective, rather, is to blur these boundaries in some ways, to discern the effects of the political *within* the psychological, to understand how the psychological (be it in terms of conceptual tools or *lived experience*) might count also as a means of the political.

Political change in South Africa brought the politics of racial identity and racism into sharp perspective.

Eurocentricity and universalising theory

For Fanon psychology in general tends to neglect precisely the economic, social, and historical levels of analysis in its attempts to understand the individual, psychopathology and psychological development. A related problem in much orthodox psychology is the making of broad generalisations, the fact that it too glibly assumes the universality of US-American and Eurocentric concepts and principles. In fact, the assumed universality of certain concepts and principles is one way in which Eurocentric and therefore dominating, colonising modes of thought come to be reinscribed in post-colonial contexts. As a number of post-colonial critics have pointed out, colonial and post-colonial relations of power are reiterated exactly through the tendency to 'universalize particularisms' (Hitchcott, 1993; Moore-Gilbert, 1997). Hold-stock makes this point in straightforward terms: 'It is important to keep in mind that the theories and the principles assumed to be universal in psychology derive from research on white Americans, mostly males, who constitute a small percentage of the world's population' (2000, 208). Hence the history, traditions and cultural values of subordinated groups are dismissed – if not altogether obliterated – as such groups are assimilated into the cultural norms and ideals of the dominating culture (Ahmad, 1992; Fuss, 1994; Hitchcott, 1993; Moore-Gilbert, 1997).

As Bulhan (1980a) rightly points out, these universalising trends postulated a particular type of human psychological reality, namely that of the bourgeois, white, European male, as the *ideal* condition of people everywhere. Models such as these then come to act as the yardstick for all people at all times; a standard against which all other subjects came to be judged. Hence 'Conformity or deviation from this class- and culturally-specific reality ... became the absolute criterion for health and pathology ...' (Bulhan, 1980a, 260–261). Expressing this concern in a slightly different way, Edward Said (1978) speaks of how colonisation makes native peoples foreigners, or cultural minorities, in their own country, by marginalising the experiences or norms of their culture to the imposed standards and values of the invading culture.

Experience as a political term

The task Fanon sets himself in *Black skin, white masks* is that of describing, as vividly as possible, *the lived experience of the black subject.* In attempting to achieve this, Fanon draws on a rich tapestry of different sources, including psychoanalysis, literary (and poetic) texts, medical terminology, existential philosophy and **Négritude**. Importantly, in attempting to describe *lived experience,* Fanon is not looking at experience in the banal sense of the term. He is considering a domain of experience that is deeply enmeshed in the world of which it is part, in Macey's (2000a) terms, a profound sense of 'living through'

Négritude:
literary movement celebrating black culture and essentially black forms of expression.

the social conditions which define a particular time and place. One way of understanding how Fanon means 'lived experience' here is through the idea of a **political consciousness**, that is, an acute awareness both of *how one is crucially a part of the world and its conditions* and of how one can and should attempt *to change that world on the basis of a carefully considered political project.* Put differently, one might understand a political consciousness as an awareness of the political dimension (that is, the power-relations) under-scoring virtually all facets of day-to-day life. This term – political conscious-ness – helps us to understand how for Fanon the field of psychological phenomena always deserves a political level of analysis – quite simply because all aspects of day-to-day life are conditioned, by power-relationships such as that of racism.

Racist objectification

One of the reasons that Fanon so prioritises race in his analysis is that it comes to act as the overriding, the *essential* and *determining* quality of identity within colonial contexts. European existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, a prodigious influence on Fanon's writings, famously announced that 'existence precedes essence', meaning to suggest, amongst other things, that one should not tie one's identity, or that of others, to predetermined qualities, prejudices or stereotypes. The experience of living as a minority – racial or otherwise – within a dominant or racist culture, is to live the reverse of this adage – to live the experience of one's '*essence preceding one's existence*'. In this connection Fanon (1986) relates an incident where a white child sees him on a train:

> 'Look, a Negro!' It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by ...
> 'Look, a Negro!' It was true. It amused me.
> 'Look, a Negro!' The circle was drawing a bit tighter ...
> 'Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!' Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me (111–112).

Fanon describes this situation in very evocative language, as a kind of 'ampu-tation, an excision, a haemorrhage that splatter[s] my body with black blood' (1986, 112). It is an experience in which, as Wyrick (1998) depicts it, an entire history of racial stereotypes and colonial oppression reasserts itself, one in which the black subject feels himself 'sealed into a crushing objecthood' beneath the white gaze (Fanon, 1986, 110). Here Fanon feels himself radically objectified, imprisoned by his race. His subjectivity, along with his ability to represent or define himself, is dissipated, evaporated, destroyed. Who he is becomes nothing more than a function of his race. He is held responsible for his body, his skin colour, his racial history. Hence 'it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me' (1986, 134). The black subject, as such, becomes 'the eternal

victim of an essence, of an appearance for which [she or he] is not responsible' (Fanon, 1986, 35).

What is particularly important for Fanon here is the *inescapability of one's blackness.* He refers here to Sartre's thoughts on anti-Semitisim, which suggest that because Jews have come to internalise the stereotypes others have of them – even if only to try to contest them – they have become 'over-determined' from within. Put differently, they have come to objectify themselves in much the same way that, as suggested above, the black subject has to, that is, they have come to understand themselves in the terms provided by the racist and hostile culture in which they live. There is a crucial difference here, though: whereas the Jew can 'be unknown in his Jewishness ... [and can] go unnoticed', because, after all, he is white, the black subject cannot but be seen and identified, hence defined by his race. What Fanon is emphasising here is that blackness comes to function as a fixed essence both in speech and appearance, one comes to 'speak' one's race, to 'appear' it. And, of course, in the case of the latter one cannot mask one's race, conceal it ... Hence one is 'overdetermined from without' (1986, 16). The evidence of the blackness of one's identity is there, unalterable, to 'torment ... pursue ... disturb ... anger' the black subject (117).

Racial alienation

Keeping the above example in mind, it is important now that we turn to the notion of racial alienation. The psychological violence experienced by Fanon in the above encounter is such that he is barely able to describe it, explain it, break it down or make it plain. It is partly for this reason that, again demon-strating his indebtedness to Marxism, Fanon takes to the notion of *alienation* as his principal means of understanding racial identity. This notion of alien-ation helps him to describe what we might understand to be the 'multiple psychological violences' of the racist encounter.

Alienation, however, is a broad and dynamic concept, one with a formi-dable conceptual history (Zahar, 1969). The particular importance for us of this concept (and particularly Fanon's use of it) is that it provides a means *of relating experience to social conditions,* of linking *personal-subjective* and *sociohistorical* domains, and of doing so in a way that produces critique (Bulhan, 1985; Zahar, 1969). Fanon uses the concept in just this way, as thinking the connections – or articulations – between an individual's *internal world,* and the external world of the *constraining social, economic or political structures* that surround and contain them.

Guarding against psychological reductionism

This is a level of relationship that has typically been ignored, or sidelined, by much traditional US-American and Eurocentric psychology's focus on the isolated, singular individual. As Holmes & Lindley (1989) have argued – in

tones reminiscent of the anti-psychiatry movement (*cf* Cooper, 1967, Goffman, 1968; 1973; Laing, 1959; Laing & Esterson, 1964; Scheff, 1966; Szasz, 1973, 1984) – the sum total of much applied psychology has been to *depoliticise* the terms of human experience, to reframe problems stemming from sociopolitical contexts as stemming from within, and falling to the responsibility of, the isolated individual. Similarly, Salmon (1991) suggests that much psychology affirms the primacy of inner events at the cost of paying attention to how determining political or cultural realities actually shape personal experience. Pilgrim (1991, 1994) calls this evasion of the sociopolitical background and the reduction of social structures to inner feelings and psychological states 'psychological reductionism'. Fanon's approach to psychology is formulated with exactly these problems in mind. Rather than seeking to discover human psychology through instinctual, genetic or intrapsychic reductionism, claims Bulhan (1979, 1980a, 1985), Fanon's project in psychology was to outline *how inseparably enmeshed the individual was in their sociohistorical and cultural context.* Continuing, Bulhan notes that

> [Fanon] was convinced that psychological theories that ignore the central role of the social order tend to blame the victim and also negate the human capacity to transform the social order and human psychology (1985, 195).

Alienation and estrangement

A second basic aspect of the notion of alienation is the idea of estrangement. This idea features centrally in what is perhaps the best known account of alienation, that of Karl Marx. For Marx, alienation is the result, particularly characteristic of modern capitalism, of the separation of the worker from the products of his or her labour. In his conceptualisation: what the worker produces they do not own, or ultimately have control over. Their labour hence takes on a life of its own, which is alien and even threatening. The products produced by the worker are lost to them, appropriated by the employer, which leads to a state of estrangement and alienation on the part of the worker. This alienation of labour leads, as Macey (2000b) summarises, to a loss of reality, to the situation where human beings are estranged from their own bodies, from the natural world and from their potentially universal essences.

Importantly, in the original Marxist conception alienation is not an 'experience'; it is rather a *real material process of separation.* It is important that we make this point, because otherwise we risk psychologising away an economic/material form of crisis. This, of course, is not Fanon's aim. His objective is not to supersede an economic/material analysis with a psychological analysis, but rather to emphasise also, in addition, the psychological dimension to such events, to call attention to the full ramifications of the lived experience and identity of the individual.

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Social rupture

The concept of alienation emphasises a sense of rupture – estrangement – in the relationship between the individual and those things, objects and people around him or her. This estrangement is not only that of the individual from the world, but also, in a very powerful way, *that of the individual person's ability properly to understand him-* or *herself and their social predicament.* Here it is important to pay attention to how Fanon adapts the concept of alienation to his purposes. For Marx, the root causes of alienation reside in the substructure of society, and particularly in the alienation of productive labour engendered by a capitalist mode of production. Therefore, when the worker's labour is alienated, so too is his or her 'humanness'. In different terms, because of alienated labour, the 'being' of the worker remains alien to him and all others.

For Fanon, *race,* and the various social practices and meanings attached to it, proves to be the pivot of alienation rather than productive labour. As Bulhan (1985) rightly notes, Fanon's application favours *psychological* and *cultural* dimensions rather than *economic* and *class* dimensions. Clearly, as a psychiatrist, Fanon was interested in an exposition of alienation from a *psychological* perspective (Bulhan, 1985). One can then be estranged, from one's 'humanness', from one's own body and sense of self, from a sense even of belonging to one's people, *all on the basis of race.* In many ways, this is perhaps the most consistent theme throughout *Black skin, white masks,* that of dehumanisation, that of the inability, because of various forms of racism and cultural dispossession, to settle on any kind of authentic identity.

Fanon is here making recourse to psychological terms of analysis to describe, and to critique, the dehumanising features not only of racism but of sociocultural and political marginalisation more generally. Indeed, it is through the basic concept of alienation – understood as the processes by which individuals are distanced from the values, products, meanings and self-understandings they produce, the means through which they effectively become strangers to themselves – that Fanon begins to rethink the notion of psychopathology.

'Colonising the mind'

To be a colonised subject, or the subject of cultural oppression or racism, in Fanon's (1968) account, is to be continually fed with cultural values and understandings *which are not one's own,* which are primarily hostile, *and which consistently de-evaluate both me and my culture.* It means to exist in a state of little or no cultural resources of my own, because they have been eradicated by the cultural imperialism of the coloniser. As Wyrick (1998) emphasises, racism (as one example) erases the black past, devalues black thinking, denies black

BOX 2   Dimensions of alienation

It is important that we retain an awareness of the tremendous conceptual and historical resonance of the notion of alienation, that we do not apply it too glibly. Whilst it is perhaps the theoretical term most useful to the analysis of oppression, it has become, in Bulhan's (1985) terms, an omnibus diagnosis for economic, social, psychological and existential malaise. For these reasons it is vital to provide a brief sketch of this conceptual terrain in relation to Fanon's own application of the term which Bulhan (1985) manages admirably:

> Fanon ... used alienation as a descriptive, diagnostic, and prescriptive guide. His application had a Marxian influence, even though he chose to emphasise some aspects (ie psychological and cultural) more than others (ie economic and class). ... There are four major aspects to alienation in the Marxian formulation: a) man's [sic] alienation from *nature,* b) man's alienation from *himself,* c) man's alienation from his *species-being,* and d) man's alienation from *man* (186).

Bulhan (1985) moves on to describe each of these four dimensions of the notion of alienation:

> The first aspect Marx referred to as 'estrangement from the thing', which means the alienation of the worker from the *product* of his labour – that is, the alienation of that which mediates his relation to the 'sensual external world' and hence to the objects of nature. What the worker produces is not his own, but rather someone else's; it meets not his but alien needs; it is a commodity he sells to eke out a bare existence. The more he produces, the more his product and hence the objects of nature stand opposed to him (186).

If this first dimension of alienation refers to the processes of exploitation where the external world and its objects come to stand in opposition to the worker, the second dimension of the concept refers to the worker's relation to his own work:

The second aspect Mark referred to as 'self-estrangement', which emphasises the worker's relation *to the act of production* itself. The process by which he produces permits him no satisfaction. His 'life activity', which should be spontaneous, free, and creative, is coerced, controlled, and regulated. He engages in work not for its own sake, as an expression of his essential *being* or of his natural activity, but for a wage to permit him only animal existence – eating, drinking, sleeping, etc. In consequence, the worker is alienated from his own activity, which is also alienation from his body, cognition and affect. He is alienated from himself (186–187).

We see here how Marx's concept is building in complexity, from the world of objects, to the world of actions, the worker comes to experience himself as almost 'outside of life'.

> The third aspect refers to the negation of human essence inasmuch as the worker is denied actualisation of his inherent human potentials through activity. That is, man expresses, objectifies, and duplicates his 'species-being', his human essence, through his labour, affirming not only his personality, but also the humanity he shares with others. Without his life-activity, everything about him remains implicit, unrealized, and unrecognized. When his labour is alienated, so too is his 'humanness'. Through activity, he leaves his mark in the world, transforming objects around him, which in turn transform him. Because of alienated labour, his being remains alien to him and to all others (187).

Whereas the third aspect emphasises alienation from mankind in general, the fourth aspect concerns alienation from specific others, by virtue of class contradictions:

> [T]he fourth aspect refers to estrangement of man from other men ... It should be stressed that at the conceptual kernel of the Marxian formulation is a ... reciprocity between man, productive activity, and nature. A threefold interaction permeates

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> **BOX 2   Dimensions of alienation *(continued)***
>
> these constituent parts. Man is part of nature, but he also humanises nature. With his activity, he creates and is created. Capitalism divides society into private property and owner, on the one hand, and wage labour and worker, on the other. It is to this antagonistic opposition of man against man, with the violence and degradation it entails, that the fourth aspect of alienation refers (187).
>
> Importantly, then, we can now see the density of this conceptual term, and all that Marx
>
> intends when he puts it to use. To reiterate, all four dimensions of alienation reduce to characteristics of 'alienated labour'. This, for Marx, is because the root causes of alienation reside in the substructure of society, and most centrally the alienation of productive labour as engendered by a capitalist mode of production. One should bear in mind, though, that the effects of this alienation are profound and multiple (as described above) and reverberate throughout all domains of social and psychological life.

individuality. What we now get a sense of is the debilitating psychological or *identity effects* of such processes. *To know myself in the oppressor's terms* is to be continually at the risk of using racist formulations as a way of understanding self – of unintentionally objectifying oneself *in terms of these racist values.*

Again here we confront the problem of the universalising trends of colonial or imperial forms of domination – the widespread imposition of supposedly global standards of value – that are really those of a select white US-American and European group. In other words, the black subject is, right from the start, 'predetermined' to fall short of these norms, by virtue of how culturally specific they are. 'Black people, then, abandon themselves individually and collectively in quest of white acceptance. The quest is inherently and ultimately futile; it results primarily in solidifying deep and disturbing feelings of inferiority' (Wyrick, 1998, 29). The theme of internalised kinds of inferiority, socially induced inferiority complexes, is one which Fanon repeatedly returns to, and it is one of the most important ways in which he thinks about the real damage, on the level of identity, the mass victimisation and enforced by dominant racist cultures on those they colonise.

Cultural dissonance

What Fanon is here attempting to impart to the critical consciousness of his readers is a sharp awareness of the continual sense of dissonance within the colonised subject, which occurs between ego and culture, self and society. This is a lesson very much at the basis of post-colonial critique, a continual awareness of the dislocation between the ideals, the norms of the valorised Western culture, and those of the dominated culture, which comes to be the demoted *Other* of all of these values. This constant and recurring slippage is pathogenic

for Fanon in the sense that it causes a deeply rooted sense of inferiority, a constantly problematised sense of identity which is split and at war with itself, causing 'pathologies of liberty', as Fanon (1990) calls them.

It is thus by tracing *the micro-level psychological impacts* of various kinds of structural oppression in this way that Fanon understands colonialism not only as a means of appropriating land and territory but of appropriating culture and history themselves and, more pertinently perhaps, as a way of appropriating the means and resources of identity, and hence effecting *powerful forms psychological damage.* The colonisation of a land, its people, its culture, is also, in short, a 'colonizing of the mind', in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1986) famous phrase. In similar terms, Bulhan (1980, 1985) argues that racial alienation is the counterpart of economic enslavement. Whereas the slave trade had uprooted bodies and transported them to alien lands, such forms of 'deracination' dislocate psyches, and impose an alien worldview on them. In his own words: 'the uprooting of psyches from their culture to their insertion into another, in which the basic values [are] prowhite and antiblack, elicit[s] a victimisation difficult to quantify, but very massive' (Bulhan, 1985, 189). It is this broad psychological level of affect that Aimé Césaire (1972) has in mind when he describes the impact of colonialism in the following terms: 'I am talking of millions of men who have been skillfully infected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, debasement' (cited in Fanon, 1986, 14).

Lactification: idea of the possibility of moderating one's race, of lessening the degree of one's blackness, and 'becoming more white'. This is a desire which Fanon sees as damaging and pathological.

| **BOX 3** | **'Degrees' of race, the whitening of the black subject** |

What Fanon's idea of **lactification** suggests, perhaps contrary to our expectations, is that race need not work simply as an 'all or nothing' category. In certain instances, it would seem that we are working with a *hierarchy* of racial identities, with *degrees* of whiteness and blackness. The black subject hence, for Fanon (1986) becomes proportionately white, and closer to being a real human being, in direct ratio to his mastery of a white language, his acquisition of white culture and the attaining of a certain level of wealth. Put differently, one might say that the dynamics of race intersect with dynamics of class, so that it is understood that 'one is white above a certain class' (Fanon, 1986, 44). European accents, figures of speech, fashions, modes of dress – all of these come to act as 'signals of class' which contribute, in the colonised subject, to a feeling of equality with the European, to an apparent *lessening* of one's blackness. As true as these observations might seem, one should point out that where racial categories have been essentialised (as to be discussed below) then race becomes an inescapable category. So even if one is able to lessen one's blackness considerably, one will never be totally white, totally accepted by the colonising culture. Of course, it is also important to mention here that a dynamics of race is overlaid not only by a dynamics of class, but also by a dynamics of ethnicity, that Fanon notes that in the Antilles it was understood that Senegalese were considered to be *more black,* so to speak, that is, less civilised than the native inhabitants of Martinique. In this sense one is able to see how a racist culture begins to set up levels of separation, differential degrees of blackness in this case, *hierarchies of prejudice* within a given population.

Systematic depersonalisation

Perhaps the closest that Fanon comes actually to naming or qualifying the intrapsychic violence suffered by the black subject in the colonial situation is the idea of a socially induced *inferiority complex.* If one is overwhelmed by the wish to be white, Fanon (1986) argues, it is because one lives in a society that makes a racial inferiority complex possible, 'in a society that derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race; to the identical degree to which that society creates difficulties for him ... [it is to that degree that] he will find himself thrust into a neurotic situation' (1986, 100).

Fanon (1986) illustrates this situation with reference to the role of cultural representation in the formation of the black child's subjectivity. Throughout his or her upbringing the black child has been exposed to, and so identified *with*, a white culture that has been put together 'by white men for little white men', as Lebeau (1998) paraphrases Fanon. This culture has diverse forms and is evident in systems of education, as well as in literature, and in the films, the comics and cartoons of children's entertainment. Inasmuch as the black child or adult does not think of or experience themselves as black – in so far as they have identified with white culture, and have *come to think and act subjectively as white* – they then come to experience themselves as a 'phobic object' (a term I shall go on to explain shortly). As Lebeau (1998) emphasises about Fanon's text: the result of this is the effect of hatred coming both from inside and outside – a racism stemming both from within and without.

This is what we might understand as the *double damage* of the colonial environment on black identity. Not only is it the case that the black child takes on the prejudices of the white/European world, coming to understand 'the figure of the Negro as the symbolic repository for all the malevolence of the world' (McCulloch, 1983, 70). It is also the case that the black child, and then the adult, uses these racist values *to understand and make sense of themselves,* that these deeply ingrained notions, attitudes and stereotypes become part of the black man or woman's *own subjectivity* to the extent that, as McCulloch puts it, they actively participate in 'forging the instruments of their own oppression' (1983, 70). Steve Biko draws attention to the fact that the internalisation of racist, self-deprecating identities is a key political tactic of oppression in his famous comment that '[t]he most powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed' (Biko, cited in Arnold, 1979, xx).

Reify/reification: when concepts or ideas are spoken about as if they are really existing concrete objects. Psychological constructs such as 'mind' and 'personality' are good examples of this.

Pathologies of liberty

For Fanon, we can never gain an adequate sense of the damage of colonialisation without a consideration of its psychological effects. In the same way, we

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| BOX 4 | Inferiority complexes and ego-defences |

Although Fanon does not go into great detail in describing the psychological 'mechanics' of socially induced inferiority complexes, he does make reference to Anna Freud's ideas of ego-defences. Following Anna Freud, he suggests the young ego is flexible and resilient in defending itself from a hostile environment. This ego may draw on multiple different defence mechanisms, and withdraw from the threat of pain in a variety of ways for which it is later able to compensate. When the ego has become more rigid, it often comes to fix somewhat obsessively on certain modes of protection, of withdrawal from the threats of the world. This situation can lead to impaired development. Fanon uses this under-standing to emphasise how few identity resources the black subject has in colonial contexts with which to affirm themselves in positive ways, and with which to defend them-selves against the constant onslaught of insidious and explicit racism. 'For him,' says Fanon, 'there is only one way out [of the hostile and damaging culture of a racist environment] … and it leads into the white world' (1986, 51). This is something of a dead-end, however, for enthusiastic identification with the white world only leads to further alienation.

Again referring to Anna Freud, Fanon (1986) notes that 'the ego is driven to desperation by the amputation of all its defense mechanisms' (59), identity becomes increasingly infirm, weakened, and the pathological process is hence advanced. The result of this situation is referred to by Fanon somewhat figuratively as **affective erethism**, a massive form of hyper-sensitivity which McCulloch (1983) describes as 'a pathological condition arising from the colonial experience' which includes 'a crippling sense of inferiority, a perpetual nearness to rage' (67).

Affective erethism: pathological condition of hypersensitivity which arises in oppressive or colonial environ-ments and which involves both a sense of inferiority, and a constant nearness to anger and/or rage.

can never properly understand psychopathology, at least within the colonial context, outside the consideration of the imbalances of political power that condition and give rise to it. A wide range of psychopathological symptoms in oppressed or colonised groups needs, claims Fanon (1986), to be seen as the outcome of a double process, *primarily sociopolitical,* and only subsequently, as an *internalised* form of damage.

Although Fanon will not completely rule out the consideration of organic or intrapsychic bases in the possible etiology of psychopathology, he insists – and this is part of the radicalism of his approach – on the importance of cultural dispossession and racial alienation in virtually all explanations of psychopathology. Fanon will assert, for example, that in colonial contexts

> [t]he neurotic structure of the individual is simply the elaboration, the forma-tion, the eruption within the ego, of conflictual clusters arising in part out of the environment and in part out of the purely personal way in which the individual reacts to these influences (1986, 81).

Fanon was often explicitly anti-psychological in the assessment of what may have seemed to be problems of psychopathology. As Adams (1970) put it, the majority of human problems were, for Fanon, reality problems, not fantasies: 'The poor are plagued by poverty .... Jews by persecution, blacks by exploita-tion ... Fanon rallied against a "psychologism" that dealt with all of these

estranging afflictions as if they were ... mere states of mind' (811). Bulhan (1980a) takes up the same point in a slightly different way, emphasising that the source of the shared anguish of the politically oppressed is not bad genes or poor heredity, but rather a specific and inequitable social structure. Likewise, Macey (2000a) affirms that

> [t]he diagnosis and treatment of mental illness in the colonial situation must begin, not with metapsychology, but with a situation and the lived experience it induces. Whereas psychoanalysis [for instance] speaks of fantasy, Fanon consistently speaks of trauma and explains mental illness as a form of social alienation (194).

Fanon develops the notion of **internalisation** to dramatise the strength of this two-way relationship between psyche and society. Internalisation refers to the process by which external, sociohistorical reality is assimilated into 'internal' and subjective reality. Internal psychological processes therefore cannot be divorced from their social context; even the contents of the unconscious mind, of dreams, fantasies and so on, are supplied by the social, historical and political location of individuals.

A sociogenetic psychology

Given the intimate connection between individual and social structure, we can hence understand Bulhan's (1985) description of Fanon's perspective on psychopathology as necessarily **sociogenetic** and Fanon's conviction of 'madness as organically linked to a situation of oppression' (Bulhan, 1985, 188). His thoughts in this regard are also foregrounded in *Towards the African revolution* (1968), where he advances the proposition that if psychological and psychiatric practices are those

> technique[s] which aim to enable human beings to no longer be strangers to their environment ... [then] I owe it to myself to affirm that [the colonized subject] ... permanently alienated in his [sic] native land, lives in a state of absolute depersonalisation ... [of] systematized de-humanization ... The function of a social structure is to set up institutions to serve man's [sic] needs. A society that drives its members to desperate solutions is a non-viable society, a society that needs to be replaced (53–54).

Both Fanon and Bulhan, though, are crucially aware of how insidiously forms of psychological treatment can, in effect, implicitly ask their patients to adjust themselves to the particular parameters of inequitable social structures. If psychopathology in the colonial sphere could more often than not be characterised as a 'pathology of liberty', then for Fanon the way that clinical or psychological forms of activity could properly find their political role was, to play their part *in restoring liberty* in some meaningful capacity, to the sufferer. It is in this way that Fanon presents the roles of clinical intervention and social

Internalisation: process by which external, socio-historical reality is assimilated into 'internal' and subjective reality. Internal psycho-logical processes hence cannot be divorced from their social context; even the contents of the unconscious mind, of dreams, fantasies and so on, are supplied by the social, historical and political location of individuals.

Sociogenetic: being social in origin, arising from, having its origins in society.

activism as *essentially complementary.* In fact, for Bulhan (1985), the Fanonian perspective suggests a redefinition of the primary tasks of psychology:

> [T]he paramount tasks of psychology and psychiatry [should be] ... to unravel the relation of the psyche to the social structure, to rehabilitate the alienated, and to help transform social structures that thwart human needs (195).

One should think psychological and political change/betterment *together.* The individual pathologies that arise as a result of the colonial situation require, for Fanon, *combined action on the individual and on the group.* We may put this somewhat differently by suggesting that effective political change in colonial contexts requires action on both *subjective* (ie psychological) *and objective* (ie social, material, economic) levels. Forms of psychological intervention should not, for Fanon, be separated in this way from forms of political intervention or activism; rather they should (ideally) be synchronised, used in tandem, for, after all: 'There will be an authentic disalienation only to the degree to which things, in the most materialistic meaning of the word, will have been restored to their proper places' (1986, 11–12).

Psychological intervention reformulated

The attempt to bring psychology alongside programmes of political betterment does not mean we should neglect the particular role that psychology is able to play. So, although the social conditions that fail to meet human needs *must* be replaced, and although one can barely emphasise enough the importance of transforming inequitable social structures, clinical work with 'casualties of the status quo', as Bulhan (1985, 200) puts it, remains indispensable. Indeed, just as it is true that political conditions bring about deleterious psychological affects, so it is true that the remedy and treatment of such affects does find its part to play within greater projects of political struggle: 'To commit oneself to the practice of healing and rehabilitating tormented psyches is no doubt a form of action – one that is always pregnant with heuristic and social import' (Bulhan, 1999, 141).

The particular psychological crises brought about as a result of the colonial context, be they inferiority complexes or variants of 'affective erethism' – the particular crises of identity that prove so characteristic of such a context – must be engaged with on a personal level. The tragedy of the colonial situation, as emphasised above, is that the alienated is first a victim of others and then *of him- or herself* as oppressive stereotypes are internalised and *self-implemented.* One needs to involve clinical work, then, as part of greater projects of political struggle, and it is in this way that Fanon sees his role as a clinician residing in the attempt to help his patients abandon attempts at 'hallucinatory whitening':

> the black man should no longer be confronted by the dilemma, *turn white or disappear;* but he should be able to take cognisance of his existence ... if society

makes difficulties for him because of his colour, if in his dreams I establish the expression of an unconscious desire to change colour, my objective will not be that of dissuading from it by advising him to 'keep his place'; on the contrary, my objective, once his motivations have been brought into consciousness, will be to put him in a position to *choose* action (or passivity) with respect to the real source of the conflict that is, toward the social structures (100).

BOX 5	Redefining violence

One of the most profound aspects of Fanon's theories of racism and identity is the way they stress the ubiquitous violence of the colonial social order. His account forces us to rethink violence, especially in light of its psychological nature, its 'identity effects'. In apartheid South Africa, for example, policies of separate development forced black workers to live in homeland areas far removed from their actual places of work. This would result in the situation where black workers would travel great distances daily, just to get to and from work. David Goldblatt's famous photographs of those daily travels force us to rethink our definitions of violence. In some ways we might understandably seek to qualify the damage of this arrangement, travelling up to 8 or 10 hours daily, as a form of structural violence. The destructive pressure this arrangement exerted on families, its disruption of sleep patterns, on the psychological and physical well-being of workers, would certainly seem to count as forms of violence, even if not of the order of immediate physical effect.

A similar situation of a kind of indirect violence came to the fore at the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where torturers of the state admitted to layering the cells of prisoners with water. Such actions would cause no immediate harming of the bodies of prisoners, but given that they had no beds, and that it is impossible to sleep when half submerged in water, such a simple act would lead to massive repercussions in terms of sleep-deprivation. Both of these examples point to how *the systematic undermining of an individual's physical or psychological resources* might be thought of as a form of violence.

Bulhan (1985) warns how many of our everyday conceptions of violence are overly narrow and selective. Many internalised prohibitions and prevailing social controls condition our views in this respect, he (1985) cautions, and as such 'we tend to recognise violence mostly in those instances when it is blatantly destructive and contrary to the established norms of society' (131). Violence for Bulhan (1985) is more pervasive in our day-to-day lives than we commonly believe, underlying more of our cherished ideals and institutions than we might like to admit.

Reviewing a series of definitions of violence that he sees as inadequate, Bulhan (1985) shows how many such understandings rely on the ideas that violence must

(1) involve the use of physical force against another person
(2) be accompanied by intense negative motivating feelings such as rage and hatred
(3) be intentional
(4) lack social or legal sanction
(5) be immediately demonstrable at the level of physical damage (133).

There are problems with each of these criteria, as the above examples amply demonstrate. It is with these problems in mind that Bulhan (1985) offers a refined and more inclusive definition:

> 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. From this perspective, violence inhibits human growth, negates human potential, limits productive living, and causes death (135).

BOX 5   **Redefining violence** *(continued)*

The value of this definition for our current purposes is that it makes us understand how a wide range of activities and deprivations may be understood as violence, even if not of the direct physical sort. Such a definition sensitises us to how post-colonial contexts may exude forms of racial violence that are not explicitly apparent, but none the less damaging to the subjectivity of oppressed individuals.

PSYCHOLOGY AND THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE

Black Consciousness and the politics of subjectivity in South Africa

Fanon intended *Black skin, white masks* to serve as a kind of 'instrument of liberation'. The original intended title of the book was to have been 'Essay for the Dis-alienation of the Black Man' (Julien, 1995). Fanon reiterates this objective within the book itself, presenting *an actively political role for personal psychology.* Just as psychoanalysis hopes to free the neurotic from his or her personal neurosis, so the text was intended to offer the reader a means of *alleviating forms of racial neurosis.* Before one can create the conditions for solidarity among the oppressed, intimates Fanon (1968) – anticipating the standpoint of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness to follow – *there must first be the destruction of the subjective aspect of black oppression.* Biko (1978) likewise emphasised the role of a healthy subjectivity, of a robust, proud and positive self-image as crucial both in creating a sense of solidarity amongst the oppressed and in empowering one's self to resist oppression. We might understand this as the 'identity-component' of liberatory politics.

Black Consciousness was, in Biko's words, 'the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers ... to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude' (1998b, 360).

Biko's view of Black Consciousness called for the *psychological* and *cultural* liberation of the black mind as a prerequisite for political freedom – in his own words: 'mental emancipation as a precondition to political emancipation' (Biko, cited in Arnold, 1972, xx). A principal part of the liberation struggle for Biko was therefore exactly 'the *psychological* battle for the minds of the black people' (Arnold, 1979; emphasis added). As Biko described it in May 1976:

Steve Biko

> Black Consciousness refers itself to the Black man and to his situation ... [to the fact that] the Black man is subjected to two forces in [South Africa]. He is first of all oppressed by an external world through institutionalized machinery, through laws that restrict him from doing certain things, through heavy work conditions, through poor education – these are all external to him – and secondly ... the most important, the Black man in himself has developed a certain state of alienation. He rejects himself, precisely because he attaches the meaning White to all that is good ... (Biko, in Arnold, 1979, 22).

In opposition to such self-negating ways of thinking, Biko called for solidarity among blacks, emphasising the need for oppressed groups to identify with *themselves* and to advance the liberation struggle on this basis. The challenge confronting Black Consciousness was to reverse years of negative self-image and to replace it with an affirming and positive – if not *angry* – form of identity. 'Blackness' here was not simply an issue of skin colour, but was a form of solidarity, a collective form of hope and security, a way for black people to 'build up their humanity' (Biko, cited in Arnold, 1979, 34). In fact, Biko defined blacks as 'those who are by law or tradition politically, economically, and socially discriminated against as a group in South African society, and [who] identify themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations' (1998b, 360). 'Blackness' as a kind of politics was, therefore, as Arnold (1979) argues, a deliberate attempt 'to lay the intellectual and emotive base for ultimate political unity between the Africans, Coloureds and Asians of South Africa' (1979, xxv). In Biko's own words:

> Black Consciousness is in essence the realisation by the black man [sic] of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their operation – the blackness of their skin – and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It seeks to demonstrate the lie that black is an aberration from the 'normal' which is white (1998b, 360).

Black Consciousness and conscientisation

The key strategy of Black Consciousness was **conscientisation**. Conscientisation involves what Biko referred to as 'protest talk', talk about circumstances of oppression. It involves the repeated attempt to

> make reference to the conditions of the Black man and the conditions in which the Black man lives. We try to get Blacks in conscientization to grapple realisti-

Conscientisation: political strategy of resistance in which an attempt is made to develop a heightened awareness of oppressive political conditions of existence.

cally with their problems ... to develop what one might call an awareness, a physical awareness of their situation ... to be able to analyze it, and to provide answers for themselves (Biko, in Arnold, 1979, 33).

Black Consciousness was an extremely positive form of politics, one that maintained that the very conditions of oppression were what would often bring a group of people together, embolden and invigorate them in their resistance to power. As Biko himself puts it:

> The call for Black Consciousness is the most positive call to come from any group in the Black world for a long time ... The quintessence of it is the realization by blacks [that] ... they have to use the concept of group power ... Being an historically, politically, socially and economically disinherited and dispossessed group, they have the strongest foundation from which to operate. The philosophy of Black Consciousness ... expresses group pride and the determination by the Blacks to rise and attain the envisaged self (Biko, in Arnold, 1979, xx).

One of the most powerful lessons of Black Consciousness for Biko is contained in 'the realization by Blacks that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed' (in Arnold, 1979, xx). This, of course, is a weapon that can be reclaimed.

The consciousness-raising of Black Consciousness also involves a component of historical redress: 'Black Consciousness [has] ... to do with correcting false images of ourselves in terms of culture, education, religion, and economics', claims Biko (1998b). '[t]here is always an interplay between the history of a people ... the past, and their faith in themselves and hopes for their future. We are aware of the terrible role played by our education and religion in creating amongst us a false understanding of ourselves' (363).

BOX 6   Steve Biko and cultural dispossession in apartheid South Africa

Although Biko was not totally uncritical of Fanon's ideas, many of his basic positions and political objectives shared a striking similarity with those of Fanon. A case in point here is the extensive reference Biko made to the kind of cultural dispossession that Fanon described in *Black skin, white masks*. Here it is worth referring, at length, to the words of Biko himself:

> Since that unfortunate date – 1652 – we have been experiencing a process of acculturation. It is perhaps presumptuous to call it 'acculturation' because this term implies a fusion of different cultures. In our case this fusion has been extremely one-sided. The

two major cultures that met and 'fused' were the African cultural and the Anglo-Boer culture ... the Anglo-Boer culture had all the trappings of a colonialist culture and ... was heavily equipped for conquest. Where they could, they conquered by persuasion, using a highly exclusive religion that denounced all other Gods and demanded a strict code of behaviour with respect to ... education, ritual and custom. Where it was impossible to convert, firearms were readily available and used to advantage. Hence the Anglo-Boer culture was the more powerful culture in almost all facets. This is where the African began to lose a grip on himself

| BOX 6 | **Steve Biko and cultural dispossession in apartheid South Africa** *(continued)* |

and his surroundings. Thus, in taking a look at cultural aspects of the African people one inevitably finds oneself having to compare. This is primarily because of the contempt that the 'superior' culture shows towards the indigenous culture. To justify its exploitative basis the Angle-Boer culture has at all times been directed at bestowing an inferior status on all cultural aspects of the indigenous people (Biko, 1998a, 26).

"WELL, THERE GOES THE NEIGHBOURHOOD!"

This process of 'correcting false images' must be undertaken by black men and women themselves: 'Whites ... from the outside ... can never extract and analyze the ethos in the black community' (363). This should not be taken as representing a segregationist viewpoint; rather, Biko's (1998b) concern is that blacks should not always be interpreted by whites. In a similar vein he warns that

> [o]ne must immediately dispel the thought that Black Consciousness is merely a methodology or a means to an end. What Black Consciousness seeks to do is to produce at the output end of the process real black people who do not regard themselves as appendages to white society ... it will always be a lie to accept white values as necessarily the best (362).

'Black souls in white skins': The radicalism of Biko

In a paper that draws attention both to how Biko made use of Fanon's ideas and to how Biko himself has subsequently come to be represented in

post-apartheid contexts (such as South African history textbooks), Kros (1999) concerns herself with the deradicalisation of Biko's politics. A major example for Kros is the lack of emphasis placed on Biko's insistence on the inability and unwillingness of white liberals – perhaps despite their best intentions – to detach themselves from the 'oppressor camp'. In the same vein, Biko argued that the superior ability of white liberal students to articulate their ideas in English would have a deleterious impact on the confidence of black students. Biko pointed out that blacks in South Africa had a 300-year-old 'inferiority complex' to surmount, which had not only dented their self-confidence, but which had emptied them of their very self-hood and had consequently rendered them entirely passive. Biko wrote: 'the first step is to make the black man come to himself, to pump back life into his empty shell, to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign ... in the country of his birth' (Biko, 1978, 29). Biko believed that the 300 years of oppressive rule had all but destroyed black 'imagination' and their logical convictions and, in words that deliberately echoed Fanon, 'disfigured' the African past. Thus the scarring of the black psyche was profound. His analysis suggests a rehabilitation of some magnitude not to be confused with an exercise in positive thinking (Kros, 1999, 6).

Now whereas Biko was not ultimately against integration in South Africa, he did go out of his way to emphasise that this would be both a false and unrealistic ideal until black people had attained 'the envisioned self' above and beyond the terms of cultural and psychical dominance as conditioned by apartheid. Hence his 'Black souls in white skins' rejects out of hand the project of political co-operation with white liberals in the latter part of 1970. For Biko whites were more of a homogenous group than they perhaps realised, in view of the fact they were all involved – even well-meaning progressives – in the usurpation of power, in the enjoying of stolen privileges. It was on this basis that Biko rejected the idea that blacks should in any way be assimilated into 'white society', and on this basis that he argued that whiteness was a concept that 'warrants being despised, hated, destroyed and replaced by an aspiration with more human content in it' (Biko, 1978, 77). Here Kros's summary is indeed apt: Biko's point (in relation to the above) 'is that 'whiteness', no less than 'blackness', was a historically constituted identity with profoundly limiting ramifications for those who found themselves defined by it. It was not to be shed ... simply by an act of goodwill precisely because it was so bound up with long historical processes and entrenched material interests' (1999, 7).

What Black Consciousness is *not*

Like Fanon's, Biko's is a political project which involves a profound cultural awareness. Both writers may be legitimately criticised for portrayals of

pre-colonial African cultures as idealised, overly static, and predominantly male, if not downright patriarchal. Despite this, both Fanon and Biko offer trenchant criticisms in which they associate European culture with analytical coldness, with egocentrism, and with the aggressive prioritisation of both individualism and technological advancement. These are not values, especially in their frequent disrespect for basic moral standards (apartheid itself, like the massive violences of colonialism, are two pertinent cases in point), that should overwrite a more human-centred African culture. It is for this reason, amongst others, that the assimilation of African culture into European is to be resisted. It is on this basis that Biko, like Fanon, points to the damage done to African history by the colonial project, on this basis that Biko argues so forcefully that blacks should rewrite their history, redefine their culture, and recover its crucial aspects of compassion and collectivity, to 'reject the prevalent economic system which depends on the exploitation of others' (Kros, 1999, 9).

Kros (1999) argues that many contemporary representations of Biko domesticate the radicalness of his original vision. Neither he nor Fanon offered either a 'comfortable politics' or a 'politics of quick solutions'; the writings of both men contain powerful insights for us today on the ongoing path of transformation, even after the overthrow of colonial or apartheid rule. Black Consciousness, warns Kros (1999), is not to be confused with an exercise in building self-esteem. Likewise, the determination of the black man or woman to rise and attain the 'envisaged self' is not to be reduced to a kind of self-help psychology. The point here is exactly to connect certain psychological levels of awareness to greater political projects – not to keep the two spheres separate. Further yet, again as Kros (1999) points out, the drive to overcome political oppression through collective effort is not merely a psychological 'formula of identity'. What Biko appears to have in mind here, by contrast, is a vision of political solidarity fostered through an ongoing conscientisation of the political conditions of everyday racism and/or discrimination. We should be aware, then, in the writings of both Biko and Fanon, not only of the political uses of psychological ideas but how such psychological ideas should be taken up not merely intrapsychically or individualistically but in the realm of broader social and political goals.

CRITICISMS OF FANON AND BIKO

Before closing, it is important to draw attention to certain apparent shortcomings within the work of both Fanon and Biko. Both men stand accused of sexism in their writings. This is clear in Fanon's work, which, despite its heightened sense of race-based oppression, contains at times quite *explicitly* sexist terms. A large part of *Black skin, white masks,* for example, deals with the

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BOX 7   Some personal reflections on Black Consciousness – *Thapelo Ramere*

As a black person born in 1980s apartheid South Africa, I was raised by an education system that gave me a new language, that is, English, as the only medium of instruction, which I then had to use as a means of defining myself. A good example of this is when attending an interview, or applying for a job or a bursary: all the questionnaires are in English, and structured by Eurocentric or US-American concepts, ideas, norms.

The education system and media made me understand that the only way to survive was to aspire to be more Western or more integrated into a Western lifestyle, with the hope of achieving the imaginary symbols and values that encourage individual achievement and social mobility. But the political system refused me access to any significant material resources necessary for the formation of a strong identity. As Verwoerd had said: 'allow a black man to see the greener pasture of the European, but don't allow him to tread there.'

I was fed with cultural values and understandings which were hostile to me, and made to believe that black is an aberration from the normal, which was white or European. I had to study Western history, not my own history; even dominant forms of entertainment are of a Western kind, with Western norms or standards that would have a Western lesson for me as a non-white child.

I felt that I lost my culture, the 'traditional education' received from my township life, because I had attached all meaning with what was Western and hence valuable. All this led to having little way to defend myself against racism and prejudice – to being even more vulnerable to racism because I had internalised white values. This is where Black Consciousness is important, because it emphasises the role of a healthy subjectivity, and of a positive image of the black self. It argues that to understand myself in the oppressor's racist terms is to be self-damaging. As means of de-colonising my mind, Black Consciousness calls for me to revise my culture, my language and history, to take respectable, admirable and worthwhile aspects of culture which are important to my identity, and to regain the pride, security and confidence lost to the oppressive culture.

A challenge to Black Consciousness lies in an awareness that aspects of traditional African culture are not simply 'pure' or innocent, that it has been patriarchal, oppressive to both females and children.

We also need to be aware that we need not a modification of the oppressive system of apartheid but a total transformation of structures of power – failure to do this produces black elites, the 'cream' of black communities that come to be incorporated into white power, while people less privileged, people in the dusty streets of KwaZulu-Natal or Soweto are still downtrodden by the system.

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question of sexual desire across the lines of race. For Fanon (1986) it is the case that the black female's desire to marry a white man is unauthentic, a detestable example of negative, self-deprecating identity. The black male subject's desire for the white female subject is portrayed in very different terms, as containing an almost redemptive political value: 'When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilisation and dignity and make them mine' (Fanon, 1986, 63). Fanon has rightly been criticised for this sexist double-standard in his work (Fuss, 1994; McCulloch, 1983; Wyrick, 1998). Kros (1999) likewise takes issue with Biko's predominant focus on black men, with the fact that he seems to have very little to say about the specific conditions applying to the sexist oppression of black women.

A different critique focuses on the fact that Fanon is said often to represent the colonial relationship as one of *complete dominance and control* (Moore-Gilbert, 1997; Young 1990). The claim here is that Fanon undervalues the various forms of resistance and opposition that colonised individuals and groups can offer colonisers, and that he stereotypes the nature of these relationships. The first part of this suggestion is not always true, although a book such as *Black skin, white masks* does spend far more time emphasising the degree and dynamics of colonial/racist control than it does the possibility of resistance. *The wretched of the earth* is a useful counterpoint here, in that it is exactly a revolutionary text focusing on the possibility and, in Fanon's terms, the *inevitability* of an eventual overthrow of, colonial dominance. Perhaps the point is that, whereas *Black skin, white masks* rather pessimistically prioritises relations of domination and control in its analysis – because it does not want these processes to be *underestimated* – *The wretched of the earth* far more optimistically prioritises the prospects of revolutionary resistance. In Biko's case this criticism seems not to hold. Not only was it the case that apartheid did approximate a form of (almost) complete domination and control – it seems hard to overestimate the extent of apartheid's racial oppression – but it was also the case that Biko's focus was exactly on strategised political routes of contesting and overcoming this oppression.

A further criticism of Fanon is to argue that he himself involves essentialist and static categories – 'the black', 'the white', 'the colonised', 'the coloniser', and so on, as Caute (1970) suggests. To a certain extent this is true, Fanon does appear to make sweeping statements at this level and does seem to tie certain categories of personhood to certain necessary forms of experience, or identity. The strongest version of this critique is to suggest that Fanon enforces a kind of victim-blaming, by emphasising how black subjects, in their grasping at white culture are making only 'inauthentic' and self-objectifying bids for identity. The idea that the black subject perpetuates a form of internal racism against themselves seems to do much the same – and might even be said to enforce a different kind of racism altogether, one where the black person is made problematic once again, understood as pathological, broken, damaged, less than functional. Of course, one might argue that the reason that both Biko and Fanon use the kinds of argument that they do is exactly to emphasise the insidious and pervasive nature of the effects of racism on identity, effects that had not previously been examined, and particularly not from a perspective of *internalised psychological damage.* Does this mean, in the case of Fanon, that his analysis may be somewhat stark, somewhat caricatured, that his understanding of the 'black subject' allows for little diversity within itself? In a similar vein, do Biko's somewhat romantic representations of an earlier pre-colonial African culture give us a static, idealised version of 'Africanness' that is no longer retrievable? Do both men rely on a kind of essentialisation, either

that of a damaged blackness or of an idealised African past? Is it the case that more flexibility is required in the analytic approaches of each?

It may in some respects be true to say that both authors foreground the damage of colonialism and racism and do so even to the extent of portraying the black subject as a damaged subject. Importantly, though, this is not the whole of their respective projects. Certainly, Biko's politics, as suggested above, are fundamentally oriented towards an overcoming of this state of affairs. Similarly, Fanon's objective is to not further racist damage by recourse to a form of victim-blaming, but to warn those he empathises with precisely of the damaging effects of internalising racist, objectifying terms of identity. Hence one might argue that Fanon's project is a fundamentally liberatory one.

Furthermore, one might suggest that both men provide us with the *starting basis* for the analysis of post-colonial contexts. This starting-basis is one in which the contrasts of the pre-colonial and colonial conditions are sharply juxtaposed (especially in the case of Biko (1978)), where an emphasis on the extremity of relations of colonial domination is absolutely pivotal, where the terms of conceptualisation may be seen at times to be somewhat static, even somewhat essentialist. Without this foundation it would seem that we may have been unable to move forward to slightly more textured, more nuanced accounts of *post-colonial* relations of power, such as that provided by post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1994).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented a view of what one might term the 'critical psychology' of Frantz Fanon. This particular brand of critical psychology may be typed as a 'psychopolitics' that politicises psychology by bringing psychological terms and concepts into the register of the political. Fanon's analysis ties his psychological analyses at each point to very real sociopolitical and historical circumstances of colonial domination. By adapting the theoretical notion of alienation into that of *racial alienation,* Fanon has succeeded in providing a powerful account of the damaging impact of a 'white mask psychology'. That is, he has dramatised, in a critical and analytical manner, the severity of the impact of racist politics upon the identity and psyche of the black subject.

This chapter has also attempted to show how Fanon's concern with the politics of race and racial identity has had an important influence in the South African context – particularly via the writings of Steve Biko. In this respect it is important to note that Fanon's use of psychology is both powerfully critical *and* political. Fanon is aware both of what is wrong with psychology – how it is used as part of the colonising agenda – and of how certain psychological concepts, and psychological forms of analysis, may be politically applied as part of the anti-colonial struggle. We may put this slightly differently by

suggesting that an additional component of a psychopolitics concerns *an awareness of how psychology (or psychological concepts) may be used as tools of resistance.* This fact, that personal identity can be a potent resource of solidarity, and of resistance to political forces, is something of which Steve Biko was well aware. This, of course, was one of the founding tenets of the Black Consciousness Movement, the idea that positive and politicised forms of black identity – and powerful forms of self-definition – are the first and perhaps most fundamental points of resistance to forces of racial oppression. And although a form of resistance which is *purely psychological* is not enough, we would do well to remember, in Biko's words, that '[t]he interrelationship between the consciousness of the self and [an] emancipatory programme is of paramount importance' (1998b, 360).

Critical thinking tasks

1. What does Fanon mean by a 'white mask' psychology? Elaborate, involving in your discussion a series of the theoretical terms that Fanon uses to describe the effects of racism on black identity. Where possible, relate your discussion back to examples drawn from the South African context.
2. Unlike the majority of orthodox psychology, Fanon takes a sociogenetic approach to questions of psychopathology. Explain what such an approach entails, relating it to other aspects of Fanon's thought. Again, relate your discussion, where possible, to the South African context.
3. There are several basic parallels between Fanon's and Biko's approach to race consciousness. List them, then suggest a set of potential differences between the writers.
4. What are the dangers of reducing Black Consciousness to a kind of psychological formula? What aspects of Fanon's work might be taken as warnings against such a reduction?

Recommended readings

▷ Fanon's key texts are *Black skin, white masks* (1986) (London: Pluto Press) and *The wretched of the earth* (1990) (London: Penguin). While they can be difficult and opaque at first, there is no substitute for attempting to master the concepts as Fanon himself presents them.

▷ While many of the 'For beginners' guides are confusing in their attempt to compact difficult intellectual material into a comic book format, Deborah Wyrick's (1998) *Fanon for beginners* (London & New York: Writers and Readers) succeeds admirably. It provides a well-balanced overview that takes in the entire gamut of Fanon's writing.

▷ Bulhan's (1985) *Frantz Fanon and the psychology of oppression* (New York & London: Plenum Press) seems to be something of a neglected classic

within the literature of critical psychology. Bulhan uses Fanon as a means of providing a devastating critique of US-centric and Eurocentric psychology. He also helpfully illustrates and extends Fanon's theories, and makes useful conceptual contributions himself. The book also contains a good biographical component.

▷ Steve Biko's *I write what I like* is probably the best collection of his political writings foregrounding his own views on Black Consciousness. Donald Woods's *Biko* makes for a good companion piece, setting out in historical detail the events and circumstances leading up to Biko's murder by apartheid security police.