


Chapter 6

Frantz Fanon's Political Thought on Tabula Rasa: An Imperative for a Genuine Decolonisation

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ABSTRACT

More than 60 years after his death, Frantz Fanon's decolonial political thought on the concept of tabula rasa remains influential, unique, and relevant. It is highly sought after by colonized subjects who continue to confront the ongoing project of colonialism. This chapter aims to examine Fanon's reasoning on tabula rasa, defined as a new beginning from a zero point. Fanon's decolonial political thought on tabula rasa differentiates two forms of decolonization: 'pseudo-decolonization' and 'genuine decolonization.' Pseudo-decolonization is described as false, superficial, or symbolic, whereas genuine decolonization is real, authentic, and veritable. In Fanon's political imagination, colonized subjects are urged to seek genuine decolonization, which, he argues, emerges from an inevitable and violent struggle between the colonizers and the colonized. The absence of such a profound and transformative struggle—tabula rasa—means that the colonized remain subjugated and only superficially decolonized. Fanon's mastery of the concept of tabula rasa allows for a clear differentiation between pseudo-decolonization and genuine decolonization, emphasizing the necessity of a fundamental and radical break from colonial structures.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to examine Frantz Fanon's decolonial political thought on tabula rasa. Built from his decolonial political thought, Fanon's philosophising on tabula rasa is not only unique, but also a dialectic requirement for genuine decolonisation to be realisable. The Latin concept of tabula rasa was originally coined by Locke (1689) who argues that at birth, the mind of a newborn is a tabula rasa (a blank slate) that we fill with 'ideas' as we experience the world through the five senses. Likewise, Agarwal *et al.* (2022) define tabula rasa as an early phase of human growth that is without any prior knowledge. This means that at birth, the brain of a newborn is a tabula rasa (empty memory) and only starts to accumu-

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late and be filled by knowledge from others in his/her daily life experiences on this earth. Linking this blank slate to decolonial context, Fanon (1961; 2017) reasons that *tabula rasa* characterises at the outset of all decolonisation as it constitutes from the very first day, the minimum demands of the colonised. Relevantly, apart from that *tabula rasa* is willed, called for, and demanded by the colonised subjects; the proof of its success lies in a whole colonial social structure being changed from the bottom up (Fanon, 1961; 2017) in favour of those who were previously colonized.

Likewise, according to Ndayisenga (2021), “*Tabula rasa* should be defined conceptually as the creation of being from non-being because the colonial system dehumanises the colonised and considers black subjects as objects” (p. 82). *Tabula rasa* is a terrifying moment when colonialism as a perpetual problem in the colonised world, is destroyed and cancelled by the struggling colonised subjects who are in search of a new world that is not marked by (colonial) violence. Apart from that *tabula rasa* has a high potential to create a real new humanity, it also restores and invents different new possibilities of existential life taking into consideration that Fanon proposes “a beginning that is irreducibly violent and one that leads to a ‘total, complete and absolute substitution’, or *tabula rasa*” (Marriott, 2018, p. 259). In essence, *tabula rasa* is the cousin concept of counter-violence, a recommendation for the colonised subjects who desire to engage in a decolonial journey and self-determination. In fact, “*Tabula rasa* should be explained as a fundamental change that results in a decolonial turn, and therefore, simultaneously considered as the beginning of life and the loss of fugitive life lived under colonialism” (Ndayisenga, 2021, p. 83). *Tabula rasa* is a contra system of colonialism that has the potential to shake and destroy imperialism and allows for a world without a colonial complex of superiority and inferiority.

Why does this chapter focus on Fanon who died sixty years ago and not on any other contemporary decolonial thinker? Not only in the academic spaces but also in the most colonized societies, “Interest in Frantz Fanon’s work continues to grow” (Gibson & Beneduce, 2017, p. 12). The only Fanon who died is therefore Fanon the body, but Fanon’s oeuvres remain influential and in high demand by colonized subjects and scholars who are interested in the lived experiences of colonized subjects. This chapter examines Fanon’s conception of *tabula rasa* in particular, as an imperative for a genuine decolonisation to be realised. As this chapter critically examines what should be done for the colonised subjects to be genuinely decolonised, it has therefore been constrained to only focus on “Frantz Fanon: father of decolonisation” (Zondi, 2017, p. 1), among many other scholars and political thinkers. Attracted by colonised subjects who continue to face colonialism, coloniality, and capitalism, “Fanon created works that continue to inspire and ignite the revolutionary spirit in black activists around the world” (Zondi, 2017, p. 1). Fanon (1961; 2017) underlines that genuine decolonisation, therefore, implies the urgent need to thoroughly challenge the colonial situation. First and foremost, Fanon’s conception of *tabula rasa* is highly willed, demanded, and clamoured for by the colonised. Fanon’s conception of *tabula rasa* is also the only potential remedy able to dismantle such a colonial system – to convert the colonised world into another new authentic decolonised world. From such a perspective, Fanon remains a unique existentialist political thinker who originally coined the concept of ‘genuine decolonisation’, highly claimed by the struggling colonised subjects. In the contemporary period:

Frantz Fanon’s presence can still be felt today and his work enlightens a large number of struggling people. Some 50 years after his death on 6 December 1961, Fanon continues to challenge world disorder ... today, for those who experience the reality of injustice and violence, alienation and exploitation, reading Fanon helps them understand the new false beliefs broadcast in insidious ways by the media. Frantz Fanon’s deconstruction of the established order is especially relevant now at a time when, in

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