

Decolonizing Theory from Within or Without? A Reply to Baum

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In “Decolonizing Critical Theory,” Bruce Baum has made an important contribution to the recent decolonial turn in political theory, raising key questions about how best to approach the task of epistemic decolonization.¹ It is in the spirit of advancing this theoretical horizon and pushing Baum’s essay beyond itself that I offer the following critical reply.

From the outset, Baum’s essay stands on two legs that do not always walk in unison, and are indeed often at cross-purposes. On the one hand, he is concerned from the outset with a tendency by some postcolonial critics to “turn away from the Frankfurt School,” and so seeks to rescue what “underestimated . . . analytic resources” Horkheimer and Adorno in particular have “contributed to critical theorizing about racism” (420–1). But on the other hand we have the objective announced in Baum’s title: to decolonize Frankfurt School critical theory itself.² Of course, to defend the Frankfurt School from its detractors and to subject it to decolonial critique are not mutually exclusive options, but in Baum’s essay, the former — a sort of “decolonization from within” — predominates to the detriment of what we could call, however imperfectly, “decolonization from without.”

As I want to argue, this apparently spatial formulation in fact bears a double valence, content and method being one and the same: the question of geographic and epistemic “exteriority” — to borrow a concept from Enrique Dussel to which I will return — is itself a central foothold for building a truly decolonial critical theory.³ Whereas the first, more internal approach centers on “Critical Theory” (a proper noun), the second brings critical theories (a plural, common noun) of race and colonialism to bear both *on* the European canon and beyond it. Whereas the first pulls us back toward an immanent critique that builds on fractures and potentialities *internal* to the Frankfurt School, I argue that to put weight on the second leg is to open up that far more ambitious horizon that Nelson Maldonado-Torres calls — in a decolonial détournement of Habermas — the “unfinished project of decolonization.”⁴

Baum’s warring concerns make him, first, overly generous in his reading of the Frankfurt School’s contribution to theorizing colonial racism, and second, this generosity limits the scope of his creative contribution to revising critical theory. This generosity emerges in the

strained effort to stress the Frankfurt School’s contributions to theorizing race and colonialism. Baum summarizes these contributions as emphasizing “(i) capitalism, race, and class; (ii) a tripartite racial schema; (iii) mimesis, difference, and racist misrecognition; and (iv) emancipation, social justice, and ‘working through the past’” (422). In what follows, however, I seek to bring decolonial critiques to bear on these formulations, with an emphasis, however schematic and brief, on the work of Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Enrique Dussel. Not only do each of these thinkers offer what I consider compelling alternatives to the Frankfurt School approach, but in some cases they even shed light on the misdiagnoses and analytic errors of the latter — errors that are neither entirely reducible to nor separable from their European origin.

Specifically, Baum centers his analysis on Adorno and Horkheimer’s diagnosis of anti-Semitism as a sort of linchpin for diagnosing capitalist modernity as a whole. In this view, Nazism is a peculiarly modern phenomenon grounded in capitalism and the instrumental rationality — one strand of the European Enlightenment — with which it is intertwined (422). But in seeking to rescue this analysis as a useful bridge to analyzing colonial racism, Baum holds back from subjecting it to the critical attention it deserves. When we approach the question by marshaling texts from the decolonial canon (if such a thing is not in fact a contradiction in terms), we find both a rich analysis of not only racism but anti-Semitism as well, one that is both grounded in colonialism and points us toward not only modernity as a whole, but toward what Dussel calls the “first modernity” (that is, that dating from the colonial encounter itself).⁵

This decolonial diagnosis of anti-Semitism emerges with particular force in the work of Aimé Césaire and his best-known pupil, Frantz Fanon. In *Discourse on Colonialism*, first published in 1950, Césaire explicitly situates Nazi anti-Semitism as a “terrific boomerang effect” whereby colonial methods and concepts returned suddenly and unexpectedly to European soil. Césaire’s object of critique is not strictly “Hitler and Hitlerism,” however, but more centrally “the very distinguished, very humanistic, very Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century” who “has a Hitler inside him,” and for whom “Hitler is his *demon*.” The European liberal who was ostensibly shocked by Nazism had been

willing to look the other way so long as those “colonialist procedures . . . had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the ‘coolies’ of India, and the ‘niggers’ of Africa.”⁶

Not that he lets capitalism off the hook: a communist even after he left the party, Césaire is unambiguous that “At the end of capitalism . . . there is Hitler,” and he insists that capitalism is “incapable” of generating substantive inequality because brutal exploitation in fact *requires* such dehumanization.⁷ But the source of that brutality is the colonial conquest itself, intimately entwined with capitalist accumulation and its most potent original motor. Inverting the civilization–barbarism binary, Césaire instead insists that “no one colonizes innocently,” and that the *process* of systematically dehumanizing others cannot but lead to a “brutalization” of the colonizer in turn:⁸

[C]olonization works to *decivilize* the colonizer, to *brutalize* him in the true sense of the word . . . each time a head is cut off or an eye put out in Vietnam and in France they accept the fact, each time a little girl is raped and in France they accept the fact, each time a Madagascan is tortured and in France they accept the fact, civilization acquires another dead weight, a universal regression takes place, a gangrene sets in, a center of infection begins to spread.⁹

The dead end into which this subjective brutalization of the European that colonization sets into motion is, for Césaire, Nazism. To the description of anti-Semitism as “a new kind of barbarism” (422), Césaire would likely respond: barbarism *yes*, new *no*. This insistence on the intimate linkage between anti-Semitism and colonial brutality has powerful implications, however, since it turns our attention to a period long prior to the Enlightenment and to a cause far broader than mere instrumental rationality.

Fanon’s abiding concern with anti-Semitism comes quite directly from Césaire, “my philosophy teacher from the Antilles who reminded me one day: ‘When you hear someone insulting the Jews, pay attention; he is talking about you.’”¹⁰ This is not solely because “the anti-Semite is inevitably a negrophobe,” but because what unites the two is a denigration of the human:

Anti-Semitism cuts me to the quick; I get upset; a frightful rage makes me anemic; they are denying me the right to be a man. I cannot dissociate myself from the fate reserved for my brother.¹¹

Whether there is common ground between Fanon and the Frankfurt School as to the characteristically modern nature of these phenomena depends precisely upon the caveat raised by Césaire and Dussel: what do we mean by modern? Where the emphasis on instrumental rationality would suggest a grounding in the “sec-

ond modernity,” Fanon’s emphasis on colonialism — not to mention other decolonial research that situates the birth of a modern notion of race in 1492 itself — would instead insist that we take a longer view.¹²

Thus where Baum is at pains to show the *potential* utility of the Frankfurt School analysis of anti-Semitism for grasping colonial racism, we have in Césaire and Fanon far more direct and compelling guidance for how to think the two together without reducing them to the same. We also have the basis for rethinking what Baum rightly critiques as a tendency in the Frankfurt School to insist on the specificity of anti-Semitism. While this specificity centered on the idea that Jews, unlike Blacks, were subject to eradication, eradication campaigns targeting colonized people are no exception, and colonialism itself is psychically oriented toward the dream of extermination. This dream, however, is restrained by the colonial paradox that Sartre had identified in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, and which Fanon would cite in *Wretched of the Earth*: that “to massacre the colonized people, which is the perpetual absurd temptation of the colonialists . . . would amount to the immediate destruction of colonization.”¹³

Adorno and Horkheimer gesture toward this paradox with the suggestion that Blacks must be “kept in their place” — for example, in the series of containment apparatuses in the USA: from slavery to Jim Crow and later the ghetto — but they do so in part to negate the history of eradication of colonized Africans, and without reference to the American genocides that inaugurated the modern era.¹⁴ But Black subjects were more than simply “kept in their place” or even eradicated: they are also, as Fanon emphasizes, “castrated.”¹⁵ Extending Sartre’s suggestion that Jews are “perpetually overdetermined from the inside,” Fanon insists that “I am overdetermined from the outside,” pointing beyond mere similarities between the two toward substantive symbolic differences.¹⁶ Anti-Black racism functions on the basis of the view from *without* rather than what goes on *within*, and Black subjects — subject to an inescapable corporeality — are constantly prisoners of an “epidermal racial schema.”¹⁷

The objective here is not to insist that either anti-Semitism or anti-Black racism is somehow *worse* than the other — Fanon himself avers that “it is utopian to try to differentiate one kind of inhuman behavior from another” — but instead to ground both in the *longue durée* history of colonialism. But in the process, the inverse argument — that the Frankfurt School’s emphasis on anti-Semitism was understandable given their context — also falters: theirs was still very much and very evidently a colonial world (426). In other words, Césaire and Fanon would view Adorno and Horkheimer’s diagnosis of anti-Semitism as in fact a *misdiagnosis*

resulting from the attempt to locate the germ of Nazism as endogenous to Europe.¹⁸

As a result of this European blind spot, what Baum generously deems a “triadic racial schema” is in fact far from it, limited as it is to a few scant comments that stand contradicted by assertions of the historical singularity of anti-Semitism (423). If we want to develop a *truly* triadic (that is, non reductive) analysis, we need to overcome rather than celebrate this misdiagnosis, take stock of substantive similarities but also key differences between the historical function of anti-Semitism and colonial racisms, and situate these in relation to one another on the stable ground of persistent coloniality.

We can perform a similar decolonial critique on what Baum celebrates as the Frankfurt School’s contribution of a concept of racist mimesis, according to which the healthy mimesis of dialectical thinking stands opposed to the perverse mimesis of identity thinking (424). While Horkheimer and Adorno “highlighted how the inequities of capitalist societies foster tendencies to regressive mimesis,” this inhumanity has a long history that renders it neither a universal tendency nor a proclivity of individuals at a specific historical moment (425). Between the two there stands what we could describe in this context as a two-sided colonial mimesis that Fanon approaches, first, by disputing the ostensible universality of psychic structures, and second, by sketching both sides of this perversely mimetic relation, in which the racialized subject is figured as absolutely other while simultaneously desiring whiteness (the imago for both white and Black is one and the same in its whiteness).¹⁹

To turn again to Dussel, colonialism itself bears a specific relationship to difference, as a massive, difference-consuming machine that voraciously internalizes the other through a logic of the same that he describes — again inverting colonial pretensions — as an “insatiable cannibalism [*antropofagia*].”²⁰ This rapacious mimesis, moreover — here echoing Césaire — transformed the very subjectivity of the colonizer in the process, laying in its practical brutality the foundation for Enlightenment theories of unrestrained rationality and sovereignty: “The modern *ego cogito* was anticipated by more than a century by the practical, Spanish-Portuguese *ego conquiro* (I conquer) that imposed its will (the first modern “will-to-power”) on the indigenous populations of the Americas.”²¹

If our goal is truly epistemic decolonization — which Baum associates with Adorno’s concept of “working through the past” to resist “collective amnesia” (426) — then we must confront head-on the broadest parameters according to which that past is structured: the colonial enterprise. Baum gestures in this direction when he rightly emphasizes the “constitutive” role of colonialism and racism for the development of global capitalism (421), providing both important nuances for rethinking

how race functions, and an imperative to truly come to grips with the weight of the past on the present.

But when he sets his sights on critically revising the Frankfurt School, he does so largely according to the parameters Horkheimer and Adorno themselves set. The result is a revision that remains almost entirely immanent to Frankfurt School critical theory itself; one that draws upon Fraser and Honneth, supplemented by Weber, and in which the only truly decolonial voice — that of Fanon — appears momentarily only to recede into the background, his most potent insights left untapped. This, I believe, is a missed opportunity to dig deeper and to press harder.

On a conceptual level, and despite noting the formative role of racism in global capitalism, Baum’s revision of the Frankfurt School maintains Horkheimer and Adorno’s framing of race as mediated by economic factors. This is not to deny such mediation, but to make a subtler point: that by placing this relation front and center, Baum turns immediately to grapple with the fraught relation of race and class in a way that is more additive than historical, and in the process turns away from deeper challenges to the entire equation. The key question is not, how has global capitalism “parceled out recognition and misrecognition”? (427) It is, instead, how has the global modern, colonial, capitalist order been constituted *on the basis of* non-recognition from day one? To describe colonialism as constitutive of capitalism means we should analyze it as such by directly addressing the underlying coloniality of modernity itself, capitalism included.

Specifically, this mediation draws Baum away from grasping the dynamics of racial imposition, and dangerously close to an uncritical politics of recognition. While Baum productively re-centers racial *identity*, emphasizing the subjective aspect against the overly structural approaches to assigned status, he neglects in the process identity as imposition. Approaching the question from without — through the phenomenology of racialized subjects — here overlaps with and reveals the weight of the view from without: as Fanon describes his involuntary embrace of the irrationality of Black identity, “I had to choose. What am I saying? I had no choice.”²² He is, in other words, forced to embrace Black identity as a political and indeed dialectical phenomenon — neither purely chosen nor imposed — through which he must pass if a universal world is ever to be crafted.

The second point follows directly from the first: Baum’s re-centering of the voluntary aspects of identity leads toward solutions that remain bound to recognition in a way that dulls their decolonial impulse. The concept of misrecognition that Baum derives from Honneth is not equivalent to Fanon’s theory of racial non-recognition — an absence of what he terms “ontological resistance.”²³ Similarly, where status evokes

the ontological universality of Hegelian ground, Fanon disputes this in his revision of the master–slave dialectic, insisting that rather than a differential or denigrated status, Black subjects suffer non-status and non-Being. Not only does an emphasis on recognition run the risk of missing the point for colonized subjects, it also smuggles in its own dangers, in what Glen Coulthard — following Fanon — has recently termed the “colonial politics of recognition.”²⁴ I worry that Baum’s “politics of cultural recognition” leans too far toward what he describes, in Adorno’s terms, as “the reconciliation of differences” instead of a thoroughgoing decolonization. Thus where Baum turns to Fanon to advocate the “deconstructive transformation” of “whiteness,” a more Fanonian solution would be its abolition.²⁵

Bruce Baum is absolutely correct to suggest that “Critical Theory itself needs to be decolonized” (421), but even when its object is European thought, epistemic decolonization is never for Europe alone. In fact, whereas Baum turns to Sartre’s “Preface” to *Wretched of the Earth* for inspiration in this task, Sartre himself admits as much in the same passage: warning that Fanon’s book is “not addressed to us,” and insisting that the question of what Europeans decide to do with themselves is entirely secondary.²⁶ The entire point of Sartre’s preface for a book that has “has no need for a preface” was instead to disrupt European narcissism and emphasize the autonomy of the colonized through which “the Third World discovers *itself* and speaks to *itself*”: boldly, loudly, and without a whiff of deference.²⁷

Europeans, open this book, look inside. After taking a short walk in the night you will see strangers gathered around a fire, get closer and listen. They are discussing the fate reserved for your trading posts and for the mercenaries defending them. They might see you, but they will go on talking among themselves without even lowering their voices.²⁸

Nothing would stunt the decolonial project more than turning it inward, making of it a process of Euro-American self-reflection that yields at best an overly reconciled and recognition-based approach to decolonization, and at worst an expiatory process of self-flagellation. Instead it must be grounded in an appeal to exteriority that is simultaneously — if imperfectly — both theoretical and geographical.

If “working through the past” is a question of accepting responsibility for past inhumanity, this is to be welcomed, but we should be clear that thoroughgoing decolonization is both much more, and much more one-sided, than this. Decolonization is not a truth and reconciliation commission in which two sides participate as equals: “To destroy the colonial world means nothing less than demolishing the colonist’s sector, burying it deep within the earth or banishing it from the terri-

tory,” or more provocatively still, “the substitution of one ‘species’ of mankind by another.”²⁹ What does this mean for epistemic decolonization? Which is another way of asking: what is the outside from which we decolonize European thought?

If Baum is concerned that too many “turn away” from Frankfurt School critical theory, then Fanon’s reply would appear to be as straightforward as it is blunt: as he puts it in the conclusion to *Wretched of the Earth*, “Let us leave this Europe which never stops talking of man yet massacres him at everyone of its street corners, at every corner of the world.” Against not only racist mimesis but also the “sickening mimicry” ingrained in the colonized, Fanon insists that decolonization begins with the radical decision to “change sides,” thereby locating the political and epistemic leverage for decolonization *outside, beyond* Europe, in what Dussel would call radical “exteriority.”³⁰ And yet, despite the “obnoxious narcissism” of European thought, here was a thinker steeped in the classics in a Caribbean colony, educated as a psychiatrist in the metropole, and who drank deeply and unashamedly from the fount of European thought, integrating-while-decolonizing dialectics, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis alike.

In reality, despite the leverage posed by an appeal to the outside, Fanon himself — and the practical and epistemic decolonization he formulated and enacted — is more liminal than external to European powers and traditions, rejecting neither out of hand. Europe proposed “prodigious theses” on the rights and equality of humanity while contradicting those very pronouncements in practice, and the task is therefore to “solve the problems this Europe was incapable of finding the answers to” itself.³¹ This is not, then, a call to abandon or much less “demolish” Frankfurt School critical theory, but instead to ruthlessly but generously take what is most usefully human in it and move forward from there. To move forward, to advance the cause of humanity, according to Fanon, “we must innovate, we must be pioneers,” and — on the terrain of epistemic decolonization that seeks to “develop a new way of thinking” — we must also be more daring.³²

NOTES

1. Bruce Baum, “Decolonizing Critical Theory,” *Constellations* 22 (2015), 420–34. For some of the recent contributions to this turn, see Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Charles Mills, “Decolonizing Western Political Philosophy,” *New Political Science* 37 (2015): 1–24; and Robert Nichols, “Indigeneity and the Settler Contract Today,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 39 (2013): 165–86, and “Disaggregating Primitive Accumulation,” *Radical Philosophy* 194 (2015): 18–28. Specifically

on the coloniality of knowledge see Edgardo Lander, ed., *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales Perspectivas latinoamericanas* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2000).

2. Baum immediately clarifies that the object of his decolonization effort is “Critical Theory” and not “critical theory” (431 n. 2), although this necessary clarification runs the unintended risk of a total substitution — whereby the Frankfurt School becomes a stand-in for critical theory tout court. This apparently minor detail is, in fact, a serious challenge.

3. Dussel is a particularly relevant figure in this case. On the one hand, he counts the Frankfurt School as a central influence, and seeks to synthesize aspects of what he considers to be the material concerns of the “first generation” of the Frankfurt School with the communicative orientation of the “second generation.” However, he insists that “along with Marcuse, we read the Martinican Frantz Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la Terre* . . . since our reflections were situated in the post-colonial periphery.” Enrique Dussel, “From Critical Theory to the Philosophy of Liberation: Some Themes for Dialogue,” *Transmodernity* 1 (2011), 16. On the other hand, Dussel’s very category of exteriority is inspired by Emanuel Levinas, for whom an ethics of alterity is understandably grounded in Jewish thought and the experience of anti-Semitism. But, recounting a 1971 conversation with Levinas in which it becomes apparent that the latter had never considered the possibility of an exteriority situated outside Europe, Dussel is driven to transform exteriority by concretizing it in relation to specific communities and global geopolitics. Enrique Dussel, *Para una fundamentación filosófica de la liberación Latinoamericana* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Bonum, 1974), 8.

4. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept,” *Cultural Studies* 21 (2007), 263. See Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves and Selya Benhabib, eds., *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997); Axel Honneth, Thomas McCarthy, Claus Offe, and Albrecht Wellmer, eds., *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

5. Enrique Dussel, “Beyond Eurocentrism: The World-System and the Limits of Modernity,” in Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, eds., *The Cultures of Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

6. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995 [1955]), 36.

7. *Ibid.*, 37.

8. *Ibid.*, 39.

9. *Ibid.*, 35.

10. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008 [1952]), 101.

11. *Ibid.*, 101, 69.

12. See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “AAR Centennial Roundtable: Religion, Conquest, and Race in the Foundations of the Modern/Colonial World,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82 (2014), 636–65.

13. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Vol. I, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso, 2004

[1960]), 303. On extermination campaigns, see Sven Lindqvist, *Exterminate All the Brutes* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

14. Loïc Wacquant, “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration,” *New Left Review* 13 (2002), 41–61. Following Wacquant’s analysis to the present further reveals that the imperative to contain (versus exterminate) Black Americans is a historical phenomenon rooted in the need for this now-obsolete labor force.

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

16. *Ibid.*, 95.

17. *Ibid.*, 92. In a very different context, I would add, the decolonial sociologist Aníbal Quijano insists that race is itself a form of social classification. Aníbal Quijano, “Colonialidad del poder y clasificación social,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 6 (2000): 342–86.

18. On 432, n. 59, Baum affirmatively cites Neil MacMaster’s suggestion that anti-Semitism and anti-Black racism have “totally different” causes, locating the origins of the former as endogenous to Europe.

19. Fanon, 139–41, n. 25. It is worth adding that this is not so much a “terrified mimesis” emerging as reaction, but instead is the slow work of centuries (Baum, 424).

20. Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985 [1975]), 65, see also 52–53.

21. Enrique Dussel, “Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism,” trans. J. Krauel and V. Tuma, *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1 (2000), 471.

22. Fanon, 106.

23. *Ibid.*, 90.

24. Coulthard.

25. For an example of this, see Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

26. Jean-Paul Sartre, “Preface,” in Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004 [1961]), lvii.

27. *Ibid.*, xlvi.

28. *Ibid.*, xlviii. The deferential position Sartre assumes in his preface is a far cry from the domineering perspective of his 1948 *Orphée Noir*, also a preface. I have argued elsewhere that this shift in tone has everything to do with Fanon’s severe critique of *Orphée Noir* in *Black Skin, White Masks*. George Ciccariello-Maher, “The Internal Limits of the European Gaze: Intellectuals and the Colonial Difference,” *Radical Philosophy Review* 9 (2006), 139–65.

29. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 6, 1.

30. *Ibid.*, 235.

31. *Ibid.*, 238.

32. *Ibid.*, 239.

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