Frantz Fanon’s Political Thought on Tabula Rasa: A Recommendation for Racial Justice

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Abstract

Fanon’s political thought on tabula rasa is highly still in demand by the racialised subjects who continue to daily experience racial injustice. Uniquely, his political thought on how the racialised black subjects should be free, is still relevant to contemporary politics in a sense that it resonates with the current political and racial problems. Fanon remains distinctive in his dialectics, as his dialectics have the potential to create the conditions for existential lives for the racialised black subjects. Using qualitative as an approach, this article justifies such a distinctiveness based on the fact that Hegel’s and Marx’s dialectics are limited to an end, while Fanon’s dialectics are renewal and continual—linked to an enduring struggle. This is the recommended struggle—a highway for racialised black subjects to durable racial justice for all. Based on the fact that tabula rasa is explained as a potential tool for the creation of a new beginning and new humanism, this article elucidates that genuine and durable racial justice for all cannot happen without the intervention of tabula rasa. Why? Because, for Fanon, tabula rasa disposes of the minimum of what the oppressed and racialised subjects have willed, called for, or demanded.

Introduction

This article aims to examine how Fanon’s conception of tabula rasa is a dialectic requirement for the establishment of genuine racial justice. It explicates how Fanon marshals tabula rasa as the conception of authentique liberation, which should be undertaken by black subjects under racial (domination) injustice to reach self-determination (Ndayisenga, 2021). Tabula rasa is originally a Latin concept that was coined by Locke (1689) in arguing that at birth, the mind of a newborn is a tabula rasa (a blank slate) that other experienced human beings, fill with (new) ‘ideas’ in order to train such a newborn to be able to survive in the world. Likewise, in their observation, Agarwal et al. (2022) define tabula rasa as an early phase of human growth that is without any prior knowledge. In such a perspective, it means at his/her naissance, a newborn’s brain is a tabula rasa—an empty memory that starts to accumulate and be filled by new knowledge(s) from other experienced people in his/her daily life on this earth.

According to Brakeley (2022), “The idea of the human mind as a Tabula Rasa dates back to ancient Greece. Several different thinkers and philosophers have used the term, though not always with the same meaning” (p. 1). However, “Not everyone agrees that people are born with a completely blank slate” (Fritscher, 2022, p.6). Contextualising this to race and racial justice for all and keeping in mind that colonialism is an endless project, Fanon ([1961] 1990) 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. Here, such minimum demands cannot be separated from justice for all in a racially unjust society where black subjects become victims. 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] 1990) and such a brisk change may be beneficial for colonised subjects who do not have anything to lose but everything to gain.
Likewise, in his political thought, Ndayisenga (2021) observes that “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) who deserve to be thrown in hell. Rationally, tabula rasa thus intervenes as the potential tool that can accommodate all kinds of colonised subjects to register in the anti-black world. This is because, with the colonial system in mind, black subjects are dehumanised and objectified, while objects are humanised and valued. Therefore, tabula rasa’s main importance here should be justified by the fact that it has the full capacity to restore and reinvent other different possibilities of life for those who were oppressed due to their race (Ndayisenga, 2021). This paper advances that tabula rasa intervenes in the creation of new humanity (for both the coloniser and colonised) and also permits black subjects to be fairly judged like other human beings under a particular country’s law system. Another particularity is that this paper will contribute to new knowledge—it will provide new literature on Fanon’s political thought on the concept of tabula rasa—especially on how tabula rasa is recommendable for the destruction of the anti-black world and the construction of a new world that accommodates and accepts the diversity of races. We should deeply think about, “Who invented the scientific concept of race?” (Bernasconi, 2001, p. 11). The invention of the scientific concept of race took place after the introduction of the broad division of peoples based on colour, nationality, and other inherited characteristics (Bernasconi, 2001).

Concerning the structure and organisation of this paper, this article first discusses Fanon’s political imagination on a tabula rasa. Secondly, the article engages with Fanon on the problématique of racial injustice: twofold dialectics. Thirdly, the article embarks on Fanon’s new humanism explained as a dialectic requirement for fair justice for all. Lastly, before this paper concludes, it critically discusses the theme of liberation and justice for all.

**Fanon’s political imagination on the tabula rasa**

In the context of this piece, tabula rasa should be explained as a terrifying moment that permits the reinvention and reimagining of existential conditions. Precisely, Fanon ([1961] 1990) describes what tabula rasa means and entails:

> But we have precisely chosen to speak of that kind of *tabula rasa* which characterises at the outset all decolonisation. Its unusual importance is that it constitutes, from the very first day, the minimum demands of the colonised. To tell the truth, the proof of success lies in a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up. The extraordinary importance of this change is that it is willed, called for, and demanded. (Fanon, [1961] 1990, p. 27)

For Fanon above, a decolonised society through which justice for all may emerge, cannot be realised in the absence of tabula rasa. It is therefore a foundation of genuine liberation and justice for all including the prejudicially rejected black subjects. Importantly, since its beginning, tabula rasa fulfils the minimum demands for black subjects in their journey to a fair society that respects and lives justice for all (Ndayisenga, 2021, p. 83). Ndayisenga (2021) advances that tabula rasa reverses the world and renders all human beings equal by changing everything from the bottom up and responding positively to those who are willing to change and hungry for fairness in their society.

Fanon ([1961] 1990) states that tabula rasa should be connoted as the beginning (the zero point) of everything. Tabula rasa as a fundamental change that results in decolonial turn is, therefore, simultaneously the beginning of life and the loss of fugitive/fabricated life. In amplification, according to Marriott (2018), “tabula rasa is a paradoxical suspension of time which is also a radically new beginning” (p. 2). Here, Marriott testifies how tabula rasa cancels the recorded history and invents a possible new time that benefits all, and which is characterised by a radical new beginning for everyone in the new society. Tabula rasa is also a principle that underlies several different therapeutic techniques (Fritscher, 2022). Here, Fritscher’s concern is that tabula rasa is a healing method for those who have been negatively affected by colonial oppression.

Relevantly, Fanon’s conception of tabula rasa is still assessed as a potential tool that disposes of the necessary conditions of different conceptions of existential life. Another great point of indebtedness is that “Fanon’s oeuvre contributed to the construction of another self to reflect on the one that had been lost” (Marriott,
2000, p. 67). Fanon contributed with extensive work in different domains; and Relevantly played a major role to expose to the fore of what colonialism is. Since the publication of *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1961, Fanon’s work has been deeply significant for generations of intellectuals and activists from the 1960s to the present day (Khalfa & Young, 2018). It is from this perspective, that this paper argues that Fanon’s conception of tabula rasa should be unmuted as it has the promising power to challenge the unending issue of racial injustice that characterises the anti-black world. According to Mbembe (2012), “every single word of Fanon was a deposition in favour of this damaged and ruined existence” (p. 22). In other words, Fanon was preoccupied with the restoration of the existence of the black subject. This means that Fanon encourages black subjects to be aware that tabula rasa and decolonisation are two inseparable elements—for true liberation and justice for all, and this is justified by the fact that “Frantz Fanon’s thought has been key to the understanding of the lived experiences of black colonised subjects in the modern contemporary world” (Nkosinkulu, 2023, p. 1). Using qualitative as the research approach, once interpreted in this paper, collected data on the concept of tabula rasa indicate that the absence of tabula rasa immediately means the absence of genuine liberation—decolonisation and the continuation of racial injustice in the anti-black world.

In support of Fanon’s idea which advances that tabula rasa should be described as the beginning of the world’s impartial, automatic, and untouchable judge; in fact, “a decolonial violence leads to a tabula rasa bringing judgment into a play, but one without jurisdiction” (Marriott, 2018, p. 228). In a psychological context, Fritscher (2022) reminds Marriott that “Tabula rasa is a theory of knowledge in psychology suggesting that people are born without innate mental content and that all knowledge originates from the external world” (p. 8). Linking this to the context of this paper, tabula rasa is that phase when the colonised are suppressed and all regain a kind of new humanism that is not characterised by superiority or inferiority. Tabula rasa cancels the law that oppresses the colonised and exposes the hidden reality (Ndayisenga, 2021). In Ndayisenga’s (2021) understanding, tabula rasa regulates all abnormalities caused by colonialism. It is such a colonialism that fabricated blackness. From this view, “Blackness as the condition of being temporary-permanent means blackness is a point of departure, a *tabula rasa* of the black figure” (Nkosinkulu, 2023, p. 9) that permits him/her to shift from non-being to being. Even though tabula rasa is a terrifying moment, it is the only form of decolonisation supported by the element of violence, which can lead black subjects to a fundamental change, a highway to a society that supports fair justice for all.

In proceeding, Marriott (2018) observes:

In these situations said to found law or state, the category of tabula rasa all too well describes that moment when the order of things is changing from top to bottom . . . these moments are terrifying moments . . . That is what Fanon is calling the tabula rasa. (Marriott, 2018, p. 176)

Marriott elucidates tabula rasa as the moment when the existing order of things changes from top to bottom; it takes a new direction where those who were excluded by colonialism regain their status as human beings who qualify to be registered in the world (Ndayisenga, 2021). It should be kept in mind that generally, “The Tabula Rasa philosophies typically align more closely with empiricism, as they suggest that people begin with no knowledge (or no self) and then, through empirical experiences, develop their understanding of the world and the self” (Brakeley, 2022, p. 1).

Regrettably, the world is subjected to endless colonialism that is characterised by racial discrimination. Fanon ([1952]2008) declares that life is exposed to risks and pains. In light of this, Fanon ([1952] 2008) asserts, “I find myself one day in a world where things are hurtful; a world where I am required to fight; a world where it is always a question of defeat or victory” (p. 203). For more concerns in this regard, Fanon laments about the colonial absurdity towards the world itself and humanity. When he says that he found himself in a world where things are hurtful and that required him to fight, he means that he lived under colonial conditions that obliged him to fight for him to justify his existence denied by the world structured in a Manichean manner. It is witnessed that Fanon eventually received anonymous death threats and survived a bomb explosion outside his home (Lee, 2015, p. 117). As a result, the colonial conditions obliged Fanon to stand up and fight against racial discrimination and fair justice for all to the point that he ended up engaging in a merciless war.
In addition, Marriott (2018) writes that “For Fanon, the mobilisation of the wretched is an event or a decision that is radically unpredictable and entails a beginning that is irreducibly violent, and one that leads to a ‘total, complete and absolute substitution’, or tabula rasa” (p. 259). Tabula rasa substitutes the existing world into a new world that accommodates black subjects as human beings who deserve to repossess all of their human qualities, privileges, and attributes. Generally, “From social death to tabula rasa, for Fanon, destructive violence is the process through which the socially dead acquire a new symbolic form” (Marriott, 2018, p. 72). Here, for justice for all to have naissance, Fanon maintains that violent struggle is inevitable.

According to Fanon ([1959] 1965), “We must remember that colonialism has often strengthened or established its domination by organising ‘the petrification of the country districts’” (p. 87). Here, Fanon is concerned about how colonialism as a violent project has used all means of terror to render the citizen as stone—an object that is not able to move anymore or anywhere inflicted with terror—petrified and racially discriminated. To clarify the meaning of petrification, Ficek puts it in these words:

‘Petrification’ also evokes the monstrosity of colonialism. When we are terrified, horrified, or frightened, we sometimes become ‘petrified with fear.’ We cannot move; we cannot scream. Agency abandons us—or is taken from us—and for a few moments we are stuck in time. (Ficek, 2011, p. 77)

Therefore, the fact that they have lost hope of escaping this ongoing petrifying moment linked to everyday life encourages black subjects to engage in a terrifying struggle characterised by a tumult of war and a noise of cries. In addition, Fanon views the revolution as a moment of tumult and ecstasy in which de-petrification allows the discharge of entirely new libidinal expenditure that further allows new relations of love, pleasure, and new forms of aesthetic culture to appear (Marriott, 2018, p. 72). Relevantly, Ficek (2011) mentions, “shortly before his death, for example, Fanon regretted not being able to die on the battlefield, a risk with which he was more familiar” (p. 75). Fanon was a questioning body that was exposed morally and physically to the cause of human liberation—a real and determined fighter. Mignolo and Tlostanova (2009) witness that decolonial thinking and decolonial option are projects led and created by the social actor Fanon. Undeniably, this justifies that Fanon remains not only the father and the master of decolonial thought but also greatly contributed to mapping out how racial injustice should come to its end.

Bravely, Fanon ([1961] 1990) continues to propose a way out for black subjects to live in a society that is free from racial injustice as he reveals that:

All values are irrevocably poisoned and diseased as soon as they are allowed in contact with the colonised race. The customs of the colonised people, their traditions, their myths – above all, their myths – are the very sign of that poverty of spirit and their constitutional depravity. That is why we must put the DDT [dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane] which destroys parasites, the bearers of disease, on the same level as the Christian religion which wages war on embryonic heresies and instincts, and on evil as yet unborn. (Fanon [1961] 1990:32)

Unfortunately, from the beginning of the conquest period, the values and human attributes of black subjects have been rejected. Fanon ([1961] 1990) exposes that all values of black subjects were poisoned by colonialism. Consequently, Fanon proposes that DDT should counter-respond to the negative impacts of colonialism. This means that colonialism is the poison itself, which must be cured by applying its rival: DDT, to intervene as a vigorous tool of decolonisation. Black subjects should consider the decolonisation period, as a fruitful time of harvest. Fanon ([1961] 1990) assumes, “He is offered definite values, he is told frequently that decolonisation need not mean regression, and that he must put his trust in qualities which are well-tried, solid, and highly esteemed” (p. 33). This shows that decolonisation is an unavoidable transformation phase of the black subject into a real true human being. It is the anti-madness that reconverts colonised subjects into real and true humans because “Madness is one of the ways that humans have of losing their freedom” (Fanon, 2018, p. 434).

Marriott (2018) elucidates “The appeal here is not to a retributive or distributive justice, but to the dark chaos of tabula rasa, which Fanon evokes as a ‘dialectic requirement’” (p. 188). Marriott advances that for Fanon tabula rasa has to be a dialectic requirement because it is the chaos that intervenes with the motive
of creating another place that comes in favour of black subjects. Significantly, Ficek (2011) demonstrates how in the colonial world, black subjects are denied the freedom they deserve, as the main target for the coloniser is to petrify the black subjects completely. The coloniser would like to create a world so saturated with seriousness that its opposite—playfulness—would be nowhere to be found (Ficek, 2011, p. 80). Such a petrified world needs to be confronted by black subjects who have decided to escape la terreur of colonialism. They have to engage in an enduring struggle to cut the existing colonial relationship and the racial injustice that is found in the terrain.

What remains as a lacuna is that the said relationship is not reciprocal as the master knows the black subject, but the black subject does not know his master. According to Gibson (2011), “the colonial social relation was characterised by a combination of super-exploitation and everyday humiliation that reduced the colonised to not-quite-human and sub-historical status” (p. 101). This everyday humiliation is extreme in the sense that there is a subordination of white mastery in a society that is under the conditions of colonialism.

Marriott is clear that the dialectic requirement evoked by Fanon is the conception of tabula rasa. Marriott adds:

It is in response to this ecstatic revolutionary movement toward liberation, where the whole relationship to the colony is reinvented, where every social relation enters into crisis and disorder, where the space and time of the new nation produce both ascesis and excess, that the socially dead are meant to rejoin the ranks of the living . . . th[e]ir changing relationship to the disorder from which a tabula rasa emerges. (Marriott, 2018, p. 191)

In essence, Marriott above explains how the colon and black subjects’ changing relationship to disorder affects society to complete death insofar as the same society will fundamentally be changed to a new society that is not imposed on law or any state’s authority. It is a society that results from a total disorder; a new society lived by people who do not need any protocol or guidance of what has to be done in their everyday lives—a society free of racial injustice and recognised and validated by all society members.

Fanon ([1961] 1990) accentuates, “but the war goes on; and we will have to bind up for years to come to the many, sometimes ineffaceable, wounds that the colonialist onslaught has inflicted on our people” (p. 200). Here, Fanon reveals how since the conquest period, it has been obligatory for black subjects to fight against the illegal Western invasion of political, racial, economic, cultural, educational, and justice affairs, to name only but a few. The next section is about Fanon’s reasoning on racial injustice.

**Fanon on problématique of racial injustice: twofold dialectics**

According to Fanon ([1952] 2008), “Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose himself on another man to be recognized by him” (p. 191). Fanon’s concern is that as long as black subjects are not effectively recognised by their master, the same master continues to control all actions of black subjects. Consequently, the lives of black subjects are defined by their master as black subjects always depend on their master’s no-reciprocal recognition (Ndayisenga, 2021). Such absence of reciprocal recognition is maintained by the prejudice and racial injustice that is daily lived and experienced by black subjects in a world that is anti-black.

Relevantly, Fanon’s dialectics are assessed as unique insofar as Fanon’s dialectics are for existence and confront the endless dehumanization caused by colonialism. Thus, Fanon’s imagination on tabula rasa advanced is still the only option to be embraced by the black subject for him/her to be able to mute colonialism—a root of racial injustice: to permit the reciprocal recognition to happen. In this regard, Fanon alerts in these clear terms:

But the former slave wants to have himself recognised. There is at the basis of Hegelian dialectic absolute reciprocity that must be highlighted. It is when I go beyond my immediate existential being that I apprehend the being of the other as a natural reality and more than that. If I shut off the circuit, if I make the two-way movement unachievable, I keep the other within himself. To an extreme degree, I deprive him even of this being-for-self. (Fanon, [1952] 2008, p. 191–192)
The condition is that the reciprocal recognition cannot fall as manna; it comes from a struggle that costs the head of the black subject. While Hegelian dialectics were only concerned with the freedom of the black subject, however, Fanon’s dialectics are beyond Hegelian thinking in Fanon’s argument, the black subject needs to shut the circuit down or cut the relation with its group, which is led by the master (Ndayisenga, 2021). As a point of importance, this cutting requires asking a question, but the same question is turned on its head. “Fanon thus turned the question on its head, showing that it was impossible to talk about a group” (Gibson & Beneduce, 2017, p. 248). This shows how black subjects are flooded by questions, but they live with them without asking the master because the same questions are returned unanswered to themselves. However:

What we want to do is to go forward all the time, night and day, in the company of Man, in the company of all men. The caravan should not be stretched out, for in that case, each line will hardly see those who precede it, and men who no longer recognise each other meet less and less together, and talk to each other less and less. (Fanon, [1961] 1990, p. 254)

Here, Fanon declares that with a decolonised society, the caravan should not be stretched out. With the presence of justice for all, white people who have declared themselves masters, therefore, have to recognise black subjects and vice-versa. At the point above, Mbembe agrees with Fanon that a decolonised community is a community on the march, a community of walkers, a vast universal caravan (Mbembe, 2010, p. 17 Originally translated from French ). In this regard, Mbembe relativizes a decolonised community with a community that is characterised by fair justice and no racial discrimination. Sharpe’s (2016) concern is that “to be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding” (p. 13–14). Here, Sharpe encourages black subjects to be ready for the endless struggle for justice for all kinds of races in the diverse society. Therefore, to understand Fanon’s dialectics, it first requires a deep understanding of how Fanon justifies the dual significations of the concept of violence as for him there is a colonial violence and the counter-violence the latter being a derivation from the first. For Fanon ([1961]1990), counter-violence should be assessed as the arbitrator between the coloniser and the colonised.

In amplification, Sekyi-Otu (1996) declares, “I, too, will go along with Hegel and call Fanon’s account of this movement a dialecticof experience” (p. 26). Fanon’s dialectics are for existence as such dialectics create the necessary conditions of life in the continuity. In the same context, Fanon’s texts speak to us with immensely complex and compelling force when we read their contents as speech acts in the moving body of a dramatic narrative (Sekyi-Otu, 1996, p. 237). Within the same context, Sithole (2015) considers Fanon as an Africana existentialist philosopher. Fanon’s philosophies about the politics of liberation and justice for all, are still relevant to our contemporary period and will never die. Zahar ([1969] 1974) could not be late to witness that through the act of violence, the colonised are capable of freeing themselves from their reified status and becoming human beings once again.

In contrast to both Zahar and Fanon above, Von Holdt (2012) uses different glasses of assessment in arguing that when violence appears it is often the ordinary people who suffer the most. Von Hold (2012) continues to contrast with Fanon in justifying that during violence ordinary people’s clinics and libraries are burnt down. However, under colonial conditions and an unjust society, the same ordinary people do not possess anything, because as Fanon ([1961] 1990) reminds Von Holdt, during the struggle for genuine liberation and justice for all, the citizens do not have anything to lose but everything to gain.

According to Fanon ([1959] 1965), “It is the necessities of combat that give rise in Algerian society to new attitudes, to new modes of action, and new ways” (p. 64). Here, Fanon’s concern is to unpack that black subjects will never be able to create the possibilities of new ways of life, without engaging in the enduring struggle. Significantly, Ciccariello-Maher (2017) posits:

Whereas Hegel presumed a shared basis for reciprocity and ultimately recognition, Fanon diagnoses the existence of a ‘zone of nonbeing’ inhabited by the racialised, which prevents the dialectic from entering into motion, to begin with. Second, confronted with this absence of reciprocity—and lack of dialectical motion—
Fanon turns to the one-sided subjective combat set into motion by those disqualified nonbeings. This combat takes the precise form of the ‘violent’ self-assertion of Black identity, a ‘making oneself known’ that prepares the basis for further dialectical movement. (Ciccariello-Maher, 2017, p. 53–54)

Ciccariello-Maher above assesses Hegel’s dialectics, as incomplete dialectics as it is based on one side of recognition, where only the master knows very well the colonised subject and not vice versa. Ciccariello-Maher (2017) explains that Fanon’s dialectics assessed that what is stopping the recognition from both sides is that the world is divided into two zones: one zone for the oppressor and another zone for the racialised and oppressed subjects. Fanon’s dialectics insist on how those two zones have to be abolished for the reciprocal recognition between the white master and the black subject to occur. Ciccariello-Maher (2017) elucidates as well that the endless struggle that is called for the black subjects, is a struggle that is not only curative but also a regulatory element of human society.

According to Mbembe (2017), Fanon’s project of the collective rise of humanity is for existence and this is justified by the fact that:

If there is one thing that will never die in Fanon, it is the project of the collective rise of humanity … Each human subject, and each people, was to engage in a grand project of self-transformation, in a struggle to the death, without reserve. (Mbembe, , 2017, p. 162)

This struggle to death obliges all black subjects as a whole to take part in it and to be proud of it while searching for durable peace for all races—it means, the race of the coloniser and that of the colonised. It is a struggle for creation. Fanon’s dialectics cannot be detached from the enduring struggle that creates the conditions of existence. Relevantly, Fanonism is best known for seeking new sovereignty; nothing could be more Fanonian than affirming the coming revolution whose proud claim is to redeem the colonised humanity (Marriott, 2018, p. 2).

For Fanon ([1961] 1990), “the human condition, plans for mankind and collaboration between men in those tasks which increase the total of humanity are new problems, which demand true inventions” (p. 252). In his understanding, new problems for Fanon have to be resolved by genuine inventions that originate from dialectics of existence. Hegel’s dialectics are more about recognising the master through work while Marx’s dialectics are more concerned about changing the order of the world. Exception and relevance are that both Hegel’s and Marx’s conceptions of dialectics are characterised by limit/end and Fanon realises that this limit should be cancelled if the oppressed subject engages in the enduring struggle (Ndayisenga, 2021). Fanon ([1952] 2008) avows, “I must constantly remind myself that the real leap consists of introducing invention into life…in the world, I am heading for, I am endlessly creating myself” (p. 204).

In Fanon’s conception of dialectics, there is no pause. Black subjects have to embrace the enduring and existential struggle as even racial injustice is an endless fact in the current world. From the creation of different sets of conditions of life, it is assumed that “revolution is mankind’s way of living today” (Gilly, ([1959] 1965, p. 1). Therefore, Fanon’s dialectics are dialectics of forever and these dialectics are fashioned through freedom practices in everyday lives. Gibson (2003) asserts that “Though Fanon returns to the issues of freedom and independence, he believes that any chance for reciprocity is utterly ruptured when colour is introduced because there is no recognition of the slave by the master” (p. 34). However, due to colonialism and the continual racial injustice and discrimination, only the master easily recognised the black subject. Therefore, the disaccord with Fanon is rooted that Hegel’s dialectics is more about recognition (as a synthesis) while Marx’s synthesis is utopia and that is why Fanon thus justifies that “One day the white master recognised without a struggle the black slave. But the former slave wants to have himself recognised. There is at the basis of Hegelian dialectic absolute reciprocity that must be highlighted” (Fanon [1952] 2008:191).

In clarification of Fanon’s statement above, due to the perpetuity of colonialism, the black subject is living the life for another because “the black figure remains in a permanent state of being a child, a child of the white subject, a child of the empire, a child of Europe, a child of capitalism, a child of underdevelopment, a child of poverty” (Nkosinkulu, 2023, p. 8). The black subject cannot be able to describe who he/she is,
as such a description requires the incorporation of whiteness. Fanon suspends the dialectics of both Hegel and Marx by declaring, “We must leave our dreams and abandon our old beliefs and friendships of the time before life began” (Fanon, [1961] 1990, p. 251). Here, the life that Fanon is revealing to begin is the difficult period of struggle that demands more from black subjects since there is no way to return but only to progress so that they shall be able to know the master. The only way of breaking this vicious cycle is to return to the human reality of masters, which differs from his ordinary reality, through mediation and recognition (Fanon, [1952] 2008, p. 192). Fanon’s new dialectics are more concerned with the existential struggle set as a caravan in continuation. Therefore, in the progress made by a fighting unity over a piece of ground, the end of an ambush does not mean rest but is rather a signal for consciousness to take another step forward, for everything ought to keep pace together (Fanon, [1961] 1990, p. 246). This means that the decolonial struggle is like a caravan in mobility—it is a struggle that continues. Black subjects engaged in such a struggle do not have to fear but consider this period as a moment for permanent sacrifices so that existential conditions of life have naissance (Ndayisenga, 2021). That is why Fanon states:

I demand that an account be taken of my contradictory activity insofar as I pursue something other than life, insofar as I am fighting for the birth of a human world, in other words, a world of reciprocal recognitions. He who is reluctant to recognise me is against me. In a fierce struggle I am willing to feel the shudder of death, the irreversible extinction, but also the possibility of impossibility. (Fanon, [1952] 2008, p. 193)

For one to engage in combat to the death, it requires an understanding of colonial violence that must be confronted by a violent and permanent struggle to the death. According to Gilly ([1959] 1965), “In the revolutionary struggle, the immense, oppressed masses of the colonies and semi-colonies feel that they are a part of life for the first time” (p. 1). The absence or delay of a struggle is what colonialism targets, but black subjects have to know that their real humanity can only be recovered through such a permanent struggle. Therefore, in Fanon’s political thought, people must fight and negate the ongoing colonialism. Fanon ([1959] 1965) assumes, “The person is born, assumes his autonomy, and becomes the creator of his values” (p. 101). In a society that is characterised by the fairness of justice for all regardless of the diversity of different races, the lives of black subjects have to be controlled by themselves and not by the master. Unfortunately, colonialism did not end for the people of Africa and other places, or, if it did end, it has been reinstituted (George, 2018, p. 9). This reinstitution of colonialism indicates that black subjects’ daily lives are exposed to peril that should be given serious attention (Ndayisenga, 2021). The next theme deals with Fanon’s conception of ‘new humanism’.

**Fanon on new humanism: A dialectic requirement for racial fair justice**

New humanism, as the politics of becoming, is the fundamental transformation of paralysed black subjects into new human beings who are no longer exposed to daily torture, dehumanization, discrimination, and racism, to mention but a few (Ndayisenga, 2021). Ndayisenga (2021) further clarifies that such a fundamental change from pseudo-humanity to new humanity of the black subject is explained as the phase of newborns who travel from the ‘old’ world to another radically different new world. At this concern, Fanon ([1961] 1990) writes “Come, then, comrades, it would be as well to decide at once to change our ways” (p. 251). Fanon invites black subjects as a whole to change their modes of life. And, this change is only possible when fair justice for all—regardless of their different races, is achieved. One among many characteristics of ‘new humanism’, is that is a non-viable society, and unfortunately, “A society that forces its members into desperate solutions is a non-viable society, a society that needs replacing” (Fanon, 2018, p. 435) mastery into equality.

This new humanity differs significantly from the given humanity (Ndayisenga, 2021). Ndayisenga’s (2021) concern is that it is the humanity that the colonised have to fight for to chart a way to a durable humanism without oppression and for black subjects to reach self-determination, Fanon insists that the creation of a new humanity is emergent. On the same point, Fanon ([1961] 1990) acknowledges, “This new humanity cannot do otherwise than define a new humanism both for itself and for others” (p. 198). Uniquely, when new
humanism is achieved, both black colonised and white masters are converted into new bodies and the absence of domination among the human species. It is this new humanity which recovers black subjects’ human qualities that have been damaged by dehumanisation (Ndayisenga, 2021, p. 119). Maldonado-Torres (2008) avers, “decolonial turn highlights the epistemic relevance of the enslaved and colonised search for humanity” (p. 7). At this point, he means that true decolonisation recuperates the blacks’ indigenous knowledge.

Fanon ([1961] 1990) suggests that “For Europe, for ourselves and humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man” (p. 255). From this point, it means that “Fanon’s recommendation became a messianic call that traces a map for moving from pseudo-humanism to true and new humanism” (Ndayisenga, 2021, p. 119). Ndayisenga (2021) continues by warning that the creation of the new humanism is in the hands of black subjects, and it is up to them to fight for it. In Fanon’s assessment, the invention of the new concepts would map the proper ideology to be used by all black subjects wherever they are located on different continents. Simultaneously, Kipfer (2011) rapidly completes Fanon’s revelation that “contrary to this false colonial humanism, the liberating horizon of counter-colonialism was a new humanism” (p. 96). At this point, Ndayisenga (2021) further argues that this new humanism concerns the whole of humanity—black subjects included and it seeks to remove the categorisation of the colonised and colonisers by fundamentally changing them into new absolute subjectivities. Such a fundamental change is in demand and called by black colonised subjects because “The black person is overlooked as a human being to the point where he/she is whitewashed to forget the self as a human being and to perceive himself/herself only as an object of the colonial imagination” (Nkosinikulu, 2023, p. 3).

The creation of new humanity is emergent for all black subjects, because “there must be no waiting until the nation has produced new man; there must be no waiting until men are imperceptibly transformed by revolutionary processes in a perpetual renewal”, declares Fanon ([1961] 1990, p. 246). Fanon calls for the colonised to be ready and engage in a perpetual face-to-face struggle, to defeat the endless racial injustice. Due to colonialism, black subjects are not found in the list of registered human beings. At this point, Fanon ([1952] 2008) alerts: “The former slave wants his humanity to be challenged; he is looking for a fight; he wants a brawl” (p. 196). This engagement of black subjects comes from the fact that having made the contours and evaluations of their humanity, black subjects expose their humanity to the trial of an enduring war from which the original humanity shall occur (Ndayisenga, 2021).

As a point of clarification to Fanon’s argument above, Lee (2015) writes, “Decolonisation in its total form offers far more than political independence, but it mainly promises the establishment of a new humanity, liberated from the constraints of Western imperialism and its political, intellectual, and ontological legacies” (p. 178). With the presence of genuine liberation, black subjects become real and independent human beings—new people who have the right to think and suggest society’s principles. As Lee above is concerned, decolonisation fully frees the black subject politically and establishes a new humanism from its first day of achievement (Ndayisenga, 2021).

In addition, Fanon reveals that it seems difficult for the white master to acknowledge his humanity without forcing him/her:

I start suffering from not being a white man insofar as the white man discriminates against me; turns me into a colonised subject; robs me of any value or originality; and tells me I am a parasite in the world ... I will force the white man to acknowledge my humanity. (Fanon [1952] 2008:78)

Here, Fanon explicates how black subjects are prejudicially exposed to physical and moral punishments due to their black skin (Ndayisenga, 2021). Fanon laments about how he could cease to be treated as an object and register himself in the zone of true human beings. Conditionally, Fanon reveals that for any black subject to come out of the zone of non-being and reach well-deserved humanity, the use of force is imperative.

Regrettably, colonialism has obliged all human beings to live one common life for people who completely differ in their myths, cultures, beliefs, and traditions (Ndayisenga, 2021, p. 122). And, this false humanism that wakens Fanon up must immediately be confronted. What should be done in Fanon’s political thought to overcome the colonial false humanism? Certainly, “let us try to create the whole man, whom Europe has been
incapable of bringing to triumphant birth" (Fanon, [1961] 1990, p. 252). At this concern, Fanon attempts to trace the trajectory of the creation of a true new human being, which is linked to discoveries (Ndayisenga, 2021). He adds, “But if we want humanity to advance a step further if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries” (Fanon, [1961] 1990, p. 254). This clarifies how black subjects’ humanity under colonialism, is a humanity that is critical in the way that they cannot invent or discover anything under the pressure of colonial injustice. The next theme is concerned with the journey to liberation and justice for all.

Towards liberation and fair racial justice for all

Decolonisation that sets out to change the order of the world is, obviously, a program of complete disorder (Fanon, [1961] 1990, p. 27). For black subjects to restore their beings, Fanon clarifies that there must be a form of decolonisation that results from a complete disorder. In reality, Fanon meant that genuine liberation cannot happen in the form of donation, but something that those who are suffering have to struggle for. It means that for black subjects to reach fair justice for all, they have to transcend a difficult time characterized by a terrifying war that reverts all to a total disorder (Ndayisenga, 2021).

However, in order to reach true liberation or self-determination, Fanon proposes that “We must shake off the heavy darkness in which we were plunged, and leave it behind. The new day which is already at hand must find us firm, prudent, and resolute (Fanon, [1961] 1990, p. 251). Fanon recommends that black subjects have to cut off any link with colonialism and any other act that is marked by colonial injustice. He encourages black subjects to remain careful and ready to erase the perpetual colonial violence that dehumanises their values and personalities (Ndayisenga, 2021). Like Fanon, Marriott firmly does not believe that genuine liberation should emerge from a compromise:

The infusing power of the revolutionary demand for a tabula rasa without mediation . . . is a demand that intervenes in a general state of disorder and one that in the pursuit of liberation acts without guarantees. There is no state of preparedness here or mass mobilization of opinion: the people’s radical decision involves a refusal and a risk as they struggle to abolish the colonial system by turning its violence against itself. (Marriott 2018:152)

According to the etymological meaning of tabula rasa, amplified by its conceptual meaning in Fanon’s sense, tabula rasa differs far from mediation since it even happens as a surprise, with its main intention to bring or establish fair justice for all (Ndayisenga, 2021). Ndayisenga (2021) further observes that tabula rasa results from the chaos where two forces use their powers: between the master and the damned; and normally tabula rasa as a form of genuine liberation does not have its own time set to be prepared. It operates without commandments. To restore order as a form of genuine liberation, tabula rasa arrives as a surprising bomb, which results in the long accumulation of illogical colonialism (Ndayisenga, 2021)—a root of colonial injustice.

In addition, in the journey to genuine liberation, every action between the master and the black subject is accomplished without asking mea culpa (Ndayisenga, 2021). All survivors of the total disorder are newborns of such a total disorder, which suspends superiority and renders the people of the society all equal. Therefore, colonial imperialism needs to be suspended by a total disorder as it is characterised by disorder. According to Fanon ([1961] 1990), “Imperialism which today is fighting against a true liberation of mankind leaves in its wake here and there tinctures of decay which we must search out and mercilessly expel from our land and our spirits” (p. 200). This means that black subjects have to fight back against colonialism while searching for their self-determination. According to Marriott:

The moment of tabula rasa is transcendent, violent, and nonviolent in a similar way because it depends on the one who is already on guard against it—and so on the one who preserves it, or produces it, founds it, authorizes it as it is immanent but who finds that its presence always escapes him” (Marriott, 2018, pp. 176–177).

Ndayisenga (2021) concurs with Marriott that tabula rasa is transcendent as it is a period that has never
been seen; it reverses colonial conditions and permits black subjects to be fully liberated from continual racial injustice. Relevantly, like Marriott above, “Fanon attentions that violence has to be given careful consideration as its finally is unto itself” (Ndayisenga, 2022, p. 6). Tabula rasa then cannot happen in the absence of violent actions—It means that fairness for justice for all has to emerge into a violent struggle.

As colonialists could not have any pity and opted to use violence, black subjects have as well to replicate back the same violence to the colonisers (Ndayisenga, 2021). Here, Ndayisenga (2021) means that at this moment of absolute disorder that characterises genuine liberation, the past life that has hardened due to continuous persecution is rejected; indeed, the colonised become creative. From the top downwards, its being acquires a new disposition because its piety withers away alongside its reverence for the old order (Marriott, 2018, p. 243). In the African context, genuine liberation and fair justice for all are still in search. In the South African context, where this study has been conducted, racial injustice is still the reality, an indisputable fact. As a point of amplification, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016) writes that “Indeed the African decolonial struggle is still on course mainly because the post-1945 decolonisation project failed to deliver a genuinely decolonised and de-imperialised world” (p. 70). Black radical and Pan-African scholars, continue to argue that the 1960s decolonisation period is synonymous with pseudo-decolonisation, as it could not satisfy the black subjects' needs and requirements for authentic liberation and race discrimination. For instance, in the South African context, the white minority is still economically, epistemically, and technologically, to mention but a few; dominating the black majority in almost all fundamental domains of one’s life.

Conclusion

Frantz Fanon’s conception of tabula rasa continues to be remarked to the present day. It is especially (re)marked when it comes to his reasoning about the politics of genuine liberation and fair racial justice for all. It, therefore, means that it is still a condition to consult Fanon’s work on a tabula rasa to understand the politics of genuine liberation and racial injustice in the anti-black world. This article demonstrated that Fanon’s conception of tabula rasa cannot be separated from the politics of race, genuine liberation, and fair racial justice for all. Based on his brilliant works, the article has engaged with his political imagination on the concept of tabula rasa and the paper has argued that tabula rasa cannot be separated from genuine decolonisation. Fanon’s dualism of dialectics has shown that Fanon remains a reputed existential philosopher, as his old and new dialectics are still relevant dialectics that have the promising potential to create the conditions for existential life. The paper demonstrated that such conditions for existence permit reciprocal recognition, a lacuna in Hegel’s and Marx’s dialectics. Fanon’s political thought has shown that liberation and fair racial justice for all, have to emerge from the resistant and perpetual struggle of the colonised subjects.

References


