

Repression and the emergence of the bourgeois self: the social origins of neuroses

The self – a concept with which we are well acquainted today – refers to the construction of an individual consciousness in relationship to itself, other individuals, and society. It is a concept built on Enlightenment ideas of the individual as a person possessing reason and free will. It was the child of thinkers like Rousseau, Hobbes and Hegel who focused their philosophical investigations on the individual. Once the individual was created as a subject in the consciousness of everyday life, the self arose in modern discourse.

The construction of the self is a rule-governed process in which certain development is encouraged, while other qualities are curtailed. In *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* Freud outlines repression as a means by which the self is shaped, in the sense that certain ideas are repressed, or removed, from consciousness. Frantz Fanon builds on Freud's theory in *Black Skin, White Masks* to describe the construction of the self within the social structures erected by colonialism. Freud and Fanon focus on neuroses as symptoms of the development of the self gone awry as a means by which to study the process of development itself.

Fanon and Freud agree that the rules governing this process are derived from society. However, while Freud only tangentially discusses the role civilization plays in the psychological development of the self, Fanon goes so far as to claim that the self is socially constructed. Since the rules governing this process are formulated in society, then the emergence of the "bourgeois self" refers to the construction of the self in a particular – bourgeois – society.

In this paper I will discuss construction of the self and the role that society plays in this process as presented by Freud and Fanon. I will first outline Freud's theory of repression and discuss how repression shapes the self. I will then examine the role that Freud attributed to society, specifically bourgeois society, in this process. I will then draw out how Fanon used Freud's theory of repression to argue that development of the self is socially constructed.

Freud

Freud developed the theory of psychoanalysis in the interest of treating patients with hysterical, or neurotic, symptoms. He initially postulated with Breuer that these symptoms were the result of previously experienced traumas. However, he later redefined his theory to propose that neuroses are the result of conflicting impulses within the self. When an intolerable impulse arises a struggle ensues, with the objectionable wish on one side and the individual's "ethical and aesthetic standards" on the other (22). A complex arises as the internal struggle ends with the repression of the undesirable wish, which is pushed out of consciousness into the unconscious. At first it appears that the struggle has been resolved. However, the unsatisfied wish still lurks in the unconscious waiting to resurface. It later makes its re-entry into the conscious realm, disguised in another, often harmful, form. Thus Freud traces the appearance of neuroses to the repression of certain ideas and wishes that are in conflict with what is deemed acceptable by the self.

Freud does offer other mechanisms, in addition to repression, for resolving this conflict. These are: sublimation of the unattainable desire into an aim that is more socially valuable (60); conscious victory of moral forces over the unacceptable desire through rational condemnation of it (59); or direct satisfaction of the desire. Freud contends that these mechanisms, along with repression, are the means by which the self is formed

the many developments, repressions, sublimations and reaction-formations, by means of which a child...grows into what we call the normal man, the bearer, and in part the victim, of the civilization that has been so painfully acquired. (Freud, 37)

and perhaps deformed, as is indicated in the last part of this quote. In fact, Freud seems to point to civilization as the underlying repressive force in the generation of neuroses. While the immediate repressing forces are the “subject’s ethical and other standards” (22), Freud seems to imply here that the underlying repressive force is society itself.

Freud further clarifies his position on the role of civilization in the formation, or repression, of the self in the statement below.

A certain portion of the repressed libidinal impulses has a claim to direct satisfaction and ought to find it in life. Our civilized standards make life too difficult for the majority of human organizations. Those standards consequently encourage the retreat from reality and the generating of neuroses, without achieving any surplus of cultural gain by this excess of sexual repression. We ought not to exalt ourselves so high as completely to neglect what was originally animal in our nature. Nor should we forget that the satisfaction of the individual’s happiness cannot be erased from among the aims of our civilization. (60-61)

Here Freud is placing social constraints in direct opposition to individual happiness. Proclaiming that civilized standards make life difficult for most people, causing a retreat from reality, and the onset of neuroses. Thus, according to Freud the civilizing process is a repressive one.

Freud is above all concerned with the repression of sexual impulses, especially sexual impulses that occur between parents and children. He goes so far as to claim that the complex that forms as a result of the repression of such impulses “is the *nuclear complex* of every neurosis” (51). As evidence of this Freud cites his experience with his own patients, for most of whom neuroses are the result of repressed sexual impulses. When asked why other “mental excitations” should not produce the same effects, Freud replies that he does not know, but that experience shows that they do not (42).

To answer this question more fully Freud might have considered the particular society within which he lived. In fact, it is plausible that sexual impulses were especially prone to repression in his patients because the ethical and moral considerations surrounding sexuality were quite rigid during Freud’s time. Moreover, it is not likely that Freud treated many working class or poor patients, after all how would they pay for the services of a psychologist? His theories were derived from treatment of primarily well-to-do, bourgeois women at the end of the nineteenth century. This observation suggests that they may be specific to the milieu within which they were formulated. Thus, we can say

that Freud has presented us with a theory of formation of the self within the bourgeois sphere at the end of the nineteenth century.

Fanon

“I believe that the fact of the juxtaposition of the white and black races has created a massive psychoexistential complex. I hope by analyzing it to destroy it.” (12)

Fanon takes psychoanalysis as a point of departure to analyze the construction of the self within the context of colonization. He explicitly situates his work in present day Antilles. He examines how black men in the Antilles construct themselves in the context of a thoroughly colonized world and finds that “every neurosis, every abnormal manifestation, every affective erethism in an Antillean is the product of his cultural situation.” (152)

In a setting where the “view of the world is white because no black voice exists” (152) a black man attempts to construct a self and finds that the “Self” is white. In the colonial world the colonized people have “no culture, no civilization, no ‘long historical past’.” (34) The colonized culture is obliterated in the interest of making the colonized people more civilized (18). Being civilized is measured by the amount of new, colonizing, culture that can be assimilated by the colonized. Thus, the collective unconscious becomes permeated with the worldview of the colonizing white man, and consequently the colonized black man assumes it.

“The collective unconscious is not dependent on cerebral heredity; it is the result of what I shall call the unreflected imposition of a culture...It is normal for the Antillean to be anti-Negro. Through the collective unconscious the Antillean has taken over all the archetypes belonging to the European.” (189)

At the culmination of the civilizing process the black man believes that it is better to be white. In response to being stripped of his culture and dehumanized the Antillean says “Then I will quite simply try to make myself white: that is, I will compel the white man to acknowledge that I am human.” (98) Toward this end he embraces the French language and abandons Creole. He adopts European mannerisms and ways of behavior. He may even go so far as to love a white woman. If it is a young woman, perhaps a student living in Paris, she may desire to marry a white man. (47) However, Fanon argues, this path does not lead the black man and the black woman to selfhood. It is instead the path to alienation. Through this process the Negro is made inferior by society. Moreover, he must reject his family, his origins, if he is to enter society, white and civilized (149). Thus, he becomes completely alienated from his past and from the world he adopts. “Without a Negro past, without a Negro future, it was impossible for me to live my Negrohood. Not yet white, no longer wholly black, I was damned.” (138)

However, having entered white society, “the educated Negro suddenly discovers that he is rejected by a civilization which he has none the less assimilated.” (93) The black person is never accepted as an equal, no matter what his qualifications. At best he is treated like a child, with condescension (31), at worst he is reviled, scorned, made inferior (149). The society he is attempting to enter is completely saturated with images of the savage black

man – “for the myth of the bad nigger is part of the collective unconscious.” (92) – which it strives to uphold at his expense.

Thus far in his encounter with the white world, the black man has been stripped of his culture and told he is uncivilized, inhuman. He attempts to become civilized, i.e. white, only to become alienated from his own people and scorned by the society into which he requests entrance. These circumstances necessarily produce a conflict within the black man. “He does not understand his own race and the whites do not understand him.” (64) This leads to neurosis, in the Freudian sense. That is, the conflict has no beneficial resolution and hence his blackness must be repressed. Thus, Fanon calls the black man seeking to marry a white woman a neurotic (79) for he is denying his blackness.

However, unlike the amnesia affected by the suppression of the incongruent idea into the subconscious described by Freud, there is no opportunity to forget for the black man. The complex is played out in the conscious realm.

Since the racial drama is played out in the open, the black man has no time to ‘make it unconscious’...the Negro’s inferiority or superiority complex or his feelings of equality is *conscious*. These feelings forever chill him. (150)

This leads Fanon to wonder if the psychological processes observed in white men are applicable to black men. He goes on to contend that neurosis is quite uncommon among the Antillean population; “in the French Antilles 97 per cent of families cannot produce one Oedipal neurosis.” (152) Fanon claims that with a few exceptions, neurosis is the product of the Antillean’s cultural situation, which is to say that it is socially constructed and culturally specific. The cases in which neurosis does arise are “the instances in which the educated Negro suddenly discovers that he is rejected by a civilization which he has none the less assimilated.” (93) Thus, the neurosis is specific to the black man when he is faced with the white world. Moreover, it is specific to the middle-class black man who has gone to Paris, studied at university, and had the opportunity to assimilate white culture. The poor Antillean does not have this kind of access to white culture; hence he is free of neuroses. We can say that neurosis is the emblem of the construction of the bourgeois self for the Antillean black man.

Fanon’s prescription for a cure is to remove the socially constructed conflict that brings about the neurosis.

“The black man should no longer be confronted by the dilemma, *turn white or disappear*, but he should be able to take cognizance of the possibility of existence.” (100)

There should be the possibility of constructing a *black* Self. Toward this end Fanon urges the increase in black culture, but cautions against getting trapped in the historical past, in the “revival of an unjustly unrecognized Negro civilization” (226). He stresses that to overcome the neurosis created by a racist society both black and white men will need to step outside of their proscribed roles in the drama. Fanon hopes that, like any complex, racism will also lose its potency upon closer examination; this is his cure for our afflicted civilization.

Conclusion

I begin to suffer from not being a white man to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me, makes me a colonized native, robs me of all worth, all individuality (Fanon, 98)

Fanon is clear that it is racism that makes him suffer as a black man, that the creation of neuroses among Antilleans is culturally specific and unique to the black middle-class man facing the white world. This then brings us to the very point at which we left our discussion of Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. Fanon supports our view that it is important to situate the theory and the neurosis in its social and cultural context, for he found that the psychoanalytic theories he learned in the white world did not apply to the black man.

Both Freud and Fanon place civilization at the root of neuroses. However, aside from accusing civilization of being too restrictive for the well being of man, Freud kept his analysis of the causes of neurosis within the individual realm (i.e. in the mechanism of repression). Fanon, on the other hand, places the cause of the neurosis squarely within society, not in the personal moral dilemmas of the individual, but in socially constructed structures like colonialism. Perhaps it was the particular tenor of their own struggles that colored the construction of the bourgeois self for Fanon and Freud. Freud presents us with a process that is admittedly repressive and full of moral conflict, but very civil, while Fanon paints for us a world in which to become civilized is to lose one's soul. The stakes appear to be somewhat different.

References

Fanon, Frantz. 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press.

Freud, Sigmund. 1961. *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

"In the beginning I wanted to confine myself to the Antilles. But, regardless of consequences, dialectic took the upper hand and I was compelled to see the Antillean is first of all a Negro." (172)