THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION IN COLONIAL CONTEXTS

In his book Red Skin, White Masks, Glen Sean Coulthard argues that since 1969, colonial relations in Canada have shifted from an unconcealed structure of domination to a form of colonial governance that works through the medium of liberal state recognition. However, the Canadian state seeks the same result: the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority. Coulthard seeks to provide a theoretical account of how the politics of recognition has come to serve colonial interests, and how one might free oneself from these structures of domination.

THEORIES OF RECOGNITION

G.W.F. Hegel

Hegel's concept of recognition is one of his most enduring contributions to social and political theory. He argued that our sense of self is dependent on and shaped through our complex relations with others, which he discussed in the context of the master/slave relationship. Hegel's project was to move beyond the patterns of domination and inequality that typify such asymmetrical relations of recognition. He stated that "the struggle for recognition can only find one satisfactory solution, and that is a regime of reciprocal recognition among equals."

Franz Fanon

Fanon argued that when colonial rule does not depend solely on the exercise of state violence, its reproduction and longevity instead rests on the ability to entice Indigenous peoples to identify with the *asymmetrical* and *nonreciprocal* (i.e. racist) forms of recognition imposed on or granted to them by the settler state and society. Over time, colonized populations tend to internalize the derogatory images imposed on them by the state. These images, and the structural relations with which they are intertwined, come to be seen as natural.

Charles Taylor

Building on Hegel and Fanon, Taylor is concerned with the harm of misrecognition. He discusses how "Europeans have projected an image of the colonized as somehow inferior, 'uncivilized', and through the force of conquest have been able to impose this image on the conquered." For Taylor, this can be staved off with the institutionalization of a liberal regime of reciprocal cultural recognition (multiculturalism) which would enable Indigenous peoples to realize their status as distinct and self-determining actors. This approach, however, leaves colonialism's deep seated structural features intact.

Self-Recognition and Anti-Colonial Empowerment

Unlike Hegel and Taylor, Fanon was deeply skeptical as to whether mutual recognition was achievable under the conditions of contemporary colonialism. He argued that the state does not require recognition, but only labour, resources, and land. Rather than depending on their oppressors for their freedom and self-worth, Fanon argued that the colonized must struggle *against* the assimilative lure of colonial recognition. They must recognize *themselves* as free through a process of self-recognition, a "turning away" from the master-dependency.

Glen Sean Coulthard - Coulthard echoes Fanon, in arguing that
Indigenous nations struggling against colonialism must "turn away" from the colonial state and society and instead find within their own community the source of liberation. "indigenous cultural practices have much to offer regarding the establishment of relationships within and between peoples and the natural world built on principles of reciprocity and respectful co-existance," says Coulthard. This empowerment must be cautiously directed away from the assimilative lure of the statist politics of recognition espoused by Taylor, and instead be fashioned toward on-the-ground struggles for freedom.

Coulthard's project proposes that Indigenous nations struggling against colonialism must "turn away" from the colonial state and society for recognition and instead find liberation within their own community

"Such a project would minimally require that we stop being so preoccupied with looking to the Other for recognition; instead we should be recognizing ourselves and seeking to make contact with all who would engage us in a constructive manner." - bell hooks

Source: Coulthard, Glen Sean. "The Politics of Recognition in Colonial Contexts." In Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition, 25-49. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.