

CHAPTER ONE

The Cunning of Decolonization

When the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel coined the term “the cunning of reason,” he knew he was trying to square a circle. Awash in the chaotic unreason of his world—“the superficial din and clamor of history”—Hegel sought out a deeper logic, or what he described as “a silent and mysterious inner process at work” in human affairs.¹ Of all the attempts to harmonize two conflicting elements of the human—the passions and the intellect—Hegel’s was at once the most satisfying and the most maddening. Where many a philosopher had denounced the passions, Hegel found in them a million indispensable motors, without which “*nothing great has been accomplished in the world.*”²

Individual passions don’t undermine human progress—they secretly do its bidding. Or, as he puts it, in characteristically dense Hegelese: “The particular interests of passion cannot therefore be separated from the realization of the universal. . . . Particular interests contend with one another, and some are destroyed in the process. But it is from this very conflict and destruction of particular things that the universal emerges.” In

other words, while the passions are sent into battle, the universal itself remains safely in the rear, emerging “unscathed” only after the smoke has cleared. It is this peculiar battleground configuration—and indeed chain of command—that Hegel calls “the cunning of reason,” and that conscripts the passions, individual and irrational, into the service of history’s broader plan.³ Hegel even describes the movement of history as a great tapestry in which reason provides the warp—those threads held straight and true—while the weft of the passions winds erratically back and forth, apparently against the grain but in reality pulling the entire fabric imperceptibly together.⁴

When I speak of the *cunning of decolonization*, this is not what I mean. For one, Hegel famously stumbles when it comes to the slave revolution that he doesn’t name, but which provides the unacknowledged background for his master/slave dialectic: Haiti.⁵ While Hegelian dialectics inspired many anticolonial revolutionaries and thinkers, the master/slave dialectic narrates the establishment of the slave relation, not its destruction. Hegel himself says precious little about abolition, and anticolonial and antiracist thinkers have had to fill in the gaps to do so. Fanon was among many who turned to Hegel for an account of struggle as a precondition for self-consciousness, but as he himself recognized, Hegel’s dialectic is ill-suited to grasping the contours of colonial domination, much less the explosivity of the decolonial reply.⁶ In its all-encompassing singularity, its presumed reciprocity between master and slave, the determinism of its forward motion, and the centrality of mutual recognition, Hegel’s approach exhibits precisely the kinds of systematic exclusion, dehumanization, and nonrecognition that are hallmarks of colonial racism.⁷

Hegel’s notion of cunning stumbles for the same sorts of reasons. It would be difficult to convince the colonized and enslaved,

for example, that their subjugation is all part of a grander plan wrought by human reason, that the insatiable passions of Europe were but the errant weft spreading murder and torture across the globe in the name of a higher progress. Indeed, the idea that history moves inexorably forward has never had much traction among the darker nations, and the belated crisis of the idea of progress in European thought was provoked in large part by something the colonized and racialized already knew. Fascism and Nazism represented, as Aimé Césaire argued, a “terrific boomerang effect” whereby colonial brutality returned to the Old World.⁸ The idea of progress remained pervasive, however, linking the “civilizing” aspirations of colonialism so venomously mocked by Césaire to twentieth-century theories of modernization and development.

Even the young Marx invoked something like Hegel’s cunning when he provided a backhanded justification for the “sickening” behavior of British colonizers in India. While the British pursued only “the vilest interests,” Marx wrote five full years after the *Communist Manifesto*, they were nevertheless acting as “the unconscious tool of history,” breaking down traditional structures to make way for the communism of the future.⁹ But Marx revised this view some decades later, opening up the possibility of divergent forms of cunning as he contemplated different paths toward communism. While the lure of colonial cunning remained strong for some later Marxists who claimed privileged access to warp strings of history, a more decolonial cunning would emerge from global struggles against white supremacy and colonialism that often drew from the Marxist wellspring. Like those Latin American communists who resisted the purportedly universal imperative to build capitalism before agitating for communism, my most powerful

interlocutors in what follows infuse their Marxism with something radically different.¹⁰

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My starting point is therefore not Hegel's cunning of reason but a cunning of a different sort that is grounded in resistance to slavery and colonialism. Ironically, this approach is one marked out by the slavemaster and colonizer himself, according to whom the enslaved and colonized were cunning if nothing else.¹¹ In the recently launched Freedom on the Move database, for example, *cunning* appears in hundreds of advertisements describing fugitive slaves, and as early as 1676, Barbadian slaves were described as "cunningly and clandestinely" conspiring against the English.¹² It might seem strange that a word so directly associated, indeed originally synonymous, with knowledge (cunning shares a root with everything from cognition to connoisseur) would be turned so firmly toward pejorative ends. But within a century of emerging, the word was split down the knife's edge separating wisdom and prudence from shrewdness and deceit due to what Don Herzog describes as "repeated experiences of what the knowing do with their knowledge."¹³

Different kinds of knowledge are used toward vastly different ends, however. The powerful have always deployed knowledge and deceit to maintain their power and make it insurmountable. The oppressed, on the other hand, have resorted to cunning as a specific kind of knowledge developed *of* and *through* their subjection. The trope of the slave as cunning trickster can be traced to ancient Greece and Africa alike and predates race as we know it.¹⁴ But the slave cunning acquired a qualitatively different meaning when that slavery was recast in racial

terms—when bondage became hereditary, so too was cunning cemented as pejorative.¹⁵ Thus, while James C. Scott is correct to identify the cunning of the oppressed as a product of systems of domination, this is not exactly what I mean either.¹⁶ As Fanon reminds us, “A colonized people is not just a dominated people.”¹⁷ Colonialism and slavery are not merely systems of domination but systems of nonbeing, and they produce a qualitatively different sort of cunning as a result.

Further, while Scott is correct that covert and creative resistance to slavery and domination “is not adequately captured by the loaded English term *cunning*,” there is a reason the word was used so often, especially once we move beyond mere domination.¹⁸ To call a slave or colonized person cunning under a system premised on their nonexistence *means* something different and says as much about the speaker as about the person they are describing. It is to wear a deeper and more revealing suspicion on one’s sleeve: that behind the happy smile and feigned contentedness there lies a subterranean discontent and yearning. To denounce the cunning of slaves was to allow just the slightest glint of one’s own guilty conscience to shine through—to recognize, in other words, that behind the *thing* there might actually be a *person*.

My goal in what follows is not to establish an objectively correct meaning for the term *cunning*, but to track and map the anxieties that the word’s usage reveals, why it is so systematically applied to Black and colonized people, and what this can teach us about the contradictory reality colonialism seeks to impose as natural. As W.E.B. Du Bois would later put it: “Wherever a black head rises to historic view, it is promptly slain by an adjective—‘shrewd,’ ‘notorious,’ ‘cunning’—or pilloried by a sneer. . . . The clearest evidence of Negro ability . . . became distorted into cunning.”¹⁹ Like slaves, other racialized, colonized, or otherwise

dehumanized groups—Jews in particular—have been historically associated with cunning, as have women more broadly.²⁰ And with continued colonial-imperial expansion, the charge of cunning constitutes part of a perverse victim blaming that continues to justify violence to the present.

As Manifest Destiny pushed the frontier westward in Canada and the US alike, for example, the “cunning Indian” was born.²¹ In her *Custer*, the poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox references cunning four times, describing how on the “withered” face of “Mahwissa, sister of the slaughtered chief . . . There flits the stealthy cunning of her race.”²² Further south, those Indigenous “Mexicans” who dared use their intellect for resistance as the US border devoured and divided their communities were similarly labeled. In the run-up to that monument of white victimhood that was the Battle of the Alamo, white settlers invading Texas came under attack from “cunning Mexicans” who, “unbeknownst to the Texans [*sic*], surrounded and commenced firing at them.”²³ This bizarre inversion of perpetrator and victim would be almost comical were it not so dangerous, but the guilty suspicion that resistance might be justified has a way of boomeranging violently back onto the colonized in the guise of self-defense. The 2019 mass shooting at an El Paso Walmart, which the shooter understood as resisting a “Hispanic invasion,” is but the most recent example.

Just as Black slaves used cunning to resist and escape the plantation, at the outer fringes of colonial power cunning was also about mobility, the stealthy crossing of an imaginary frontier made real. As a result, cunning—or *astucia* in Spanish—often becomes synonymous with banditry. White opinion remained divided to the end as to whether Pancho Villa—“more a force of nature than of politics”—was “a consummate Napoleonic strategist” or possessed “merely the inborn cunning of any Indian on the warpath.”²⁴

Moreover, fears of slaves and Indians often coincided and fed into one another, as with a similarly maligned bandit of a prior generation, Juan Nepomuceno “Cheno” Cortina, who for decades terrorized the “flocks of vampires” busily dispossessing Mexican Texans. Many white Texans, “already alarmed by the news of John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, appeared certain that Cortina was coming north from the border to liberate the slaves in Texas and murder the Anglos in their beds.”²⁵ Indeed, Cortina would attack the Confederate Army two years later.

More recently, Argentina witnessed a resurgence in fears of *el malón*, those “indigenous cavalries that for centuries launched stealthy, high-speed attacks on frontier settlements,” and whose invocation in the present suggests the “return of this gendered, feared barbarism from the past.”²⁶ And wherever colonial and imperial domination arrives, those resisting its power through subterfuge and the weapons of the mind are painted with the same pejorative brush, from the “Yellow Peril” rhetoric of the nineteenth century to outcries against Japanese deviousness during the US-Japan trade war of the 1980s. And when the US invaded Vietnam from half a world away, the Vietnamese suddenly found cunning imposed on them as a strategy and a condemnation alike, heroically leveraging the former to their advantage as they previously had done against the French. Things have scarcely changed today: a recent *New York Times* article about an international soccer match pitted “American physicality against Mexican cunning,” and Donald Trump repeatedly referred to both Mexicans and Chinese as cunning.²⁷

But if slaves and other colonized peoples were routinely portrayed as fiendishly tricky, crafty, and shrewd in their cunning, then why paint them with the same brush used by their oppressors? Because accusations of cunning have much to tell us about

racial and colonial domination and, more importantly, about its built-in weaknesses. To accuse slaves and colonized people of cunning was never a pure projection of power. It was also a tacit concession that slavery and colonization share a potentially debilitating Achilles' heel: the humanity and resistance of their victims. And in this sense cunning is about far more than either intelligence or resistance: it is a peculiarly deceptive and explosive fusion of the two that takes advantage of the delusions built into the system. As a result, it is precisely in the breathless denunciation of cunning that we can find unspoken proof of the power of the oppressed.

Harriet Jacobs, formerly a slave herself, put it best when she asked, "Who can blame slaves for being cunning? . . . It is the only weapon of the weak and oppressed against the strength of their tyrants."²⁸ The point, for Jacobs, was therefore not to *reject* the master's portrayal of the cunning slave but instead to bind this cunning to the system that produced it, and more importantly to *embrace* it as a revolutionary weapon. Struggling against her own master, Jacobs thus "resolved to match my cunning against his cunning."²⁹ In this and so many other cases, "What their masters and mistresses described as cunning, slaves saw as the psychological mechanism needed to develop and maintain autonomy within the harsh regime of bondage."³⁰

Viewed from this angle, decolonial cunning intersects with Hegel's cunning of reason in several ways. It helps us grasp how individual acts of resistance zigzag across and through the tapestry of Black freedom struggles, here falling short, there doubling back, but drawing the fabric together in even unseen ways. Take the case of "the terrible Nat Turner" himself, whose life is shot through with Hegelian resonances.³¹ There is an intense cunning, for example, in the fact that Turner's masters—devout Methodists—did

not feel guilty enough to free him but did feel guilty enough to inculcate in him a faith that would be their undoing, even proudly touting his fervent religious zeal.³² Or that his African-born mother reputedly tried to kill him rather than see him enslaved, only to have her son survive long enough to enact a bloody vengeance that helped to doom the entire system.³³ Or that once, after escaping for a month, Turner claimed to have received a vision instructing him to return to his master. Or most importantly of all, that by striking for partial freedom—and doing so irrationally, at least according to his enemies—Turner’s individual zeal unleashed far greater universal chain reactions.

But there is much that Hegel cannot account for as well, specifically how Turner turned his dehumanization against the dehumanizers—the essence of a decolonial cunning. He “used his spotless reputation among whites” and “practiced polite and subservient behavior to gain a reputation never to be associated with trouble.” He was thus able to “manipulate white masters,” taking full advantage of “the misconception that slaves were too ignorant to know or want freedom” in order to strike a blow at it.³⁴ Hegel’s description of Julius Caesar as a world-historic individual sacrificed on the altar of freedom—who “had to do what was necessary,” who “himself met his end in the struggle, but necessity triumphed”—certainly resonates with figures like Toussaint Louverture and John Brown. But it says far less of Turner and so many others who rebelled not for “the Idea” of freedom but for its concrete reality, throwing colonialism and racial capitalism into world-historical chaos in the process.³⁵

Were Turner’s rebellion and so many others like it proof of the inevitable forward march of history, or simply the product of the constant tectonic grinding of subterranean freedom struggles? Decolonial cunning does not look down on society with a

God's-eye view from above or seek to survey history as a whole from a position outside of it, reproducing what Santiago Castro-Gómez has called the "zero-point hubris" characteristic of colonial thought.³⁶ Instead, it finds its footing *within* conditions of racial-colonial oppression and the struggle *against* those conditions, leveraging the colonizer's own hubris through a perspectival cunning that is tied to the weft of resistance but claims to grasp little more than the roughest direction of the warp.

Decolonial cunning, in other words, sets out from a radical doubt toward any reason aside from the reasons that we fight. While weaving together, as Hegel did, the sometimes-selfish motivations of individuals, decolonial cunning does not presume a higher rationality, much less arrogantly claim to know its contents beforehand. If anything, it recognizes that the line between individual acts of revolt and universal freedom is a fine one indeed and that even the most mundane acts of cunning can help generate self-consciousness and prepare the grounds for liberation. To steal a pig from the master, for example, was about far more than the value of the pig: what mattered was "the actual act of stealing [it]," through which slaves "outsmarted their physically powerful owners with their wits alone."³⁷

Decolonial cunning is consequently not itself a universal concept but one that *approaches* the universal in a specific way: as a shared constellation of particular needs, desires, and struggles. This was something that an exuberant Aimé Césaire once believed he had discovered in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, exclaiming to Senghor: "Listen to what Hegel says, Léopold: to arrive at the Universal, one must immerse oneself in the Particular!"³⁸ But a decade later, Césaire would still be looking for what he thought he had found. In 1956, he resigned from a French Communist Party that insisted on sacrificing Black particularity to a future

universal and continued his search for “a universal enriched by all that is particular, a universal enriched by every particular: the deepening and coexistence of all particulars.”³⁹

If decolonial cunning privileges particulars, however, it must be said that these are not just any particulars but those *specific* to the oppressed, those condemned to the nonbeing of colonization and racial slavery and those absorbing their aftershocks today. It is the cunning of Harriet Jacobs, not of her master, the cunning of those on the underside of history, those truly universal revolutionary subjects who cannot join humanity without tearing down the walls of ontological apartheid separating true Being from its opposite. Decolonial cunning is more an orientation than a framework, and much less a road map. With no omniscient God or philosopher-king to hold tight the warp, the weft careens wildly, and the tapestry of freedom it leaves in its wake is frayed and uneven.

But it is freedom nonetheless.

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What I want to argue might seem obvious: that the parameters of racial and colonial domination contain a secret weakness, and that they conceal and indeed nurture a cunning in their victims that surfaces in the shocking eruption of explosive rebellion. This cunning originates in what I call the “colonial blindspot” among the powerful, whereby the very same dehumanization used to justify racial-colonial domination blinds those at the top to the inevitability of resistance from below. Wrapped in colonial nonbeing like an invisibility cloak, the colonized cultivate what, following Du Bois, I describe as a “second sight.” These are certainly “weapons of the weak,” but they are more than that as well.⁴⁰ They are secret weapons honed in the

obscurity of nonbeing that take full advantage of the blindspot of its purveyors: an arsenal of the invisible, of the many specters, zombies, spooks, and spies infiltrating the white power structure from within its own clandestine shadows.

Colonial and racial oppression produces its own gravediggers, sharpening them into sentient weapons of its undoing, gravediggers that duck into their own trenches to carry out a subterranean war of position that is always ready to explode into an open war of maneuver. This explosion, what I call the “decolonial ambush,” emerges at the intersection—indeed, the collision—of the colonial blindspot and the second sight of the colonized that the colonial order contains. Or rather, that like so many tinderboxes it *fails* to contain. The decolonial ambush is the element of surprise peculiar to the invisibilized, the moment when what was concealed is revealed, when the excluded appears with a defiance that debunks its own impossibility. It is the slave revolt, the Indian raid, the riot—it is Ferguson, Missouri; it is Baltimore, Maryland; and it is Minneapolis, Minnesota. From the perspective of those cataracted and willfully opaque regions of self-imposed colonial blindness, this ambush appears above all as a *shock*, and one that varies in direct proportion to the dehumanization of those involved.

No, this is not the despair of standing helpless in the face of natural disaster. It is a righteous fury against the present and the knowledge that the earth must first be torn in two if it is to ever be brought back together again. Decolonial cunning, in other words, is the plastic explosive built right into the foundation of colonial white supremacy, waiting to tear it asunder. This is not optimism, strictly speaking—we know too little of the future, and we certainly know better than to expect easy victories. At the same time and for the same reason, however, decolonial

cunning cuts against all pessimisms of the intellect that are not outmatched by an optimism of the will for liberation. This includes that form of pessimism with which it would seem to share the most: Afro-pessimism.

Afro-pessimism, particularly in the works of Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton, views the world as wholly and inescapably anti-Black because of the reduction of Blackness to pure negativity and the ongoing libidinal investment in Black death, producing a situation not of conflict but of absolute antagonism to which Afro-pessimists explicitly refuse to provide an alternative.⁴¹ Decolonial cunning responds to this diagnosis by insisting that it is precisely *from* the shadows of negation that resistance so often erupts. In fact, one of Afro-pessimism's most potent sources, Fanon himself, describes the zone of nonbeing as "an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline stripped bare of every essential[,] from which a genuine new departure can emerge."⁴² But while the apparently minor absence of a single comma in the new English translation of *Black Skin, White Masks* might seem to imply that this region is *so* sterile and *so* arid as to render any "new departure" impossible, Fanon's meaning is exactly the opposite. It is precisely from the sterility and aridity of nonbeing—from all that survives, subsists, and *persists* within that zone—that something truly and radically new might indeed emerge. In this and so many other ways, Fanon was no pessimist.

More troubling, however, are the strategic implications of the Afro-pessimist approach, or rather, the explicit refusal of strategy—and particularly of what might once have been understood as Third World solidarity. Here, Afro-pessimism traffics in an ahistorical neglect of both the concrete construction of anti-Blackness and its deep imbrications with other colonized communities. Let's not forget that Haiti was a colony *and* a slave