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De-constructing the 'White Saviour Syndrome': A Manifestation of Neo-Imperialism

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With the recent widespread of protests for black civil rights and against racism across the Western world, the topic of white prejudice has risen to the centre of public attention, of which one manifestation is the so-called 'White Saviour Syndrome'. Whether it is Ed Sheeran posing for 'Comic Relief' with a number of black children (Hinsliff, 2019), Madonna adopting children from Malawi (Hinsliff, 2019), or students going on adventures advertised for 'young philanthropists' within a multi-million dollar gap-year industry (Bandyopadhyay, 2019), numerous cases of altruistic acts of 'White Saviours' can be found throughout popular culture in the global North. Whereas these practices follow an altruistic narrative, they are commonly criticised as serving to satisfy a 'White Saviour Syndrome', the phenomenon in which a white person "guides people of colour from the margins to the mainstream with his or her own initiative and benevolence" which tends to render the people of colour "incapable of helping themselves" and disposes them of historical agency (Cammarota, 2011: 243-244).

The 'White Saviour' is itself a notion of altruism that follows the modernist desire to 'help others' based on the idea ofa universal human "compassion in us for others, sometimes despite a risk and cost to the self" (Burr, 2010: 1). In popular culture, this desire is commonly represented by a will to 'do development', which is illustrated by the rise in popularity of work, studies and volunteering in the development field (Burr, 2010: 1). Originally, the idea of universal altruism is derived from the moral ethics of the Enlightenment and rationality, which shapes the modernist notion of 'development' as "progress, growth and improvement" according to the Northern ideal of an enlightened society (Burr, 2010: 1). Within this background, this essay will analyse the concept of the 'White Saviour' according to the theories of Louis Althusser (2014) and Frantz Fanon (1970), arguing that the construction of an 'altruistic self' follows ideological interpellation to constitute the subject, which then reinforces the power dynamics towards people of colour as the white person's inverted other. Furthermore, the described syndrome embeds Self-Other relations through ideological state apparatuses within the reproduction of the global means of production promoted by the ruling capitalist ideology. Firstly, the essay will analyse the construction of the (White) Self through Althusser's concept of interpellation, followed by Fanon's theory on the black person as an object for construction of the white self. Finally, the paper will look at the relations between the self and the other embedded within the global means of production.

The White Altruistic Self, Constructed Through Ideological Interpellation

Following Louis Althusser's (2014) theory, the subjectivity of the 'White Saviour' follows the interpellation of the individual by ideology through the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), defined as "a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialised institutions" (Althusser, 2014: 143). For instance, there is the religious ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the school ISA, the media and cultural ISA, and much more that determine how to practice the 'rituals' of a subject's ideas. The individual itself lacks a centre and becomes a subject through the recognition of their subjectivity. This is achieved through interpellation by ideology, understood as the "imaginary relationship to their [the individual's] real conditions of existence", a form of 'world outlook' (Althusser, 2014: 162). Interpellation, as the key function of ideology, serves to constitute "concrete individuals as subjects" through ideology as an omni-present and unconscious influence upon the individual (Althusser, 2014: 171). This process, by which the *individual* becomes a *subject* through ideology, is

illustrated by an analogy to a policeman shouting "Hey, you there!" which causes the individual to turn around and recognise that the 'hail' was addressed to them (Althusser, 2014: 174). Since ideology is omni-present and unconscious, the individual is *always-already* interpellated into a subject and practices the rituals of ideological recognition, prescribed by the ISAs, that form their subjectivity in a constant process of interpellation. Ideology itself is a political structure, to be seen as a collective unconscious, which influences the acts of the subject. In other words, every subject has a consciousness and chooses ideas, but they are forced to act the practices and rituals of ideological state apparatuses upon their ideas in order not to seem "inconsistent, cynical or perverse" (Althusser, 2014: 168).

Applied to the construction of the altruistic self, the idea of altruism and development within the subject's consciousness is inherently connected to the prevailing ISAs. The white subject is positioned within their imaginary relations of production, i.e. as a privileged individual from the Global North, whereas the altruistic self then acts according to the ideological interpellation by the ruling ISAs to achieve ideological recognition as a subject. For instance, the 'altruistic ISAs' that interpellate the subject would be represented in gap year advertisements, the promotion of global programmes by the school ISA, celebrities acting as 'white saviours', and in discourse with other subjects (Bandyopadhyay, 2019: 327-343). On a more profound level, the interpellation of the altruistic Self starts through enlightened ideas of universal altruism that manifest themselves within the family and religion, as well as the culture industry that romanticises heroes in literature and movies. While the subject has a consciousness that possesses an idea of altruism, agency in the process is nevertheless an illusion since the ideological content and the material rituals of this idea originate from the subconscious ideology (Althusser, 2014).

The Black Person as the Inverted Other to the White Subjectivity

Frantz Fanon (1970), on the contrary, implies that the discourse on the 'altruistic self' is unique to the white man whose subjectivity is recognised while the person of colour serves as an inverted other that confirms the subjectivity of the white saviour. Therefore, the ISAs influence the Black person differently than the White person. On the one hand, the 'enlightened altruistic saviour' seeks to promote progress and development while, on the other hand, the person of colour is victimised, de-rationalised and contrasted to the heroism of the 'White Saviour'. Hence, the subconscious ISAs and the ruling ideology produce a psychological inferiority of the Black man to reproduce subjectivities; "The black soul is the white man's artefact: the creation of blackness in the white imagination" (Fanon, 1970). This quote illustrates the constructed master/slave relation within the ruling ideology that Fanon outlines, so that the Black man is merely a tool for the recognition of white subjectivity (Hudis, Irving and Le Blanc, 2015). While Fanon (1970) implies a conscious suppression of people of colour by the 'White Saviour', Althusser's (2014) theory adds the understanding that this psychological degradation originates from the ideological state apparatuses. Therefore, it serves the ruling ideology of capitalism, which will be examined in the following.

The 'White Saviour' and the Global South: Reproducing the Means of Production

Regarding the relation between the Self and the Other, the 'White Saviour Syndrome' functions to reproduce the global means and relations of production that serve the ruling ideology of capitalism. Since the subject lacks a centre, they are constantly interpellated by the political, including in interactions with the Other. As the subject looks for recognition of their subjectivity, Althusser (2014) implies that subjects also desire the Other's desire. This means that the (White) Other firstly contributes to the interpellation that defines 'doing development' as part of the ideological norm of subjectivity, and secondly, they contribute to the recognition of subjectivity once the (White Saviour) subject acts according to this norm. This recognition implies a distinction of the Otherwith regards to race, as subjects of the global South are rather used as objects to confirm the White subjectivity, such as through photography and gratefulness to the 'White Saviour', while the white Other plays a more dominant role in shaping the narratives within the prevailing ISAs (Escobar, 1992: 20-56). Ultimately, the imaginary relation of the 'White Saviour' with the Global South serves to reproduce the means of production in terms of capital and labour. The reproduction of capital is embedded in the multi-million material complex around white saviourism whereas the reproduction of labour includes the reproduction of the "submission to the established order" through the interpellation of the 'White' and the 'Black' subjects according to the Enlightened idea of rationalised progress (Althusser, Goshgarian and Balibar, 2014: 132).

As a Fanonian analysis shows, the reproduction of global relations of production is reinforced by the psychological subjugation of the global South which re-affirms a global separation of production into core and periphery (Frank, 1966). In other words, within the 'White Saviour complex', the centre of Self-Other relations depends on the subjugation of the Black man in order to reproduce the relations of production within the capitalist system. Consequently, the White Saviour syndrome represents the continuation of colonialism through discourse by practicing the 'civilising' of the global South according to the standards of the North. As Fanon (1970) claims, "the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man", which outlines that the black man is created "in relation to the white man", without a 'naturally' inherent quality to him other than to serve the construction of the white self (Fanon, 1970: 83). Hence, the 'white saviour' reinforces a "psycho-existential complex" (Fanon, 1970: 5) of inferiority by victimising people of colour and only showcasing them as the inverted other of White civilisation (Manji, 2015). This means that the "black man wants to be white", while "the white man slaves to reach human level", this action follows the political, the subconscious, which itself can create conflicts within the White subject's consciousness that eventually seeks to help (Fanon, 1970: 3). Id est, believing himself to act altruistically, the White man finds himself "sealed in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness", which ultimately serves to reproduce the global relations of production (Fanon, 1970: 3).

Conclusion – Towards Incremental Change

In conclusion, analysed from the perspectives of Althusser (2014) and Fanon (1970), the 'White Saviour Syndrome' represents the interpellation of an altruistic subject by the ruling capitalist enlightened ideology that serves to reinforce the global means of production by subjugating the subjects of the global South as inverted others to the 'heroic' acts of White saviours promoted by material ISAs. While this essay does not show an open and consciously acted racism, it outlines how the subconscious ideology of capitalism induces Northern individuals to affirm their subjectivity by exploiting the subjugation of people of colour and by reinforcing a psycho-existential inferiority complex, which ultimately serves the reproduction of the means of production. Hence, it outlines the participation in a neo-colonial complex, an example of the continuing existence of systemic imperialism. In order to reverse this trend, this essay leads to the implication of incrementally changing the ISAs' discourse on the global South through interpellation by altering the discourse within the development community. For this endeavour, a further analysis of Michel Foucault's concepts of discourse and power may be of use in order to change how power is performed and, ultimately, to give back agency to local actors in shaping the underlying ideologies of development work and philanthropy.

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