THE SUBALTERN SYNDROME AND DOSTOEVSKY'S QUEST FOR AUTHENTICITY OF BEING

In *Peau noire masques blancs* (Black Skin, White Masks), Franz Fanon endeavors to give a psycho-philosophical explanation of the black man’s sociogenetic inferiority complex that modern postcolonial studies have come to define as the condition of the subaltern. Fanon argues that Freudian psychoanalysis cannot be successfully applied to the black man’s psyche because it addresses the psychological problems specific to the white man’s condition. According to Fanon, the growing interest in man as an autonomous subject inspired Freud to turn his attention away from the late nineteenth-century phylegenetic theory of man’s psychopathology to the ontogenetic perspective. What is important for the discussion of the black man’s psychopathology, however, is the sociogenetic perspective because, unlike the white man’s alienation, at the core of which lies the private/public dichotomy, “the black man’s alienation is not an individual question. Besides phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny” (*Pn* 10, *BS* 11). In other words, unlike the white man’s neurotic condition, the black man’s psychopathology has developed not within the binary opposition between the individual and the social with the repression of the individual into the unconscious, but mainly within the binary opposition between the “inferior” and the “superior” genetics and cultures.

Fanon’s interest in the black man’s sociogenetic psychopathology produced by colonization with the consequent problems of assimilation of European modernity is considered as pioneering. Without diminishing his pioneering role in investigating the subaltern “psycho-existential neurosis,” I would like to argue that, already in the nineteenth century, Dostoevsky was preoccupied with a very similar problem – the detrimental effect of Russia’s cultural “colonization” by the West on the educated Russian man’s psyche. Similar to Fanon, Dostoevsky is interested in the psychological and philosophical dimensions of the subaltern consciousness. Like race or gender, Russianness for him is a bio-cultural “fatality,” a given. The physical and the cultural aspects of Russianness are inextricably mixed in Dostoevsky’s thought. As a

pochvennik, he is fond of bio-cultural imagery; native soil (pochva) embodies for him native culture, history and the land, the physical locality that produced them. The two aspects of a national “organism,” the cultural and the physical, are inseparable for Dostoevsky much the same way as body and mind are inseparable in a human organism. Dostoevsky’s articles to Time and The Epoch, where he explains the meaning of the pochvennichestvo, are particularly full of bio-cultural imagery. In these articles, he compares nationalities to plants. Their development is inextricably connected to the soil on which they “grow”: “Without the soil nothing will grow and there will be no fruit. For every fruit its own soil, its own climate, its own training [vospitanie] is necessary. Without a firm soil under one’s feet any movement forward is impossible. . . .” One can detect the double, socio-cultural and biological, resonance of the word “soil” here. Dostoevsky talks about the cultural originality of the ethnic group that lives in a particular geographical locality and emphasizes the “sacredness” of the land that feeds and sustains it: “[Migrants] take, with them on their way a handful of earth, which they look upon as sacred, and they intend to bequeath this sacred handful of earth to their grandchildren . . . . Why, we are not even migrants. We simply soared into the air. . . .” (19: 148). To emphasize the sociogenetic meaning of Russianness he opposes it to the strictly social idea of class saying about the common people and the upper classes: “We all have descended from the same noble soil and, as Russians, we are all equal…” (19: 65).

In juxtaposing Dostoevsky’s and Fanon’s ideas on the problem of the sociogenetic inferiority complex, one must concede some evident differences between the Russian and the black subaltern. One of the differences lies in the ambiguity of the Russian culture that finds itself inferior in relation to the West yet dominant within the Russian Empire. Another difference is the overtly physical aspect of the black man’s colonized condition. This aspect is particularly important to Fanon for several reasons. First, the epidermal contrast between the dominant and the subaltern groups in Fanon’s analysis allows him to expose the absurdity of the Eurocentric division of races into inferior and superior ones, especially vividly. The Negro’s unconscious denial of the fact of his blackness as a result of his sociogenetic inferiority complex produces an even stronger impression on the reader than does the denial of his Russianness by the educated Russian man in Dostoevsky’s fiction and journalism precisely because of its physical obviousness. Second, the biological/physical aspect of the black man’s state of being is important for Fanon in order to expose the white man’s myth that the “Negro symbolizes the biologi-