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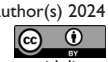

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Amílcar Cabral, Colonial Soil and the Politics of Insubmission

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Abstract

This article discusses the concept of 'insubmission'. This concept is the cornerstone of Amílcar Cabral's critical theory. Introduced in his early agronomic writings, it refers to the human species' refusal to submit to the nature of which we are always a part. The context is the anticolonial critique of traditional European humanism. Insubmission is Cabral's response to the dehumanizing effects of colonialism and the environmental impact of anthropocentric extractivism that accompanies it. As a linchpin in Cabral's theoretical framework, insubmission serves to structure and impart meaning to other concepts. Notably, it provides fresh insights into the multifaceted concept of 'resistance'. Cabral underscores the imperative of combating dehumanization through physical fortitude (physical and armed resistance), intellectual resilience (cultural resistance), and institutional strength (political resistance). Additionally, it emphasizes the necessity of averting environmental catastrophes through a socio-economic development model (economic resistance) underpinned by a resolute ethical commitment to responsible soil conservation practices.

Keywords

Amílcar Cabral, critical theory, humanism, insubmission, resistance

Introduction

This article asks: What is Amílcar Cabral's main conceptual contribution to social theory? Our answer: insubmission. Insubmission emerged from Cabral's earlier agronomic research and, combined with resistance, constitutes the theoretical cornerstone of

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Cabralian critical theory.[1] Cabral's critical theory critiques humanism, which holds the belief that rational human beings can establish more favourable conditions for their existence and that there exists a common humanity that unites all such endeavours. Importantly, Cabral's critical humanism stems from the painful realization that colonialism strips the colonized of positive human attributes and fosters an extractive relationship with colonial soil. At once hopeful and realistic, it avoids the nostalgic pitfalls of decolonial approaches, while its ethic of 'caring for the soil' is more than just a discourse. We arrive at this conclusion by examining Cabral's agronomic writings in conjunction with his more political essays.

Fifty years after his untimely death on 20 January 1973, academic interest in the agronomist-turned-revolutionary leader is increasing. This is hardly surprising as Cabral is one of the most important anticolonial thinkers of the 20th century. The latest wave of Cabral studies is exploring the two-dimensional character of his work amidst the looming environmental catastrophe and political impasse. From the 1970s into the 1990s, this was often depicted as a schism that robbed Cabralian political ideas of the intellectual consistency they otherwise would have achieved (Bienen, 1977; Davidson, 1984; Dhada, 1993). In the 21st century, a new generation has returned to Cabral's thought, understanding it in more positive and nuanced terms (see, e.g., Lopes, 2010). The coexistence of agronomic-scientific and political-philosophical discourses is now increasingly viewed as a duality (see, e.g., Idahosa, 2002, esp. 38–41; Taiwo, 1999). Concretely, this duality functions as a potential source of conceptual innovation (Neves, 2017); it is depicted as a particularly prescient political intervention in the age of the Anthropocene (César, 2018), and his graphs are seen as foregrounding decolonization itself.[2] This article joins that conversation by re-examining Cabral's life and writings across its various dimensions, at the heart of which we find the concept of insubmission.

'Insubmission' is understood as a master concept to help us bring together Cabral's philosophical anthropology with his sophisticated understanding of the operations of power in colonial contexts and his vision of how those powers might be reconstructed to inaugurate more liberated ways of being and being in the world. So it is with insubmission that we begin. The first reference to the concept of insubmission in Cabral's works reads as follows:

> What distinguishes man from other animals is, principally, man's insubmission to Nature, of which it is part. Analysing this reality, one could say that Nature has in the human being the realization of its own antithesis. From this circumstance, results a conflict. Its solution is in the basis of all human and scientific progress. [. . .] It is no exaggeration to claim that science's most general goal is the conscious integration of man in Nature, of which it is a part. Erosion is one of the most deleterious consequences of said conflict. It results from profound disturbances in the natural complex soil-life-climate, which originate in the need to obtain from the land the satisfaction of a requisite essential to life: food. (Cabral, 1988: 108; authors' translation)

In-submission. 'In' is a word-forming element meaning 'not, opposite of, without'. But Cabral's in-submission is not simply a 'without' or an 'outside' as opposed to 'within' or 'inside'. Rather than either or, inside or outside, in-submission is both, and it is both at the same time. Put another way, for Cabral, 'Man' is both part, and *not* part, of nature; both nature, and its antithesis.

'Man' relates to nature internally, *as* nature, so to speak. But 'Man' also relates to it externally. Man's distance from nature is necessary in order to enter into a (conscious) relationship with it. This relationship is not problem-free; it implies conflict. The human species turns to nature for self-preservation. Paradoxically, humanity often erodes its own foundations in its quest for self-preservation: 'Man, who causes the destruction of the soil, destroys himself' (Cabral, 1988: 215). Awareness of this paradox calls for intervention so that the contradictions created at one level can be overcome – as far as possible – at the next level, through a conscious integration of the human species with nature. This human-nonhuman integration underpins Cabral's ethics of 'caring for the soil', which resonates strongly with later-day feminist calls for an 'ethics of care' (César, 2018: 256; Gilligan, 1982).

Cabral's understanding of our relationship with nature follows a dialectical pattern that begins within nature itself. For nature, as for humanity, survival depends on constant transformation. 'Everything in nature', writes Cabral (1988), 'has a positive and a negative, a past and a future, elements that disappear and others that develop' (p. 208). In other words, erosion is not just destruction or the process by which soil quality is gradually lost. Soil itself is erosion. It is created by it. The permanent construction/destruction of earth materials is the very mode of soil development. However, an important distinction must be made between two different processes: the natural process of erosion and the accelerated erosion caused by human intervention. While the former is a benign process, the latter upsets the balance of the soil, making the future of the earth as a living system, and of man as part of it, uncertain.

Insubmission is, in other words, a conceptual category that addresses ontological questions in a very general and abstract way. Within Cabral's critical theory, insubmission functions as a master concept. It helps to organize, and give meaning to, other concepts. Resistance, by contrast, is a Cabralian concept that is primarily oriented to guide practical life. Synonymous with struggle, there are at least five different types of resistance: political resistance, armed resistance, economic resistance, cultural resistance, and physical resistance. Once examined in the light of the more ontological category of insubmission, each of these types of resistance is further clarified. Together, insubmission and resistance form the conceptual apparatus of Cabral's critical theory. There are two frames of reference for Cabral's critical theory, each associated with a concept. The first is the anticolonial critique of European humanism. This critique frames insubmission. The second is the struggle for national self-determination of the colonised. This provides the context for conceptualizing resistance.

Like so many of the other anticolonial thinkers of the time, Cabral reveals a critical orientation towards humanism. Postwar Western philosophical debates involve a penetrating critique of humanism (the so-called 'crisis of man'), which will eventually lead to the transition to the so-called antihumanism of structuralism and post-structuralism in the 1960s and 1970s (Kliger, 2018). Black anticolonial thinkers were also keen to move away from Western humanism, although their motivations were slightly different. Their criticism of universalism often aimed to liberate their homelands from colonial oppression. Similarly, their critique of the European patriarchal system also sought to dismantle racial hierarchies both in the colonies and the metropolis. In addition, they aimed to ensure the environmental and economic sustainability of their homeland in the medium

and long term by challenging anthropocentric extractivism. In essence, this is how Cabral rose to become the leader of the armed resistance against Portuguese colonial rule in Guinea-Bissau, and one of the key intellectual figures of the anticolonial movement of the 1960s. Furthermore, it is vital to take into consideration Cabral's target audience – who precisely is he addressing (Getachew and Montana, 2021: 364)?

We structure our argument as follows. Initially, we investigate the textual and socio-political roots of the idea of insubmission, tracing it back to Cabral's agricultural writings. Then, we examine the position insubmission holds in Cabral's thinking, highlighting its role in supporting his anticolonialism and criticism of humanism/anthropocentrism. Finally, we move away from abstract considerations of existence and being towards more practical, concrete considerations. The essay investigates the relationship between insubmission and the other key concept of Cabral's critical theory, resistance. A brief conclusion follows.

From Agronomy to Revolution

This section examines how the concept of insubmission emerges as part of the anticolonial critique of European humanism. This takes us back to Cabral's early agronomical writings where we find his highly original account of 'the human'. This sets the stage for our next section, where we will discuss Cabral's critical humanism.

In more senses than one, Cabral proceeds from the ground up. His care for the soil begins with the influence of soils on living things. This is the object of edaphology. Alongside pedology, which studies soil formation, these are the two main branches of soil science. We find frequent reference to both in Cabral's (1988) agronomical research (pp. 63–79). As a pedologist, Cabral is interested in the fundamental phenomenology of soils. An early instance of this life-long interest is his final course report, from 1951. Born in 1924 in Bafatá, Portuguese Guinea (now Guinea-Bissau), Amílcar Lopes da Costa Cabral grew up in Cape Verde and moved to Lisbon in 1945 to study agronomy. Cabral's final course report is a study of the phenomenology of the soil in southern Portugal. Entitled 'The Problem of Soil Erosion: A Contribution to its Study in the Region of Cuba (Alentejo)', it is the first study on soil erosion undertaken in Portugal and includes the first erosion chart in the country made on a 1:25,000 scale. For our purposes, Cabral's final course report is relevant for yet another reason: it is here that the concept of insubmission originally appears (Cabral, 1988: 108).

Cabral first uses the term 'insubmission' in Chapter 2, 'On the Concept of Soil Erosion' (Section 5). Cabral (1988) uses it to explain the human–non-human relationship from the perspective of the problem of soil erosion. In 5.1 he summarizes the role of human activity in soil erosion (p. 109). This discussion is then extended in Chapter 3. Entitled 'Man', it includes sections on the geography, history, and political economy of the region under study (Cabral, 1988: 119–25). Cabral's argument is dense and informative, providing significant insight into the origins of the concept of insubmission. Moreover, it highlights the importance of humanism in comprehending this idea.

Importantly for our purposes, Cabral's account of 'man' differs from traditional Western humanist accounts in several important ways. Rather than being lofty and abstract, it focuses on a specific problem – soil erosion. Rather than teleological and

progressive, Cabral's narrative argument is dialectical. It proceeds by exposing and exploring historical contradictions, blind spots and missed opportunities. Rather than being organized around 'man' and the progressive realization of 'man's' unique achievements and ability to master nature and its resources (Singh, 2018), Cabral's account is resolutely non-anthropocentric. His alternative account considers human activity, both individually and collectively, on par with non-human agents and conditions. Yet Cabral does not abandon humanism altogether. Instead, throughout his agronomic writings,[3] as well as his literary and more political essays and speeches (Cabral, 1979; see also Cabral, 1973), Cabral proposes an unmistakably humanist message: if humanity is indeed to survive its own mistakes, we must use reason and experience in close dialogue with nature.

This is the general theoretical task assigned to the concept of insubmission. Specifically, insubmission allows Cabral to identify the same basic dialectical process across all dimensions of his study of the region of Cuba, Alentejo. Consider geography. For Cabral, the conflict between rural workers and landowners has been exacerbated by mechanization. This is compounded by a conflict over which crops to grow: for political reasons, wheat production is on the rise, while pasture and horticulture are on the decline. The result is a worsening problem of soil erosion. In addition, although the water supply is largely dependent on unpredictable rainfall, 'the collective use of water is completely unknown' (Cabral, 1988: 120).

No less crucially, insubmission endows Cabral with a systematic view of reality. It allows a fresh perspective on the history of Cuba's region. The region's history is considered a part of Alentejo's history, which, in turn, is a segment of Portugal's history. Cabral's historical account takes a profound, long-term perspective that includes an analytical portrayal of colonialism while acknowledging the natural history of the region. Cabralian history is a combination of socio-political and natural history, presenting a critical aspect in both cases.

Cabral's account begins with the arrival of the Romans. Remnants of the 'Roman imperialist expansion' are visible in the region's peculiar form of property, the latifundium, which reflects a polarized class structure with a clear division between patricians and plebs. The domination of the latter by the former is a typical feature of the Roman Empire, which extended to the Alentejo. Cabral argues that the Romans displayed limited interest in defending the land, even within Italy itself. Consequently, crop production often resulted in soil destruction. The Romans' incapacity to understand this paradox impeded them from perceiving their association with nature as one of insubmission. Consequently, Cabral (1988) posits that the damages inflicted upon arable land may have played a role in the 'decline and annihilation of the empire' (p. 121).

The Arab occupation that ensued was characterized more by land rotation than by an expansion of cultivated land. Leaving some land fallow had a favourable impact on preventing soil erosion. Agriculture came to an end with the Christian reconquest of Iberia, which resulted in extensive destruction. Nonetheless, as Cabral (1988) points out, once the 'kingdom is pacified, the priority is colonisation' (p. 121), that is, the integration and development of the Alentejo region as part of feudal Portugal. This is characterized by a significant increase in arable land, which in turn exposed it 'to the agents of its destruction' (Cabral, 1988: 121).

During the period of colonial expansion, agriculture in the Alentejo region suffered due to the allure of 'the riches of India' (Cabral, 1988: 121). However, in the 20th century, with the advancement of internal colonization in Portugal, arable land began to increase once again. By the 1940s, wheat production prevails, resulting in 'thousands of hectares being exposed to erosion' (Cabral, 1988: 121), as was the case in the past.

The Alentejo's 'agrarian problem' stems from the conflict between the region's climate and soil features, and the Estado Novo government's political agenda to transform it into the 'breadbasket of Portugal', implementing the 'Wheat Campaign' from 1929 to 1938.[4] This socio-natural dialectic resulted in soil degradation and a majority population living in poverty. Cabral concludes that the cause of soil erosion lies with people, both at the individual level, due to farmers' lack of understanding of appropriate cultivation techniques, and at the collective level, through a property regime focused solely on maximizing profit. In accordance with the logic of insubmission, Cabral observes that this ultimately harms humanity: soil destruction, for which humans are responsible, leads to increased poverty and reduced employment opportunities.

In summary, Cabral's 1951 analysis of 'man' is critical, but not antihumanist. It maintains that the human subject has the potential to improve its existence. However, the philosophical-anthropological category of 'man' is in urgent need of a profound revision. It is necessary to promote the achievements and the potential of the individual agents and of the concrete social formations as they live in coexistence with their natural environment. This is the foundation of Cabral's critical humanism.

That this discussion of insubmission was not a passing remark in an academic dissertation is made clear by the fact that Cabral chose to have it republished verbatim three years later in the *Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa* (Cabral, 1988: 214), a journal founded in 1946 with the aim of reporting the 'ceaseless progress, a new chronicle of the conquest of Guinea for civilisation and science' (Caetano, 1946: 3). If Cabral wanted his ideas to be read by the Portuguese-speaking political and scientific intelligentsia, this was the place to do it.

Indeed, Cabral soon became one of the empire's leading agronomists. His agricultural census of Portuguese Guinea, a study made on the bequest of the United Nations in 1953 and eventually published in 1965 (Chabal, 2003: 48), will remain the staple analysis of the territory's soil, vegetation and rural life for decades (Cabral, 1988: 291–443; see Chilcote, 1968). Politically, the survey provides Cabral with unparalleled insight into the lives of rural Guineans (Chabal, 2003: 49), which will prove crucial in his afterlife as revolutionary leader. As Chabal (2003) aptly observes, 'few twentieth-century revolutionary and guerrilla leaders were in the enviable position of having such a specialised and detailed knowledge of the country in which they proposed to launch a people's war' (p. 52).

Being equipped with a detailed knowledge of the soil enables Cabral to study how soil properties are dialectically related to plant communities, both natural and cultivated. Cabral (1988) pays particular attention to the process of meteorization of the rock (p. 92). It is out of this process that the outermost layer of the earth that provides the foundation of terrestrial life on the planet, the pedosphere, is created. Yet, Cabral insists, this is not the only relevant contradiction. The fundamental contradiction between nature and humankind – our insubmission to nature, of which we are a part – is equally important to

the history of the planet. It is from the ground up, then, that Cabral sees soil management as a political problem, a problem that exposes the extractivist nature of colonialism. Thus, 'the problem of erosion [. . .] is not the concern of agriculture alone, but of society as a whole' (Cabral, 1988: 223). Cabral (1988) traces the issue of soil erosion in metropolitan Portugal and Portuguese Guinea to the system of property (p. 155). In either case, 'the problem of the defence of the land must be of interest' not only to farmers, 'but also to the social community in which it is debated'. Care for the soil 'must be present both in the governments' programs and in the wills of the Peoples. This is because to defend the land is to defend Man' (Cabral, 1988: 86). Given the negative environmental record of colonialism, the ethical imperative of caring for the soil is even more acute in Guinea than in southern Portugal (Cabral, 1988: 247–8). The political founding of Portuguese Guinea as an independent country, thus, involves not only *insubmission* to colonial rule and its extractivist mode of production, but also *insubmission* to nature, a balancing act between human intervention and natural processes, which remain firmly outside the purview of human agency.

Insubmission and Critical Humanism

Whilst the textual origins of this balancing act lie in the agronomical research Cabral undertakes in the 1950s, the motivation driving his politics of insubmission is personal and traumatic. The trigger is a natural catastrophe. In 1941, when Cabral is 17, he witnesses one of the worst droughts ever to affect the archipelago of Cape Verde. That year alone, some 20,000 Cape Verdeans starved to death, a figure that will ultimately rise to an estimated 45,000 deaths. Astonishingly, the hunger will go unreported in the Portuguese press. Colonial authorities ban the use of the term 'famine', and any attempt at reporting deaths is quickly suppressed (Brooks, 2006). Colonialism is not only responsible for turning a drought into a famine; it is also to blame for preventing the suffering from being accounted for. Herein lie the distant roots of Cabral's inexorable anticolonialism. In the short-term, the trauma will influence Cabral's decision to study agronomy and specialize in the phenomenon directly behind the famine: soil erosion (Idahosa, 2002: 38). In the long-term, it becomes a signature motif for the independence of Guinea and Cape Verde.

This traumatic episode, the memory of which would stay with Cabral (1969) forever (p. 18), sets the stage for our discussion in this section. We begin by exploring how Cabral's concern with human suffering and racial discrimination leads to a critical examination of what it means to be human. This forms the basis for comparing his critical humanism with contemporary approaches and analysing two ways in which Cabral's ideas are put into practice.

At the heart of Cabral's (1988) conception of the human is the assertion that 'man is nature' (p. 44). This Cabralian motto not only signals a rejection of anthropocentrism, but also underscores a systemic understanding of the place of the human species in relation to the natural environment. The category of 'man' functions as a bridgehead between a multitude of interdependent factors, including the natural environment as well as cultural and socio-economic structures. Insubmission arises from the contradictory nature of the human-nature nexus: 'Man is nature' does not mean mere identification; on the contrary,

it signals the quasi-ontological character of a dialectic – the dialectic underpinning the master concept of insubmission.

It does not take long for Cabral to draw the political implications of this conception of the human. Like many others in his generation, it provides Cabral with a solid foundation upon which to critique humanism.[5] This paves the way for a 'critical humanism' (Said, 2004) that retains a safe distance from the French antihumanism of the 1960s, from which current critiques of humanism, despite their internal variety, all stem.

Although it has been long noted that humanism serves as a frame of reference to Cabral's critical theory,[6] the existing literature has so far overlooked the exact role the concept of insubmission performs in that engagement. More recently, Rabaka (2014) takes a step in the right direction when he points out that Cabralism is *not* a posthumanism (p. 266). However, how exactly Cabral's anticolonialism lends itself to a critical engagement with humanism, and why insubmission plays such a central role in it, remain unexplored. Consider the exploration of the continuum machine–human–animal in Donna Haraway, an early example of posthuman social theory (Haraway, 1991). In contrast with Cabral's critical humanism, that is developed as an alternative to both the dehumanizing effects of colonialism and the environmental consequences of anthropocentrism, Haraway's work is undertaken in opposition to militarism, patriarchal capitalism, and state socialism. Equally somewhat distant from Cabral's critical humanism, which has relatively little to say about the humanism-patriarchy nexus, is Anzaldúa's (2012) 'queer inhumanism' (p. 40). Closer to Cabral's anticolonialism is dehumanism. Understood as 'a practice of recuperation, of stripping away the violent foundations (always structural and ideological) of colonial and neocolonial mastery that continue to render some beings more human than others', it has been recently proposed as a pathway for social change (Singh, 2018: 4).

Insubmission helps account for Cabral's anticolonial counterpoint to contemporary critiques of humanism. Cabral's anticolonialism, however, also serves as a counterpoint to decolonial and postcolonial approaches, both of which have from their inception been the site of a debate about humanism. Decolonial thought emerges partly as the realization that Christian humanism in Renaissance Europe is a 'cause and consequence' of European-indigenous contact (Mignolo, 2000: 721). Eventually, this will lead to a metaphysical, if not nostalgic, discourse premised on the possibility of returning to the moment prior to the original colonial contact. By contrast, Cabral's redefinition of the 'human' is founded in human immanence rather than transcendence and, like Fanon, has a 'voracious taste for the concrete' (Fanon, 1963: 95). As opposed to decolonial thought, it is resolutely non-metaphysical (Mignolo, 2011). Postcolonialism's relationship with humanist artistic and literary forms tends to be more nuanced. Cabral renders the postcolonial critique of humanism insufficient, however. Even though Cabral shares with postcolonial approaches the belief in humanist universalism's potential to combat racism (Said, 2004; Todorov, 2002), unlike them, he sees colonialism and racism as more than a matter purely of language or discourse. In either case, Cabral's understanding of the human remains porous: wary of the subject-object dichotomy, the relationship between human and nonhuman forms is seen as fundamentally imbricated.

Cabral's critique of humanism is concretized in at least two concurring ways. First, Cabral's critical humanism translates itself as a politics of the soil. This is an original

aspect of Cabralian humanism vis-à-vis other anticolonial thinkers, such as Frantz Fanon, Leopold Senghor or Aimé Césaire. It involves a non-anthropocentric politics of the soil, in the guise of the one depicted in his final course report, in the ulterior reports he produced for the colonial government in the 1950s, and eventually implemented in the highly subversive 'agronomy of liberation' (César, 2018: 261) that characterized the struggle for the independence of Guinea-Bissau.

Second, Cabral's humanism is concretized – besides the 'revolutionary internationalism' noted by Rabaka (2014: 212) – in a realist approach to politics, including international politics, that exposes manipulatory usages of concepts such as 'democracy', 'civilization' or 'humanism'. Here, as we shall see, Cabral's audience is very different from that of his early years. He now speaks directly to the international political community in the person of national representatives and international officials of international organizations.

In order to fully understand how Cabral exposes self-serving usages of 'humanism', one needs to consider the fact that Cabral mobilizes a constructivist definition of ideology (Rabaka, 2014: 212). Although operating within a broadly leftist framework, Cabral rejects the orthodox Marxist critique of ideology as false consciousness, including Althusser's critique of 'socialist humanism'.[7] He also rejects the structuralist view of ideology as yet another cultural structure mechanically impacting human behaviour. Rather, for Cabral, it is in light of local social and natural conditions that political agents interpret and adapt ideologies. Ideology is viewed as a cultural entity that emerges out of human webs of meaning riveted in the ground. As Cabral happily concedes, Guineans' knowledge of the ideologies of a Marx or a Lenin was limited at best. Yet this limited knowledge sufficed (Cabral, 1971: 21). This makes Cabralian ideology eminently redeployable. As a result, Cabral is able to expose uses of humanist ideas to justify colonial oppression while retaining the ability to redeploy these very same humanist ideas as anticolonial tools.

A good illustration of Cabral's critical humanism is his highly subversive reading of Decree no. 43.897, from 1961.[8] Enacted in response to the United Nations' resolution on decolonization of 14 December 1960, Decree no. 43.897 is part of a wider pack of reforms of colonial legislation on the constitutional and legal status of Guinea. The Decree stands out for the explicit way in which it draws upon the universalist principles of the Enlightenment and its humanist underpinnings to justify downgrading the customs and mores of the 'indigenous' populations. Cabral is keen to exploit the contradiction of a selective universalism. In a statement made in Conakry in June 1962 to the United Nations Special Committee on Territories under Portuguese Administration, Cabral notes that Article 2 of Decree no. 43.897 enables the recognition of local usages and customs, 'limited by the *moral principles* and basic rules of the Portuguese legal system' (Cabral, 1969: 22, emphasis added). Inequality between Portuguese citizens and imperial subjects is thus justified not as a matter of fact, but morally. A question then arises: What kind of 'moral principles' justify colonial domination overseas? Cabral points to the Portuguese Constitution, which specifies '*morality, the dictates of humanity and the free exercise of Portuguese sovereignty*' (Portuguese Constitution of 1933, Article 138, Amendment 11 June 1951, emphasis added). In fact, the political-constitutional order of the Portuguese colonial empire was, at least in part, built upon humanist moral principles. Indeed, Cabral

is entirely justified in his critique of humanism as a moral-philosophical justification for colonialism, as references abound in the Portuguese constitution of the time (e.g. Articles 4, 15, 22) and populate Salazar's political speeches.[9] However, for Cabral there is little doubt that 'the basic strength of Portuguese colonialism lies not in legal provisions nor in any original features of its political organization'. Instead, the 'basic strength of Portuguese colonialism [. . .] lies, and has always lain, *in its moral and physical propensity for repressive practices*, based on an absolute refusal to regard the African as a human being' (Cabral, 1969: 26, emphasis added). In other words, the beginning of Guinea as an independent country is made dependent on bringing an end to colonialism and its two-tier conception of humanity (Said, 1975).

Yet Cabral is wary of any logic of total transcendence whereby one replaces one system of beliefs for another. For Cabral, humanism – and the associated ideas of human dignity, personal growth and making the world a better place – is not intrinsically bad or good. As with any other system of ideas, humanism exists only as it is redeployed and adapted to local circumstances. It is a resource that political agents use to achieve their goals, either colonial domination or emancipation from it. The value of humanism for Cabral is that it gives political founding a moral grounding. This grounding provides Guineans involved in the liberation struggle an important source of motivation (Cabral, 1979: 224–50) while remaining eminently intelligible for colonizers themselves. Consider Cabral's (1979) open note to the Portuguese Government, which had recently recognized Guineans as '*civilized*' (p. 172). Cabral swiftly takes the opportunity to contest the colonialist appropriation of the term 'civilized' and resignify it, turning it into an instrument of anticolonialism. The true measure of civilization of the Guinean people, Cabral points out, is their collective rejection of colonialism (Cabral, 1979: 172) in tandem with their claim to the right of self-determination in the eyes of 'world opinion and the United Nations' (Cabral, 1979: 173). In the court of world public opinion, Cabral's narrative argument becomes his sword against the civilizing discourse of European colonialism, which is exposed as a false, self-serving narrative based on humanist principles that nevertheless remain potentially emancipatory. This also reveals that, for Cabral, the human is less a fixed biological category, separated from the nonhuman, than a contingent moral category, open to constant redefinition.

At this point, the comparison between the critical humanism of Cabral and Fanon's 'new humanism' is instructive, not least because it breaks through the almost exclusive focus of the current scholarship on the Anglo and Francophone intellectual contexts (Kliger, 2018: 773–800). The basic difference between Cabral and Fanon can be traced back to their respective training as agronomist and psychiatrist. Fanon's writings are suffused with psychiatric concepts and deeply informed by his medical practice. By contrast, to read Cabral is to read a soil scientist trying to come to terms with the paradoxical relation between human activity and nature. In addition, whilst Fanon has a secondary role in the war of independence of Algeria,[10] Cabral leads the military struggle of national liberation of his home country from the beginning until his death. These differences help explain why, for Fanon, decolonization is tantamount to a fundamental shift in terms of the colonizer/colinized's psyche and identity, whilst for Cabral decolonization is a socio-natural transformation involving both identity redefinition and soil protection. That said, one should not draw an unnecessarily hard line between Fanon and Cabral's notions of

humanism. Both authors ground their notions of humanism in concrete lived experience (Pithouse, 2003). Whereas Cabral's humanism is built from the ground up, including in the struggle for the liberation of Guinea-Bissau from Portuguese colonialism, Fanon's call for a new humanism was grounded in the struggle in Algeria. The concrete parameters of this new humanity were sketched in his 1959 book, *A Dying Colonialism* (Fanon, 1965), involving the slow and complex refashioning of relations to objects, language, gender, and to each other (see also McCulloch, 1981: 8–10; Serequeberhan, 2005).

In sum, Cabral's critical humanism rejects reductionist anthropocentric solutions in order to pave the way to a more horizontal relationship between the human species and the other living species that together inhabit the pedosphere. It is also resolutely realistic. It conceives of the politics of humanism (how humanist doctrine is deployed in concrete social and political settings) as riddled with contradiction. It can be relatively progressive and emancipatory, but it can also be responsible for dispossession, murder, and oppression. Crucially for Cabral, the politics of humanism can nurture forms of care for the soil and combat environmental and biological determinism. His faith in science and human reason leads him to find in the tensions within universalism the ongoing potential of a strategic, flexible, and always provisional humanism – one that recognizes that 'man is nature'.

Insubmission and Resistance

Having examined the position of the master concept of insubmission in Cabral's social thought and his critical engagement with humanism, we are now in a condition to address the other frame of reference to his critical theory: the nation-state (Rabaka, 2014: 204 ff.). This means moving the discussion from ontological to more concrete levels of analysis. Conceptually, the concern with national self-determination (Getachew, 2019) is encapsulated in the Cabralian concept of resistance. In this section, we use the concept of insubmission in order to re-examine the five types of resistance Cabral writes about: political resistance, economic resistance, cultural resistance, armed resistance, and physical resistance.[11]

Resistance is also where Cabral's narrative argument, with its moralized rhetoric, most clearly comes to the fore: orally presented before his comrades-in-arms in seminars and other public gatherings, the concept of resistance and its various subtypes is fundamentally oriented to guide practical life. Yet it would be wrong to diminish Cabral's analytical efforts to carefully distinguish between the various types of resistance. These efforts are particularly evident when one takes the master concept of insubmission into consideration.

Consistent with insubmission, resistance is generally defined in naturalist terms. 'Resistance is a natural thing', Cabral (2016) explains, resorting to Newtonian physics: 'All force that exerts itself on a particular thing gives rise to a resistance, that is, a counter force' (p. 73). Yet it is also a social process through and through: 'the counter force to the colonial and imperial force is the movement of national liberation' (Cabral, 2016: 73). This interweaving between human and nonhuman dimensions, following the terms laid out by insubmission, is thoroughly dialectic. Resistance 'is to destroy something for the sake of constructing another thing' (Cabral, 2016: 76). Cabral's anticolonial resistance is

both 'a natural thing' *and* a political process; its double political aims are the destruction of colonial domination *and* the construction of an independent Guinea. Importantly, each of these political aims has a human *and* a nonhuman dimension.

Each specific type of resistance is further clarified when considered in the light of insubmission. As discussed, a key aspect of insubmission is the affirmation of the human species as a natural entity ('man is nature'). In social theoretical terms, this addresses two important issues. First, it is a corrective of social constructionism, especially in its more radical variants. Cabral's notion of *physical resistance*, which involves overcoming a primary human emotion (fear) in relation to one's own physical integrity, is a concrete illustration of his rejection of any kind of symbolic-linguistic reductionism. For Cabral (1979), physical resistance is necessary in order to 'destroy the physical ills which colonialism has brought us in order to build a stronger and more capable new being' (p. 239). For Cabral, bodies matter, especially in the process of superseding the dehumanizing effects of colonialism.

Second, it is a corrective of anthropocentrism, the humanist ideal that has historically enabled economic extractivism. In that it tries to conciliate environmental sustainability and socioeconomic development, Cabral's *economic resistance* provides a valuable counterpoint to contemporary degrowth economics (Saito, 2023). 'Man' cannot be the measure of all things and its gradual but inexorable flourishing the sole reference for historical 'progress'; socioeconomic development is a valuable aim even if this means undertaking it under the auspices of an ethic of care for the soil.

Insubmission is also insubmission to oppression and inequality. In the immediate context of Cabral's life, this meant insubmission to colonialism and the looming menace of neo-colonialism, including what would later be designated as coloniality. According to Cabral, this means accepting that one is simultaneously created by and struggling against colonialism. *Political resistance* illustrates this conundrum in the context of the formation of a new nation-state. The way out of the conundrum, and the main aim of political resistance, is 'to unite, to raise national consciousness [. . .] as much in Guinea as in Cape Verde' (Cabral, 2016: 79) among the people of those territories, defined as anyone who opposes colonialism (Cabral, 2016: 80),[12] under one political party that is also a national liberation movement. This goal can only be achieved if some of the master's tools are appropriated and used to build the new political structures of the postcolony. Concrete examples of political resistance in this sense include the use of Portuguese, science, and bureaucracy.

In turn, *armed resistance* illustrates what fighting against colonialism ultimately entails. Unlike Fanon, however, Cabral does not attach a metaphysical quality to the category of violence (see, e.g., Fanon, 1963: 94; see also 254 ff., where Fanon analyses the destructive impact of violence). Violence is acceptable only within very clear limits. It is merely a means to an end, a means to be used only when absolutely necessary and in the most humane way possible. In any case, taking up arms against external oppression is an entirely justified act of insubmission.

The dialectic nature of insubmission to colonial oppression is well captured by *cultural resistance*. In a reminiscent tone to Leopold Senghor, Cabral concludes his speech on cultural resistance with a note on 'critical assimilation'.[13] 'Our struggle', Cabral observes, 'has been the constant application of the principle of critical assimilation, that

is, availing ourselves of others, but criticizing what can be useful for our land and that which cannot. Accumulating experience and creating' (Cabral, 2016: 137). Cabral's anticolonial concept of cultural resistance, forged (like Senghor's) during the decolonization era, can be instructively contrasted with Edward Said's postcolonial project of 'humanistic resistance'. Whereas the latter is a literary project involving the writing of 'longer essays, longer periods of reflection' (Said, 2004: 73) as a means to foster oppositional writing that would enable 'the practice of identities other than those given by the flag or the national war of the moment' (Said, 2004: 80), the former is concerned with the practical accomplishment of a chosen end, namely, to help Guineans achieve cultural liberation from ignorance and prejudice.

In sum, resistance is the concrete application of insubmission. Together they constitute for Cabral, as Marx (1978) put it, a '*real* movement which abolishes the present state of things' (p. 162, emphasis added) and which is creative of new relationships, new identities, new forms of knowledge, new forms of thought, new communities of expression and of being. Hope, in other words, follows insubmission and resistance.

Cabralian hope is both grounded and open-ended. It is grounded in the literal sense of being defined from the ground up. Cabral is keen to emphasize from early on that the soil is a good that does not belong to any one generation. As he observes, the soil must be a 'perennial good, used, and, as much as possible, enriched by the collectivity, as a contribution of each generation to the benefit of the prosperity of future generations' (Cabral, 1988: 155). Cabral, however, was notoriously reticent about giving a definitive blueprint of the future of Guinea (Chabal, 2003: 48). This provides Cabral's anticolonial critique with a unique flavour among postwar liberation movements in Africa, which typically endorse the Marxist-Leninist idea of progress. By contrast, Cabral's open-ended utopianism helps undermine false universalism, debunk the aporias of anthropocentric humanism whilst criticizing ideas of progress latent in more dominant notions of utopia. His writings, whether more self-consciously political-theoretical or concerning agronomy and soil science more directly, offer a glimpse into the untapped possibilities already embedded in the here and now. This, we argue, places Cabral firmly within the 'black utopian tradition' (Zamalin, 2019) where he sits side by side with Du Bois (Du Bois, 1920). Both thinkers mobilize the utopian genre to show how the shared human vulnerability to catastrophes helps destabilize racism's epistemological foundations.

Conclusion

We can now answer our initial question more definitively. Cabral's primary contribution to contemporary social theory is the concept of insubmission. He created this concept in 1951 as part of his final course report on soil erosion in southern Portugal. Insubmission is the basis of Cabral's critique of traditional humanism. It provides Cabral with a powerful tool for analysing not only the nature of humanity and how humanity interacts with the non-human realm, but also how these definitions are shaped by historical events, particularly the experience of colonialism. Insubmission allows Cabral to define humans as the only animal species that refuses to submit to *the nature of which it is a part*. This refusal defines the boundary between humans and nonhumans. For Cabral, this refusal is not a lofty intellectual accomplishment but instead an intrinsic aspect of social and

natural history. He narrows in on the history of European colonialism, examining it through the lens of the natural history of the respective territories.

Hence made part of history, insubmission is mobilized in response to the dehumanizing and environmentally destructive outcomes of colonial expansion. The basic idea is deceptively simple: we must reject colonialism, which reduces the colonized to subhuman status, as well as its linked anthropocentric economic extractivism, which leads to environmental catastrophe. *In*submission is the only rational, humane response that human beings can make to these twin challenges. A partial solution to this inescapable contradiction is science, the knowledge of the laws that govern nature. But, as the problem of soil erosion shows, this is never enough.

Resisting is essential, but what does resistance entail? All human groups naturally resist dehumanization and environmental degradation. However, resistance has a political side, requiring tools from science and experience to enhance and extend the struggle. How do we go about resisting? Cabral emphasizes resisting dehumanization with our bodies, minds, and institutions. Physical, cultural, armed, and political resistance are among the various forms that can manifest as resistance against dehumanization. However, economic resistance is the only means by which we can resist environmental degradation, which necessitates a strong ethical commitment to soil conservation.

Importantly, resistance is not just a reaction, nor is it steeped in nostalgia. Cabral's fight is a struggle for liberation, buoyed by hope and the desire to build something new based on pragmatic and adaptable principles, rather than a set ideological doctrine. Reversing dehumanization requires a rethinking of what it means to be human. Rather than scrapping everything from the past, the process involves a selective preservation of what is of value, while discarding negative and toxic elements, based on the circumstances and options available to us. This requires relinquishing anthropocentrism and acknowledging our unique obligation to care for nonhuman beings. By redefining the relationship between humans and nonhumans, we can be liberated from environmental catastrophes if we resist catastrophism. National liberation involves individuals and collectives who reject anthropocentric extractivism in favour of a realistic assessment of our needs in relation to the world's available resources. This is a collective project geared towards survival as a species.

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Notes

1. On the challenges posed by anticolonial thought to Frankfurt-style critical theory, see Said (1994: 357), and by post/decolonial approaches, see McArthur (2022). On Africana critical theory more generally, see Bassey (2007); Rabaka (2009).
2. See, e.g., Saraiva (2022). A biography has been recently published by Tomás (2022).
3. Cabral's agronomic writings are comprised of 59 articles. For a complete bibliography, see Cabral (1988: 49–51).
4. Inspired by the Italian *Bataglia del Grano*, the aim was to ensure the country's productive self-sufficiency.
5. But see van Veen (2016), who critiques Cabral for failing to challenge humanism as the premise '*behind* various forms of European colonialism and white supremacy' (p. 84, emphasis added).
6. Drawing upon a tradition whose genealogy has been recounted in Hardt and Negri (2000), Chabal (2003) writes about Cabral's 'revolutionary humanism' (p. 168); see also Rabaka (2014: 139).
7. Althusser (2005: 223). On the rediscovery of the humanist Marx in the 1950s, see da Silva and Vieira (2019: 62–98); see also da Silva (2016).
8. Decree No. 43.897, of 1961: https://files.dre.pt/1s/1961/09/20700/11341135.pdf (accessed 30 April 2024).
9. In a key speech from 1963, the Portuguese dictator singles out 'Christian humanitarianism' as the moral justification for the Portuguese colonial empire in Africa. See Salazar (1967: 287).
10. From 1959, Fanon is a roving ambassador of the Algeria National Liberation Front (FLN) to Africa's sub-Sahara states.
11. Although most commentators only focus on four types of resistance, ignoring physical resistance (e.g. Hamilton, 2021: 94–6). This has partly to do with the fact that Cabral discusses the five types across various writings published between 1965 and 1969: the theoretical considerations made after the February 1964 Cassacá Congress; 'Palavras de Ordem Gerais' (1965); *Alguns Princípios do Partido* (1969). These three texts were first published as one volume in 1974 as *PAIGC. Unidade e Luta. Textos Amílcar Cabral*, no. 2. This collected volume covers much of the same ground as the 19–24 November 1969 seminar that gave origin to *Análise de Alguns Tipos de Resistência*, translated into English in 2016 as *Resistance and Decolonization*, which we cite here. If one focuses solely on *Resistance and Decolonization*, where physical resistance is not addressed, it is easy to understand the focus on four, not five, types. Yet Cabral does not give any textual indication suggesting either that his earlier public addresses were less important than the latter, or that his position has substantively changed. In any case, given that he only discusses physical resistance in passing in his earlier speeches, it seems fair to conclude that this is a less fundamental type of resistance than the other four.
12. Dan Wood's 2016 English translation completely mistranslates Cabral at a crucial point in the text when he comes to define the people. The latest Portuguese version reads: '*Eu repito: povo é todo o filho da nossa terra, na Guiné e em Cabo Verde, que quer correr com os colonialistas portugueses, mais nada. Se ele quer, ele é povo*' (Cabral, 2020: 21). A possible translation is: 'I repeat: the people are every child of our land, in Guinea and Cape Verde, who wants to get rid of the Portuguese colonialists, that's all. *If they want, they are the people*' (emphasis added). By contrast, Wood's translation effectively deprives readers of Cabral's non-essentialist definition of the people: 'And I repeat to the people and to every child in our land of Guinea and Cape Verde who wants to run with the Portuguese colonialists – no more. He wants to do this, but he is of our people, and we don't want anyone to divide our people' (Cabral, 2016: 80).
13. Only by 'assimilating, not [by being] assimilated', can colonized peoples become truly free and independent (Senghor, 1964: 293).

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