

Fanon dans la pensée politique africaine récente

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First, I would like to thank Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun, Valérie Lowit, and the other organizers for their hard work in putting this meeting together. A local meeting is difficult enough. To have taken on such a task on an international scale is Promethean. I would also like to thank Mireille Fanon-Mendes for her international work on human rights. Her father, in whose honor this meeting was organized, would be very proud to know how well she embodies his spirit. And finally, I would like to thank the audience. In the United States, there are scholars who are fond of saying that Fanon has no influence in France, that he is relatively unknown in French intellectual circles. The several hundred people who attended various sessions over the two days of this conference prove otherwise.

The time afforded leaves little room for but an outline of the ideas I propose here. It is my hope that my fellow participants, the audience included, will find these thoughts, offered in summary form, useful. I will discuss Fanon in the present tense since, unlike many of his critics, I do not share the view that he is trapped irremediably in his time. It is the mark of a great intellectual, in fact, that he or she only stands *partially* in such time while reaching far into the future. Some critics erroneously use *universality* as the criterion of a thinker transcending his or her time. Fanon's work has shown, however, that human studies should be understood in other terms. It is fallacious to think that the absence of universality equals that of irrelevance. What is important, his work has shown, is that ideas are sufficiently general (versus *over general*) and relevant to reach others. I recently wrote a book on African diasporic philosophical thought over the past thousand years. There is literally no chapter in which Fanon's thought was not relevant, and he stood, across three regions, as one of the undisputed canonical figures.

Fanon has offered a set of important concepts that continue to be relevant and useful. Here are several:

In *Peau noire, masques blancs* he offers a critique of method. He shows that colonization occurs also at the level of *how* a people produce knowledge. Let us call this *epistemological colonialism*. To respond to this kind of colonialism, the intellectual must offer a critique that shows how concepts can make us dependent on systems that colonize us. In effect, this means there is important work for intellectuals in emancipating projects. To understand the importance of such work, it should be borne in mind that colonization and racism challenge the humanity of colonized and racially-dominated peoples. An at first logical response is to demonstrate that such people are as human as the people who have colonized them. Such a response is, however, a trap. For it would in effect affirm the colonizing group as the standard of being human. The task, then, is to unsettle the meaning of being human and to take responsibility for the standard or standards by which being human should be lived. This is part of the intellectual work, as articulated by Fanon, and it involves being sufficiently self-critical as to question even the methods by which we produce such work.

In the same book, Fanon argues for the importance of understanding how the social world produces meaning and, as a consequence, kinds of beings. He calls this *sociogenesis*. Most debates on colonialism and racism focus on either dominating structures on the one hand or individual responsibility on the other. Fanon argues that the social world mediates

both, but he reminds us that it is human beings who produce the social world. We make the social world, but it also makes us by becoming that by which our choices are contextualized and made meaningful. Oppression, for example, exists through limitations forced upon us by a stratified social world. It forces us to exercise agency only over our inner life; being ineffective at affecting the social world, we attempt to fix ourselves. W.E.B. Du Bois referred to this as making ourselves into problems, of becoming “problem people.”

Fanon identified the production of problem people in his critique of normativity. Modern colonialism and racism have, for example, eradicated any coherent notion of a black person. The black professional who attempts assimilation in the society encounters an impasse. He or she is not considered a “normal” black person. Through an endless stream of insults, her or she is treated, by whites and other people of color, as not “really black.” But at the same time, should he or she assert not being black, the many limitations of racist society are imposed in the form of illicit membership. The discourse against affirmative action today is a case in point. The black is always presumed to be “unqualified” in comparison to any white under consideration. Then there is the other extreme: The black criminal, drug addict, mentally challenged, licentious example (in popular culture, the “gansta”) is *authentic*. That such behavior is considered pathological means that, in effect, black authenticity is a form of abnormality. In effect, abnormality is in either direction.

Du Bois’s observation was that some people are studied as problems instead of people with or facing problems. A racist social world produces people as the same. Fanon’s point is that however black people live or understand themselves, the social world thrusts upon them a distorted version of themselves as problems. Du Bois called this a doubled-reality. To be such people is to know of their identity as seen through a world that makes them into problems while at the same time knowing themselves as otherwise. The second stage, of knowing the contradictions of the distorted image, is a dialectical movement of double consciousness. It is part of the intellectual dimension of decolonization.

The discussion of double consciousness raises the question of several important distinctions in Fanon’s thought. It is not only how we are perceived and our critical understanding of that perception, but also what we are able to do that has a similar contrast. Fanon’s thought, for example, offers a distinction between liberty and freedom. The first is about an absence of constraint and is what we share with other animals. The latter is about the responsibility we have for the first. Freedom is about how we are able to appear to ourselves and to others. It is about how we exercise our liberty or its absence. To be free involves being out in the open. The addition of responsibility brings back the discussion of pathology and normativity. Fanon, unlike many other political thinkers, understands the developmental aspect of human life. We are not, in other words, born as adults. Freedom, as he sees it, is a maturation process. It is about learning to live as an adult. Colonialism and racism relegate a group of people to the status of children. In racist societies, black men and women are always “boy” and “girl.” In French, such individuals, even when older and are not familiar, are addressed as “tu” instead of “vous.”

That modern racism and colonialism treat many people of color as children leads Fanon to offer a critique of the Self-Other dialectic and the problem of recognition. The genealogy is from the thought of G.W.F. Hegel, where self-consciousness and freedom are understood through struggles for recognition. A master achieves recognition as a master through forcing another to do so and, in so doing, makes him or her a slave. Where a

master is eventually forced to recognize his or her dependence on the recognition of the slave eventually empowers the slave to overcome the relationship, which results in a higher stage of freedom. This higher stage of freedom, in which each could become self and other, is an ethical relationship. In the contemporary academy, much discussion of race and racism is replete with criticism of otherness. Fanon, however, argues that racism proper eliminates such a relationship. Instead of self and other, there are self, others, and non-self, non-others. In other words, there is the category of people who are neither self nor others. They are no-one. The dialectics of recognition is disrupted, and the struggle of such people becomes one of achieving such a dialectics. Put differently, they are not fighting against being others. They are fighting to become others and, in so doing, entering ethical relationships. This argument results in a peculiar critique of liberal political theory. Such theory presupposes ethical foundations of political life. What Fanon has shown is that political work needs to be done to make ethical life possible. That is because racism and colonialism derail ethical life.

It could be objected that ethics is still the goal of anti-racist struggles. Given the argument about epistemological colonialism, a similar argument applies to ethics. Which standard of ethics should rule the process of social change? Since ethics must also be interrogated, then it is, in effect, suspended at the moment of critique? Ethics could, in other words, function in a counter-social transformation way by demanding conditions that would preserve colonial relationships.

Fanon brings all these considerations together in his political thought.

The distinction between liberty and freedom could also be understood through what Jean-Jacques Rousseau has described as the will in general versus the general will. The first is about individual's interests. The latter is about the interest of one's society. Put differently, one involves thinking about oneself and the latter includes thinking about others. In *Les damnés de la terre*, Fanon makes this distinction through his discussion of nationalism versus national consciousness. The first involves thinking only about one's ethnic group, the latter involves thinking about the nation, the good of one's society. Nationalism is a manifestation of a will in general, and national consciousness is an expression of the general will.

The question of self-interest versus national consciousness comes to the fore in Fanon's discussion of leadership in the process of decolonization. His argument is similar to the one posed by Moses in the Hebrew Bible: The charismatic leader could lead the people to Promised Land that he may not enter. In similar kind, Fanon argues that those who are best suited for the struggle for independence are not necessarily suited for the task of building the nation that follows. Those leaders should learn how to move out of the way for a new set of leaders to emerge, a set whose understanding and problematics are indigenous to the postcolonial situation. The consequence that often emerges, however, is a dialectical movement from colonialism to decolonization and then neocolonization to postcolonization. The stage from neocolonialism to postcolonialism is one in which the conflict is with the new mediating class, understood as the national bourgeoisie but not properly such since their power is divorced from capital. There is a *moral* argument instead of a material infrastructural one. Unlike the European bourgeoisie, whose ascent was symbiotically linked to the development of resources and ideas, this new bourgeoisie, which could properly be considered a lumpen-bourgeoisie, are able to acquire wealth without national development. Their way of life in fact requires the exportation of wealth and its preservation elsewhere.

It is striking that although Fanon's analysis of the national bourgeoisie in post-

independence Africa is the largest chapter in *Les damnés de la terre*, and his discussions of alienation, terrorism, and torture in *Pour la révolution africaine* could be easily mapped onto the present conflicts in Middle East and North Africa, his first chapter on violence seems to have eclipsed most of his thought. I will not outline the many discussions and criticisms here. Let us instead consider an aspect of his discussion that is often overlooked. If colonialism leads to a suspension of values, as we have seen in the derailment of the dialectics of recognition, what is the consequence in a world where there is no basis of limiting actions without force? In other words, if ethics has been derailed (because of an absence of egalitarian relations between selves and others), how is it possible to outlaw violence? The situation becomes acute when one considers the stage set by the colonial situation: On the one hand, there is a group whose land was taken from them by force or trickery. On the other, there are the settlers, most of whom, over time, have acquired land through a legal process that their most generation did not in fact create. Both groups make a claim for the same land and its resources in terms of *right*. The tragedy of the situation is that no one could really get *what is right* without the other being *wronged*. This is the violent situation.

Although much attention is paid to Fanon's discussion of physical violence, the point he is making is not redemptive. What Fanon argues is that the criteria of nonviolence demanded by colonizing forces require the absence of de facto transformation of power. In other words, there is an analytical presumption that justice for the colonized must mean injustice for colonizers. Thus, colonizers demand for a just transformation into a postcolonial situation amounts to a maintenance of the status quo. That is because their right to colonization is not questioned in the ethical limitations posed on the process of decolonization. In effect, decolonization is what is on trial, and the logic of illegitimacy follows. A comparison with the U.S. Civil Rights struggle illustrates his point. Martin Luther King, Jr. is today recognized as an apostle of nonviolence. But when he was waging his nonviolent protest, it was perceived by most white Americans and the U.S. government as *violent*. That is because Dr. King was, in Fanon's formulation, *actional*. To have been sufficiently nonviolent for his critics, King would have had to cease fighting against U.S. apartheid.

Contemporary Africa faces many continued crises on which critical reflection brings many thinkers to Fanon's thought. The context is the so-called postcolonial state. The "post" in postcolonial does not, however, signify a past condition. Today it is more an illustration of an absence of moral legitimacy. In other words, the head of a nation cannot call for the colonization of another nation for the sake of national wealth. He or she must, instead, offer a project of prosperity that establishes a *de facto* colonial relationship while disavowing it *de jure*. Added to this situation is the reality of neoliberal and neoconservative hegemony. The fall of the Soviet Union has led to a form of historical triumphantism in which socialism has become a form of outlawed discourse, as pretty much affirmative action has become in Western democracies. Debates and theorizing of this situation of postcolonial illegitimacy, neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and their global significance in African politics have emerged, in the shadow of Fanon, through the thought of several creative contemporary thinkers. They include Kwame Gyekye (Ghana), Mahmood Mamdani (Uganda and South Africa), Pal Ahlulawia (Kenya and South Africa), Achille Mbembe (Cameroon and South Africa), Elias Bongmba (Cameroon), and Rabson Wuriga (South Africa).

The logic of colonization in Africa offered by Lord Lugard finds its legacy in these debates. Lugard argued that the error in Asia was the hybridization of Europeans and the

indigenous peoples and the cultivation of capital development locally. For Africa, he argued for the demotion of the indigenous people into children who should be more properly ruled than negotiated with in equal relations as citizens between one nation and another. The result, at least as argued by Mamdani, is the cultivation of false histories of custom and kingship with a consequence of rule over indigenous peoples on the one hand and relations of citizenship for settlers or, in a word, whites on the other. The legacy of such relations has been a crisis of the political in Africa. In Gyekye's reading, politics requires sites of discursive opposition or liberalized social spaces. The situation of Africa has been a constant struggle for such spaces, especially where leadership, armed, as Wuriga has shown, with the moral argument against dissent from their participation in the decolonial process, hold power through corrupting strategies tantamount to, in the thought of Mbembe and Bongmba, the privatization of power. Ahlulawia is more optimistic than most on the possibility of the exercise of citizenship even under the weight of traditional leadership, but it cannot be denied that there is much disenchantment with the postcolonial situation in Africa. It is difficult to see how the logic of Lugard has not continued, and how the warnings of Fanon against the postcolonial national bourgeoisie could not be anything but prescient.

In his third autobiography, W.E.B. Du Bois reflected that he had realized, during his years of teaching at Atlanta University in the early twentieth century, that he had learned to stand still in several languages. He realized that the Atlanta riots and the network of laws that were developed to for U.S. apartheid were also experiments on thwarting the course of freedom in the modern world. The contemporary political situation of Africa is, in similar kind, a laboratory of global significance. For example, it used to be a truism that the radicalization of social inequalities would compel disenfranchised populations to take action and issue in progressive changes. Neoliberalism has, however, led to the erosion of state apparatuses while cultivating capitalist expansion. The more recent rise of neoconservatism to power has meant an abrogation of protections in civil society and the encouraging of their absorption by religious institutions, instead of secular social ones. That many contemporary religious institutions have leaned more to the right has meant the development of right-wing ideology as inequalities continue to increase. The ironic result has been a rise in black populations moving toward the right instead of to the left. What this means as states continue to fail, if the history of the European context is an indication, is an increased possibility of new forms of fascism and their concomitant forms of violence. If this assessment is correct, then situation of Africa, although structured as peripheral in global discussions, is, in fact, at its center. The future is no doubt a struggle between different visions of global reality. Current circumstances are pushing matters to a terribly ugly right-wing version, but Fanon would remind us of the importance of imagining and fighting for alternatives in which hope and possibility are embodied in an organic relationship with what it means to be women and men who question, with responsibility, what we are to become.

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