

IS THE ONLY HISTORY WHITE? REMEMBERING FRANTZ FANON FORTY YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH

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Although the ideas of Frantz Fanon, a Black psychiatrist and one of the leading figures of the Third World liberation movement, have lost their political impact, his writings are valued as founding texts of the critique of colonialism.

Colonialism and its aftermath are increasingly being discussed within the framework of “theory”, literary or critical. Since the 1980s a new academic discipline referred to as colonial discourse analysis or postcolonial studies (postcolonial theory) has been firmly established in Western, especially American, academy, producing its own periodicals, anthologies, conferences and jobs. Edward Said’s work *Orientalism* (1978), which had caused a major upheaval in area studies and related disciplines is generally seen as its founding text. The postcolonial theory, however, did not emerge to fill an empty space in the language of political-cultural analysis. The beginning of its adaptation coincides not only with Said’s provocative text, but with the eclipse of the older paradigm, that of the Third World as well.

The term *Third World* gained international currency particularly in relation to the anticolonial nationalist movements from the 1950s to the 1970s. The three worlds theory, however, has been seen, at least by some critics, as problematic, owing to the complex and politically ambiguous developments of the period. Third World euphoria – a brief moment in which it seemed that First World leftists and the Third World guerrillas would walk arm in arm toward global revolution – has given way to the collapse of the Soviet Communist model and the crisis of socialism in general as well as to the recognition of the changes caused by the ongoing process of globalization. (Shohat 2000,127) The crisis in Third World thinking contributed to the enthusiasm for the term postcolonial, a new name for critical discourses dealing with issues emerging from colonial relations and their legacy, comprising a long period since the beginning of the European expansion up to the present day.

Said’s critique of Orientalism, aimed at “dismantling the science of imperialism”, was followed by an unexpectedly broad spectrum of projects analysing colonial dis-

course, generally closely related to feminist or black production and critical interrogation of the Western canon. The first profound analysis of imperialism attacking its authorized version, however, was written way back in the 1950s within the political and intellectual cultures of the colonial liberation movements, by Frantz Fanon, psychiatrist and polemicist, theoretician and guerilla. Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* has become a revolutionary manifesto of decolonization and the founding analysis of the effects of colonialism upon subjected peoples and their cultures. It was read with enthusiasm both by black activists in the USA and participants in armed liberation struggles elsewhere. In this political climate *The Wretched of the Earth* translated into English and published in Britain and the U.S.A. acquired much publicity, due to a certain degree to the preface written by J.P. Sartre that was considered to be an important part of the work.

Today Fanon – symbol of the Third World struggles, has fallen into obscurity. When remembered, he is a kind of mythical figure, revered as a prophetic spirit of the Third World liberation, or blamed as an instigator of violence in the Black Power movement. (Bhabha 1994,113). Fanon's critical insights, however, continue to be of interest to all who strive to understand the world we are inhabiting today in all its complexity. Fanon's total commitment to the political task he was confronted with never restricted the inquiring movement of his thoughts.(Fanon's quest in *Black Skin, White Masks* – O my body, make me always a man who questions!) His theoretical work is complex, even contradictory, it can be looked at from various angles and invoked from various positions. As a theoretician of the liberation struggles Fanon can be dismissed as an author of univocal propaganda tracts, rebuked as an apostle of violence or valued for deep psychoanalytical analysis of the problem of colonial cultural alienation. Forty years after Fanon's premature death it is believed that his contribution to decolonizing Africa is far less important than his contribution to decolonization of Europe.¹

Frantz Fanon was born on July 20, 1925 in Forte-de-France, Martinique, a Negro of French nationality (his own words) in an upper middle class family. In 1944 he enlisted in the French Army and served in Europe against the Germans where he distinguished himself. Taking part in the struggle against Fascism contributed to Fanon's anti-racist commitment and left a deep mark on his personality. After the war he remained in France to study medicine and psychiatry in Lyon. At the same time he studies philosophy and takes part in the student movement and in the activities of Black intellectuals. Having finished his studies he returned to Martinique and started work in a hospital.

¹ It may be good that Fanon's work can no longer be used in order to understand what Africa is and what can become of her (if they ever could be used for that purpose). But for the understanding of what Europe is and what she could become the work of this intellectual from Martinique is very important (Bondy 1974, No 42, quoted in Gordon 1977, 199)

Fanon's first work, *Peau noir, masques blancs* (*Black Skins, White Masks*), appeared in 1952. It is a clinical study of Black consciousness alienated by the colonial system, a passionate study of racism. This work, the foundation of Fanon's revolutionary humanism, remained unnoticed until his second work attracted the attention of the public in the sixties. Then it was translated into many languages and became a bestseller in America.

Some time before the outbreak of the Algerian revolution Fanon was appointed Head of the Psychiatric Department in Algiers. He found medical facilities inadequate and patients' care appalling. Here, in the divided world of French Algeria, he discovered the impossibility of his mission as a colonial psychiatrist:

"If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment, I owe it to myself that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization.The social structure existing in Algeria was hostile to any attempt to put the individual back where he belonged."

With the beginning of the revolution Fanon resigned his post and became an editor of the F.L.N. newspaper *El-Moudjahid* in Tunis. At the end of the fifties he became interested in the developments in tropical Africa and began to see himself as an African. After the revolution Fanon represented the Algerian Provisional Government in Ghana. In 1961 he flew to France to see J.P.Sartre about his agreement to write the preface to his new book *Les damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*). In the same year Frantz Fanon died of leukemia in Tunis and, according to his own wish, was buried in Algiers.

Fanon's thinking is marked by phenomenology and left-existentialism penetrated by Marxism. He uses Hegelian categories to expose some aspects of the colonial situation. The concept of recognition, derived from Hegel, in Fanon's view provides the key to the Black problem. According to Hegel (*Phenomenology of Mind*) each person desires the desire of the other to be recognized as unique. Recognition is the correlative of freedom. Hegel maintains that it is by risking one's life for recognition that freedom is achieved. The slave is what he is because he clings to his self-existence, and fails to risk his life for recognition. At last the master recognizes that he is dependent on the slave for his existence, his own freedom being a mere abstraction. At this point the scale of the dialectic tips in favour of the slave. It is through mutual recognition that freedom is achieved by each.

As Fanon points out, the slave in Hegel's analysis is not turned into a master, but only aspires to a lower kind of recognition of service, which is not grounded in true independence and freedom, whereas the Black man or the colonized man in his relation to the White man or the colonizer wants to be accorded human dignity based on independence and freedom.

"I find myself suddenly in the world and I recognize that I have one right alone: That of demanding human behaviour from the other. One duty alone: That of not renouncing my freedom through choice" (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 30).

In *Black Skin, White Masks* the European existentialist and psychoanalytic traditions are turned to face the history of the Negro which they have never contemplated (Bhabha 1994, 122). Fanon says: "Freud and Adler...did not think of the Negro in all their investigation." In Fanon's writing the colonized as constructed by colonialist ideology is the very figure of the divided subject posited by psychoanalytic theory to refute humanism's myth of a unified self. Denied the right to subjectivity and alienated from his natal culture, the colonized is condemned to exist in an inauthentic condition:

"Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is the culture of the mother country" (Fanon 1986, 30). The Negro child in the Antilles loses his or her normalcy in the first contact with the White culture, particularly with its "collective unconsciousness" which he or she absorbs from comic books, newspapers, textbooks and films.²

Fanon sees the alienation of the Negro, of the colonized, as essentially socio-economic, but having profound psychological effects. Cultural imposition in the form of language represents the major aspect of alienation. The alienation of the native may take the form of assimilation, the loss of cultural identity or its disruption, through which the group imitates the oppressor.³

The oppressor manages to impose on the native new ways of seeing, and in particular, a pejorative judgement of his original form of existence. After the phase of deculturation, however, the oppressed comes back to his original position, to his forgotten culture. The rediscovery of his identity is often the object of "passionate research...directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid

² "African filmmakers have unsparingly deployed Fanonian concept of alienation to define their own positions against cultural imperialism. Films denounce it under whatever form it presents itself: the preference of some Africans for the French language over local languages in *Xoala* (1974) and *Gelwaar* (1993) by Sembene Ousmane; their habit of watching television as an escape or source of identity formation in *The Garbage Boys* (1986) by Cheick Oumar Sissoko, ...and most recently in *Bab El Oued City* (1994) by Merzak Alouache, a powerful film about Moslem fundamentalism in Algeria. The last film opens with a loudspeaker declaring that "we must clean our city of the filth coming from outside." The allusion is to the European cultural imperialism, which stands between Algerians and their Moslem identity." (Manthia Diawara 1998, 120)

³ Not only...were we constructed as different within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as "Other". ...It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that "knowledge" not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm. That is the lesson – the sombre majesty – of Fanon's insight into the colonizing experience in *Black Skin, White Masks*. (Stuart Hall 1994, 395)

era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others” (Hall 1994,393).

Although distancing himself from a rediscovery of tradition that reaffirms customs and beliefs and resumes ancestral practices, Fanon argues that the plunge into the past can be a condition and source of freedom.

“Face to face with the white man, the Negro has a past to legitimate, a vengeance to extract...In no way should I dedicate myself to the revival of an unjustly unrecognized Negro civilization. I will not make myself a man of the past...I am not a prisoner of history...it is only by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate the cycle of my freedom” (Fanon 1986, 225-6, 229,231)

The aim is the constitution of a politically conscious revolutionary Self that can stand in unmitigated antagonism to the oppressor, occupying a position, from which the oppressed will be able to mobilize an armed struggle against the imperialist power: (Parry 1987,30) Fanon speaks of “murderous and decisive struggle between two protagonists”

“Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature....Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men....the primary Manicheanism which governed colonial society is preserved intact during the period of decolonization; that is to say the settler never ceases to be an enemy, the opponent, the foe that must be overthrown.....The immobility to which the native is condemned can only be called into question if the native decides to put an end to the history of colonization – the history of pillage – and to bring into existence the history of the nation – the history of decolonization.”

(Fanon 1967, 30, 40, 41)

Decolonization, according to Fanon, requires the use of violence. Violent action is the only way for the last to become the first. The violence of decolonization in Fanon’s view is conditioned by the specificity of the colonial situation. Fanon constantly stressed psychological factors making violence unavoidable. The necessity to use violence is not an idea of revolutionary intellectuals instilled into the masses, this necessity cuts into the very skin of the oppressed and is felt intuitively. Violence becomes an anti – dote It liberates the colonized from his inferiority complex and revalorizes him in his own eyes (Gordon 1977, 88). Fanon’s concept of violence, however, did not include individual acts of terror or violence in an institutionalized form.⁴

In his passionate effort to destroy the old order and expose the evils of colonialism Fanon’s thoughts show much negativity and pessimism. His criticism of Europe is merciless. Violence, Fanon proclaims, is intrinsic to European culture. Although

⁴ R.Young in *Colonial Desire* (Routledge 1995) expresses the view that the role of violence in Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* is consistently underestimated by commentators. Violence was often quite openly proclaimed by the colonists themselves.

Fascism and the Holocaust are usually presented as if they were a unique aberration, a dark perversion of Western rationalism or a particular effect of German culture, Fanon points out that Fascism is simply colonialism brought home to Europe.⁵ (Young 1990,125).

In his preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* Sartre spells out the implications of this argument: "Liberty, equality, fraternity, love, honour, patriotism and what have you. All this did not prevent us from making anti-racial speeches about dirty niggers, dirty Jews and dirty Arabs. High-minded people, liberal or just soft-hearted, protest that they were shocked by such inconsistency; but they were either mistaken or dishonest, for with us there is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism since the European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters" (Fanon 1967, 22).

Although in *Black Skin, White Masks* the author invokes universal human qualities, in *The Wretched of the Earth* the universal values become suspect. It is especially European humanism that is fiercely criticized, both in its Enlightenment conception of man's unchanging nature and its Marxist version of new (historical humanism) that would see "man as a product of himself and of his own activity in history" (Young 1990, 121). Fanon's critique of humanism starts with the realization of its involvement in the history of colonialism. From the colonial perspective humanism's origins lie in self-justification by colonizers for their own people. The universal human features cover the assimilation of the human with European values. A clear case of such an identification is the Marxist definition of history which states that if history is the product of human actions, then it can only begin properly when "primitive" societies give way to civilization, obviously European civilization. As Aimé Césaire observes: the only history is white. The critique of humanism questions the use of human as a category providing a rational understanding of "man", claiming universality while excluding Others, such as "woman" and "the native" (ibid. 122).⁶

Criticizing European civilization Fanon offers an alternative in the idea of the Third World becoming a new subject of history. He could not deny the utmost backwardness of the colonized countries but at the same time he protested against it. He refused to accept the picture of a caravan formed by peoples of the earth,

⁵ Sheldon Pollock in his *Deep Orientalism*, considers the possibility that the movement of orientalist knowledge may be multidirectional. It is usually imagined as directed outward – toward the colonization and domination in Asia. In the case of German Indology we might conceive of it as potentially directed inward – toward the colonization and domination of Europe itself.

⁶ According to Bhabha Fanon's perception of the "tardy" emergence of the black man as a human being (or the lag in time before he began to be recognized as such in within Western discourse) problematizes the legitimacy of the universalized and transcendental category of Man as a unifying referend of ethical value which underwrote the new episteme of modernity. (Moore-Gilbert 1996, 124)

headed by Europe, with colonial countries at the end. He knew those at the end would never be able to catch up with the avantgard. There is only one way: leave the caravan and set off... The Third world does not have to imitate Europe. However, knowing the power of Western civilization and its influence on the Third World, Fanon could not but experience serious doubts about this project. The reader can feel them in the pathos of his argument.- Soviet theoreticians and historians of the liberation movements found an interesting parallel to Fanon's ideas in those of A.I. Gertsen. Even the formulation of the problem reminds us of Fanonian style: We and Europe. Is the way of European development the only possible, unavoidable way that every nation has to walk irrespective of its previous history? Like Fanon, Gertsen argued in favour of an alternative, believing Russia could avoid capitalism on her way to socialism. Fanon, however, did not intend to avoid one stage only, he denounced all Western history as a form of world history, a European form of universality (Gordon 1977, 223, 220).

As mentioned above both among the general public and in intellectual circles in the West Fanon's name is unfamiliar and his ideas have hardly any impact on the political Left. However, the fact that his name is rarely mentioned in Africa and in Arab countries may be surprising (Some speak of Fanon's homelessness in Africa.). In this connection Ali A. Mazrui from Makerere University in Uganda points to the absence of a tradition of philosophical and political thinking in Africa. Under these circumstances the leading political representative of the day becomes the leading thinker as well.

On the other hand, Fanon's work is currently being explored by many critics of colonialism in the Western academy including those engaged in postcolonial studies. Benita Parry (1987, 27), however, believes in most cases mentioning Fanon's name is little more than a ceremonial gesture to an exceptionally radical stance, where the rhetoric of the individual is inseparable from the participation in collective action and theoretical writings that combine political analysis with representative psycho-autography.

Homi Bhabha, a leading figure of postcolonial theory, is greatly influenced by Fanon. In accordance with his own concepts he values especially *Black Skin, White Masks* for its engagement with colonial relations at the inter-subjective level rather than focusing on the "public sphere" of legal or economic structures and for seeing them as dynamic and shifting rather than static. In Parry's essay Bhabha is reproached for reading his own ideas into the master's work so that aspects of Fanon's text, congenial to Bhabha's deconstructive practice, are abstracted from the body of his writing. In this way Fanon's vision of the colonial condition as one of implacable enmity between the colonizer and the colonized with an armed opposition as an unavoidable necessity is obscured. This reading, in Parry's view, annexes Fanon to Bhabha's own theory.

According to Ania Loomba, Fanon's dichotomy of black skins / white masks, of the native subject having to choose between a "nativist", nationalist or "Westernized" position, remains an important object of inquiry within post-colonial studies.

From her Indian perspective Loomba questions the idea that colonial power was completely effective in erasing native cultures in all their differences and evolutions. She believes the paralysing dichotomy of black skin / white masks can be questioned without downgrading indigenous cultures and subjects. The starkness and unmitigated opposition which Parry values in Fanon are in turn being examined by Loomba and found to be of little use for the analysis of the Indian situation.

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