

The Rationality of Rebellion

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The Problem of Humanism

What is Fanon's humanism, or better to say his new humanism? Simply put it is about putting invention into existence, or life into being. His is a living humanism. In *Black Skin*, Fanon speaks of this abstractly, he says, "yes to freedom no to exploitation"; but we have to also think of humanism as something that hasn't happened. That is to say, critical of European humanism, which he says is an anti-humanism in practice, which kills and murders in the name of humanism (and still does). Fanon argues that a new humanism must include disalienation. There is a resonance with Marx here. After speaking about the abolition of alienated labor and the private property, which it creates, Marx posits a "positive humanism beginning from itself."

So when Fanon calls on us, at the conclusion of *The Wretched*, to humanize the world what does this mean in the context of post-apartheid South Africa? We can intimate some transitional elements. At the very least it would mean redistributing wealth and land, abolishing the dividing lines, the security and policing of exclusion, the bio-ordering of citadels, the walls, razor wires of the gated communities, and creating space for human interaction, it would mean the right to the city in Lefebvrian terms, in terms of encouraging buildings and architecture that expresses social life. But at its basis, such reforms could not be instituted by decree. They would require every attempt to practice a fundamental decentralized democratization from the bottom up that

would include everyone in decision making about what to do. It means, in short, living a life consciously in the world, creating if you will a human world, humanizing the world. It is not a grand scheme that needs to be realized in one fell swoop, it begins here and there, and is interrupted often only for a moment, in struggles. But that struggle has not been realized--and so there is something out of wack with post-apartheid South Africa that has simply incorporated a Black elite into what used to be considered the racial capitalist system reformed by neoliberalism.

You know the rest. By necessity the poor, the damned of the earth, have to struggle to survive and in the neoliberal world, the gulf between poor and rich, so clear in South Africa, is ever widening. So South African capitalism has morphed into a highly securitized system, alongside alienation, commodification and destruction of the human (both in mind and body and environment (which is not really a third term)). We need a shift in thinking.

The Problem of Method

I have just come from a conference on *Reading Fanon 50 years Later* in Naples Italy. What was not surprising, I suppose, since it was an academic conference, was that it was an academic conference, that is to say it was limited by at times highly intellectualized discussions--often marred by disciplinary squabbles-- which seemed by their nature to objectify as "other" and make absent the politics of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* that the conference was named.

In Naples someone called me a Fanon fundamentalist; I don't really take umbrage from this. I am a Fanon loyalist, but I am not interested in checking affiliation cards. I am only interested in an organization in an eminent historical sense that is to say I take Fanon seriously as a thinker and practitioner.

But I do not come empty headed to Fanon, of course, nobody does. I come with specific concerns and my readings are influenced by my thinking for over thirty years, but I still regard him as an original thinker who is very much part of his time but give us something to think about.

While *The Wretched* does reflect on the Algerian and African situation, it provides no blueprints and there are no *a priori*s to a long and reflective and engaged dialectic. Fanon is a source, a guide, a way of thinking that requires, if you will, a shift in the geography of reason. That being said my reading is infused with Raya Dunayevskaya's Marxist-humanism. I can't really say where one thing starts and another ends. I was a student of Dunayevskaya in the 1980s and have been thinking of Fanon and Marxist-Humanism for 30 years (of course there are other thinkers and theoreticians who have been influential) but Dunayevskaya's Marx is my Marx and central to that Marx is Dunayevskaya's conception of the movement from practice as a form of theory. In *Marxism and Freedom*, published in 1958, she describes how Marx completely redeveloped *Capital* based on movements from practice, the civil war in the US, the struggle for the 8 hour day, and the Paris Commune and so on. The latter being central to his development of the fetish character of the commodity as well as his consideration of the possibility of non-capitalist roads to socialism, which is absolutely

essential to understand Marx and the contemporary world. I make this point not as a caveat, nor to say that I claim Fanon as a Marxist.

The problem with the movement from practice as a form of theory is that one has to know when it is and when it isn't. And one can't know that before hand, so one has to be continually open to the world and its breaths as Césaire puts it; and at the same time always self-critical, always questioning and always listening and thinking.

In an almost counter-intuitive way, then, at least from the point of view of power politics but not from Fanon's last writings, it is not surprising that new articulations of humanism, are being articulated in South Africa, even 16 years after the end of apartheid; perhaps because capitalism--namely neo-apartheid plus BEE has won—that it does seem abundantly clear to many that struggle is not over and that in such CRISIS ideas of liberation can be generated from the bottom up.

Paradoxically or not (not for me) the shift in thinking can be aided by social struggles and those thinking about these struggles. Fanon makes the point that the intellectual is always out of step with the people who are struggling to be free. They have changed, but the university-trained intellectual keeps repeating the old mantras. We need to catch up, and to catch up necessitates opening our minds and ears not only to history from below, but as its notional self-comprehension, how that thought is challenging thinking.

The Call to the Barricades?

This is not a call to the barricades even if it is a call to ideological combat not to confine new developments in a priori categories.

The struggle is a school, as Richard Pithouse puts it. And let's be clear sometimes that school comes into contradiction with the academic system and can have dire costs both in terms of employment and in terms of threats of violence. Fanon talks about "snatching" knowledge from the colonial universities; he is also aware of the great sacrifices that this can entail. In *The Wretched* he makes a point to distinguish between the hobnobbing postcolonial intelligentsia and the honest intellectual who distrusts the race for positions; who is still committed to fundamental change even if presently does not see its possibility. I am not saying that the university should be given up on. It is a contested terrain, mired in assumptions about what constitutes academic research, and thus for those of us who work in the academy, one has to be very wary. The spaces of autonomy, the spaces for genuine, collaborative and political work with poor, excluded, the so-called illegal or marginal people, the wretched and damned is always compromised. As Fanon, the existential puts it, everyone's hands are dirty.

In quite another time—namely in the anti-colonial epoch of the 1950s Fanon had a great job at Blida Psychiatric Hospital. It was what he wanted and he put enormous energy into fighting to reform how psychiatry was practiced in the hospital. He created space—both practical and intellectual (reading groups) for himself and his colleagues.

Indeed the Algerian war politicized him, radicalized him. He began to see its effects; he began to treat the tortured and the torturer. The situation became untenable, he simply couldn't continue there. The authorities were closing in on Blida, suspected as

a hotbed of support for the FLN. It was dangerous. He resigned before he was picked up. He began to work full time for the revolution.

Fanon made contact with the FLN in 1955 and left the country around the new year of 1957. His identification with and commitment to the Algerian revolution was swift and absolute. Living the double life while at Blida, he prepared a paper for the First Conference of Black Writers held in Paris in September. *Racism and Culture* was written in the context of a state of emergency and emergence: the endless strikes, a curfew on Blida, and summary executions of FLN sympathizers (Cherki: 86). The paper had no direct reference to the Algerian struggle but Fanon's commitment was obvious in its conclusions:

The logical end of this will to struggle is the total liberation of the national territory. In order to achieve this liberation the inferiorized man brings all his resources into play, all his acquisitions, the old and the new, his own and those of the occupant. The struggle is at once total, absolute (1967b: 43).

During the 1956/7 "Battle of Algiers" all these resources were brought into play. And Fanon was among them. Doctors, hospitals, and pharmacies were secretly tending to the wounded; other sympathizers were helping to distribute materials and information or provide safe houses; and so on. Fanon was contacted to help counsel militants. It was a

very practical and concrete request, using his training to aid the defeat of the French, while being educated in what he called the “school of the people” (1968:150).¹

Fanon had never thought of psychiatry apart from society and thus it had become absolutely clear that sociotherapy could not be practiced in Algeria because the social structure was against it. At least, this is what he maintained in his resignation letter. Lawlessness, torture and inequality were the “logical consequence” of an “attempt to decerebralize a people” (1967b: 53), which he claimed had “put an end to my mission in Algeria” (1967b: 54). In reality, he had already begun another mission to put an end to one Algeria and help bring into being another one. From full time director of psychiatry he became a full-time revolutionary, working for the FLN.

So in early 1957 Fanon arrived in France. The Parisian left was full of discussions of the Hungarian revolution that had raised the question of a socialist humanism before being crushed by Russian tanks in October 1956. Yet the heralding of the Hungarian resistance and the mass resignations from the French Communist Party (which continued to support French colonialism in Algeria) did not translate into a shift in attitudes toward the Algerian question and the liberation struggle. On the contrary, even with the emergence of “new left” non-vanguard communist organizations like Castoriadis’ *Socialism or Barbarism*, which was loudly praising the self-activity and self-organization of the Budapest resistance, the French remained mostly quiet about

¹ This experience would become generalized in *The Wretched* where he argued that in order to join the “school of the people” the middle class needs to be at the service of the revolution all the resources they have “snatched from the colonials universities” (see 1968:150).

Algeria.² Fanon, on the other hand, who made clear in *The Wretched* that his sympathies lay with the Budapest revolutionaries (noting that it signified “a decisive moment” [1968:79] in the global anti-colonial movement), rejected the Parisian left talk and committed himself to decolonizing Algeria.

If Lenin had believed that his was the epoch of imperialism, for Fanon, decolonization was not simply the “bacillus” (CW 22:357) for the proletarian revolution, as Lenin put it, but a beginning of something quite new. Colonialism was dying, and from inside the Algerian revolution the problem was the emergence of a democratic, inclusive, and accountable society that could be the basis for a new internationalism (1968:247). This was the problem that Fanon found Lenin grappling with as he read the documents of the early Communist International at Jean Ayme’s apartment in early 1957.³ Namely the Communist International’s theses that national and peasant revolts are not only essential to the social struggle but as Lenin put it questioned the inevitability of “the capitalist stage of economic development” (Lenin: CW 31:244). Indeed, Lenin insisted that Bukharin’s idea of skipping the capitalist stage was “impossible” and could only be demonstrated “practically.” It was a remark echoed by

2 Césaire also resigned from the Communist Party after Hungary but remained “loyal” to France and unwilling to support the Algerian struggle.

3 Fanon had met Ayme, an “institutional psychiatrist with a long history of anticolonial activism” (Cherki: 86), in September 1956 and he introduced Fanon to Pierre Broué. The same age as Fanon, Broué had become a revolutionary socialist in 1944 and co-authored one of the most definitive works on the Spanish revolution and its “betrayal” by Stalinism (published in 1961). According to Cherki, all three talked through the night. The next day Fanon presented “Racism and Culture” at the Congress of Black Writers.

Fanon in *The Wretched* when he argued that “whether or not the bourgeois phase can be skipped ought to be answered in the field of revolutionary action not logic” (1968:175).

Practice Enlivens Theoretical Issues

To understand how practice resolves or enlivens theoretical issues, one must return to Fanon’s commitment to the Algerian revolution and the brilliance of its moment, while at the same time not freezing that moment but catching its dialectic, saturated by his experiences of 1956/7, the battle of Algiers and discussions with the FLN leader Ramdane Abane.

Central to Fanon’s conception of the new society is the politics of space. The reordering of colonial geography is a central marker to decolonial *reorganization* (1968:38) and Fanon’s famous description of the zoned cities of colonialism—the dark, cramped, poor, hungry, native town, and the light, spacious, rich, satiated colonial town—is based on his own observations especially Algiers. If in *Black Skin* he notes that the elites in Fort de France lived high above the shantytown below; in Algiers the European city is built around the port and its gaze is turned away from the Casbah toward the Mediterranean. Though there was not a formal organizational separation between the “European city and the Muslim one” there was, (Cherki notes (42)) a “keen awareness of boundaries felt by everyone.” In the interstices of the Casbah what Alice Cherki calls “the vast slums, groaning with misery, that cropped up ... places without public works or services of any kind [where] the rural poor came to settle” (Cherki 2006:41-42).

In reality, the poor urban populations living in the *bidonville*⁴ or “informal settlements” on the edges or in the interstices of the Casbah are the same displaced rural populations seen as an unruly, threatening mass by the colonial regime. For Fanon this subterranean and uncounted mass of people became the crucial actors in the liberation struggle. By the 1950s, the growth of shack settlements added what Zenep Çelik (1997:110) calls “a third element” to the dualistic colonial city that Fanon described. This third element formed the core of Fanon’s *lumpenproletariat*, which by 1954, on the eve of the Algerian revolution, had become over 40% of Algiers’ native population. During the Battle of Algiers, Fanon observed how the *bidonvilles* began to take on a more practical-critical role, not only as manifestations of the material/spatial divide between Europeans and Algerian zones, but as a center for the resistance. Algiers’ marginals, poor and unemployed, irrupted into history. The *bidonville* became part of the frontline of the struggle and in retaliation, “and as part of the war strategy,” Çelik remarks (1997:112), colonial “military forces bulldozed many squatter settlements, and army trucks transported the residents to dispersed locations to be rehoused.”

Traveling through the Blidean *maquis* on their way to the Soummam Valley in summer 1956, Abane and his colleague Ben M'hidi were impressed by “the courage of the young women ... mainly from bourgeois Muslim families ... who sacrificed their studies and their opulent lives ... [for] the hard life of the maquis” (Abane 2011) and Hocine Ait-Ahmed, one of nine “historic leaders” who founded the FLN and the only one of the external leadership around Ben Bella who approved Ramdane’s Soummam

4 From bidon meaning metal can or drum.

platform, argued, in what would become a Fanonian vein, that “the revolutionary must ... descend from the pedestal of theory to root himself in concrete life, in order to draw upon it and verify there his principles of action” (quoted in Gillespie 1961:80). The idea of rooting oneself in concrete life, of practice and action trumping theory, was methodologically exactly what was at stake in *Year 5 of the Algerian Revolution*, where concrete life was one of radical mutation which had to be recorded by the revolutionary theoretician.

Fanon began working on what would become *Year 5* quite soon after he arrived in Tunis. It reflected his Algerian experiences, his ongoing discussions with Abane and his commitment to the Soummam platform as well as according to Alice Cherki a polemic with Bourdieu’s writings on Kabylia.⁵ *Year 5* was addressed to the French left but it also had a strictly Abanean thesis associating the power of the Algerian revolution not with guns but with the “radical mutation that the Algerian has undergone” (1967c: 32) and thus was clearly directed to the internal political struggle. Abane’s emphasis at Soummam that the mass movement dominated military strategy was echoed by Fanon, who in *The Wretched* argued that the subservience of politics to the military was a symptom of the revolution’s degeneration.

The dialectics of organization are not solely about the forms of organization—whether centralized or decentralized, military or political. For Fanon in *Year 5*, revolutionary organization also mutates and is implicitly connected with the idea of the

⁵ Indeed, in Tunis, Abane, still one of the leaders, is maneuvered away from day to day political decisions and “relegated,” as Belaid Abane put it, “to an ‘intellectual’ function: information and propaganda. He notably directs the journal *El Moudjahid* that he had founded the previous year. Logically, Fanon is integrated into Abane’s team.”

whole nation undergoing change (see for example his essay on the radio). Yet it is also not surprising—since practice and commitment to the struggle for liberation do not end questions about how to create the new society—that the suffocation of the “oxygen” of revolution (Fanon 1967c: 181), and the suppression and indeed criminalization of the mass movements by the nationalist parties which had gained power after independence, meant that Fanon’s dialectic of liberation had to be further internalized. *The Wretched*—a book that he knew would have to be his last—would be a balance sheet seriously addressing the internal contradictions and misadventures that undermined the possibility of liberation.

The New society (and its Misadventures) and Organization

In contrast to the opening up of space detailed in *Year 5*, the dialectic of *The Wretched* which begins with the suffocation of space under colonialism ends with its suffocation in neocolonialism. The time needed to rethink everything, to include all in decision-making, is quickly consumed in the rotten deals spun by the nationalist elite and withdrawing colonists. Time is eaten up by insider political deals: the already senile bourgeoisie (1968:153), aged before their time, the rotten huckstering petit-bourgeoisie, rotten on the vine, are consumed by the speed of the world market, the gleam of its shiny goods and get rich quick schemes (1968:166-176). The masses, Fanon adds, either mark time or go backwards (1968:147). These are all well-known parts of Fanon’s analysis. Yet a crucial divide between *Year 5* and *The Wretched* is the assassination of

Ramdane Abane. Fanon knew about it; but he remained silent. In a minority position, perhaps he felt that he could be disappeared. But it clearly indicated the degeneration of the revolution within the revolution, and as he told Sartre and Debeauvoir, Ramdane's assassination remained on his conscience.

Thus if practice does solve contradictions in *Year 5*, clearly *The Wretched* complicates the issue. Beginning with "violence" and ending with "torture," *The Wretched* reflects on subversion of the radical social actions of men and women detailed in Year 5. It is no accident, in the context of Abane's politics, that the chapter the pitfalls of national consciousness was first presented as a series of lectures to ALN militants on the Algeria/Tunisia border as an ideological intervention against narrow nationalism. It remains powerful because it traced the speed of degeneration of the anticolonial revolution from inside the revolution. But Fanon's is not an *a priori* schematic critique of a bourgeois revolution that can be mapped onto the postcolonial Africa. *The Wretched* isn't a neo-Marxist appraisal of the class character of nationalist leaderships.

Indeed, Fanon is quick to point out that after independence the "masses" become "frustrated" because for them there is no immediate change, no redistribution of land, no social and economic reforms. The "enlightened observer takes note of this masked discontent". The feeling of injustice is real, but it often goes unheard or is violently suppressed. And thus we return to the brutal manicheanism that had characterized colonialism.

The discontent can be manifest in local acts of violence which appear spontaneous but are often micro-managed by ethnic entrepreneurs, local businessmen

and local party leaders, or discontent can burst out regionally and even nationally, often organized through the politicization of indigeneity. The sources of injustice (the lack of land, jobs, and bread) are often articulated against “outsiders,” framed as “natives” against “settlers” or foreigners or religions (see 1968:160-161). And thus nationalism and ultra-nationalism, as Fanon predicted in 1961, and as we have witnessed for 50 years, leads to chauvinism and racism (1968:156).

But the problem with the anticolonial movements cannot simply be answered by applying the logic of Marx’s slogan in light of the defeat of the 1848 revolutions, “never again with the bourgeoisie.” Fanon’s critique of the timidity and incapacity of the national bourgeoisie to act in a decisive way against colonialism echoes Marx’s critique, and Marx’s advice that the workers’ own organizations encourage and give direction to revolutionary excitement and “popular vengeance” (Marx 1975:325) is echoed in Fanon’s advice in *The Wretched*, that violence should be channelled toward its “real” cause. For Fanon the comprador character of the national bourgeoisie is expressed by its paucity of ideas. Thus, ironically, the end of colonialism offers an opportunity for revolutionary *will* because the nascent bourgeoisie in the colonies is so structurally weak. But for Fanon, it is a tricky position to navigate. It is almost idealistic because alongside an organized and principle resistance, Fanon posits a unifying liberatory ideology as what is lacking in the African revolutions. But this raises the issue of circulatory thinking. The lumpen-intelligentsia needs to be educated in the school of the people and the people need to be liberated from reactive thinking. This answer wasn’t a vanguard-type nationalist organization which he saw as a form for the one-party state

preferred by the “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie” (1968:165) but he noted in 1960, the problem was the absence of ideology (1967b: 189), namely an idea of the future—what he calls a new humanism—practically spelled out in a way that is profoundly concrete. While *Year 5* and *The Wretched* both concern the unfinished character of Fanon’s engagement with the dialectics of organization as prefiguring the new society, an important shift is seen in the conclusion to *The Wretched*. Rather than a “return” to Lenin’s aphorism that there can be no revolution without revolutionary theory, Fanon’s humanism begins from the rationality of the rebellion.