

Frantz Fanon

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Philosopher of the Barricades

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Introduction:

Fanon in Our Time

Fifty years after the formal end of European colonialism, and almost a decade after the United States had *seemed* to some to turn the corner on racism by electing its first black president, the specter of Frantz Fanon has returned—with a vengeance. Largely consigned to academic studies and debates over postcolonialism, difference and alterity for many years, Fanon’s name suddenly went viral in December 2014. Within days of a New York City grand jury’s decision not to indict the police officers who had strangled to death Eric Garner, an unarmed black man who was trying to sell a few cigarettes, a comment by Fanon appeared on numerous social media sites that was quickly picked up and quoted around the country—and in many parts of the world. It read: “When we revolt it’s not for a particular culture. We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe.”¹ The statement seemed to capture the pain and poignancy of the moment, as tens of thousands of people poured into the streets—often spontaneously—to protest the injustice done to Garner as well as to Michael Brown, an 18-year-old black youth from Ferguson, Missouri who was murdered by a policeman that a grand jury likewise chose not to indict a few weeks earlier.

Actually, it turns out that the quotation from Fanon was somewhat truncated. The actual statement, made in *The Wretched of the Earth*, reads: “It is not because the Indo-Chinese discovered a culture of their own that they revolted. Quite simply this was because it became impossible to breathe, in more than one sense of the word.”² Still, the fact that Fanon’s words were quoted a bit out of context—a problem that has arisen repeatedly since his death in 1961—is less important than the fact that his ideas are seen by many to speak to the urgency of the moment. That the moment we are living through is urgent is clear—and most of all to blacks and Latinos in the U.S., as well as immigrants from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East facing heightened

police abuse and racial and religious discrimination throughout Europe. Time seems to be marching backward in many respects, as xenophobic—as well as subtler but no less insidious—forms of racism seem to define the very shape of globalized capitalism in the twenty-first century.

Whatever was meant by the “promise,” voiced following the collapse of statist communism in Eastern Europe and Russia in 1991, that a “new world order” was now before us based on principles of liberal democracy, it certainly has not brought us to a world any less “overdetermined” by racial profiling, racial prejudice, and racial injustice. Time seems to be marching backward indeed . . . but the question is, to what? To the kind of world that Fanon saw and criticized? To something even more barbaric? Or does the response by a new generation of activists and thinkers to what has aptly been termed “the new Jim Crow” in the United States foreshadow an effort to put all this aside, and reclaim what existing society repeatedly denies, especially to people of color—our *humanity*?

The challenges facing any effort to forge a revolutionary new beginning today are surely enormous. No sooner do new voices arise against the dehumanization that defines contemporary capitalism than they risk being subsumed by religious fundamentalist terrorism and the reactionary response to it by the Western powers. Violent attacks on journalists, feminists, Jews and others in the name of some mythical incarnation of “Islam,” whether it occurs in France, Syria or anywhere else, testifies to how divorced today’s apostles of mindless violence are from any liberatory impulse. The Islamic fundamentalists who murder civilians in France have the same aim as Christian fundamentalists who do the same in Norway or the U.S.—they wish to push history backward by provoking *permanent* inter-religious warfare (the same of course applies to Jewish fundamentalists in their attacks on Palestinians). No less mindless is the response of the Western powers—not only because of their persistent discrimination against immigrants, Muslims, and people of color but also because their response to religious-inspired terrorism is characterized by such a huge degree of *disassociation*. One would never know from listening to the pundits decrying the “clash of civilizations” that France murdered over a million Muslims in Algeria in the 1950s and

early 1960s or that more recently the U.S. killed half a million in its misguided wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Violence is always to be condemned—except when “we” engage in it, even when done on a massive and systematic scale and in complete disregard of human rights and international law. Today’s voices of opposition are being continuously subsumed by state-sanctioned terror on one side and religious-misogynist terror on the other. Is there no way out of this cul-de-sac, which works so well for maintaining bourgeois social and ideological hegemony? Will it ever become possible to break through these mind-forged manacles by making the quest for a decent, living, *human* world a reality?

Whatever turns out to be the answer to this question, one thing is clear: Frantz Fanon was one of the foremost thinkers of the twentieth century because of his persistent effort to bring to the surface the quest for a new humanity in the social struggles of *his* time. Those struggles are long behind us now, and buried for the most part under a heap of disappointments and failures. So much is this the case that it is often hard to remember the promise of the anti-colonial movements of the 1950s and 1960s, how much they reordered world politics, and how many aspirations from common people they gave expression to. If for no other reason, Fanon’s work is important in removing this layer of mnemonic debris left by over 50 years of aborted and unfinished revolutions.

We have more to recover, of course, than the past. It is the future that is most in jeopardy today, precisely because the effort to articulate the emergence of a new humanity from within the shell of the old has so often fallen short. So can Fanon help reinvigorate the effort to develop a liberating alternative to the present moment? This is largely the question to which this study is directed. But we can only pursue it if we are first of all attentive to who Fanon was and where he was coming from in *his* moment.

Race and Society

Fanon made it very clear, from the onset of his intellectual career, that “I’m not the bearer of absolute truths.”³ He resisted any pretense that the theoretician can hover over the world and give an objective

accounting of it from afar. He understood, far better than most, that *each of us is the zero point of our orientation*. We can only know the world—and change it—from the vantage point of our situated experience. But the fact that I am the zero point of my orientation does not mean I cannot reach out to, and know, others. Nor does it mean that we cannot know absolute truths. He wrote, “As a man, I undertake to risk annihilation so that one or two truths can cast their essential light on the world.”⁴ One or two truths—that is all. It doesn’t sound like much. But if those “one or two truths” turn out to connect us to our human potential that is now subsumed under an array of alienated forms and structures, would we not have made important progress in dealing with our present predicament?

The specter of Fanon *has* returned, and largely because he was one of the foremost thinkers of the last century on race, racism, and human liberation. It is precisely because we are not past the racism of the last century that we are not past Fanon: instead, we seem to be colliding into him, all over again. In doing so, what will we find?

One of Fanon’s most important insights is that race and racism are not “natural” or biological factors but products of specific social relations. “Blackness” is neither a natural attribute nor a “fact.”* “Blackness” is an objectified result of colonial domination—as is “whiteness.” “It is the colonist who *fabricated* and *continues to fabricate* the colonized subject.”⁵ The formal end of colonialism by no means alters this, since “colonial racism is no different from other racisms.”⁶ *All forms of racial classification and racism are a creation of historically conditioned social relations that have taken on a life of their own.*

Fanon’s insights hardly end here, however, since in stark contrast to today’s social constructivists and postmodernists, he is not a determinist. He does not think we are the mere product and playing

* The 1967 English translation of Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* by Charles L. Markman wrongly translated the title of chapter 5 as “The Fact of Blackness”—thereby ascribing to Fanon a view he did not hold. The original title in French—“L’expérience vécue du Noir”—is properly rendered as “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” in the more recent translation by Richard Philcox.

of ideological interpellation and social structures that are outside of our control. Instead, he grounds a negative critique of racism and dehumanization in a positive, affirmative vision of the human being who struggles to resist these conditions. He writes, “Man is a ‘yes’ resounding from cosmic harmonies.”⁷ *Contra* Martin Heidegger, Fanon insists, “Man is propelled *toward* the world and his kind.”⁸ We are not simply “thrown” *into* the world; we are *propelled* toward it and other *people*. We want “to touch the other, feel the other, discover each other.”⁹ *Our primordial ethical orientation is one of intersubjectivity.*

Racism radically distorts this orientation by locking individuals into their “whiteness” and “blackness.” We become so habituated to being treated as racialized objects that we cease to *see* the other for who they *are*. As Lewis Gordon writes in his fine study of Fanon

Racism renders the individual anonymous even to himself . . . [it] either locks the individual into the mechanism of things or sends him away and transforms him into an observer hovering over that very thing. Thus, to be seen in a racist way is an ironic way of *not being seen* through *being seen*.¹⁰

This is the depravity and invisibility that Fanon spent his entire life critiquing and seeking to overcome. But he could not point the way to its overcoming unless he approached his subject matter from the standpoint of that which has not yet become fully objectified and reified—our human potential. We can only *see* beyond a certain limit if we already *stand*, in some sense, *beyond* it.

It is this stance that has receded from view in recent decades, as the tidal wave of structuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonial theory denies the possibility or validity of a humanist perspective. The result has been far from encouraging—an evisceration of revolutionary possibility and the loss of ability to envision a non-alienating future. This has an especially egregious impact when it comes to studies of Fanon, since it makes it all the more difficult to discern the *internal coherence* of his multifaceted work as a philosopher, political activist, psychiatrist, and revolutionary theorist. Many postcolonial theorists praise Fanon for issuing a virulent critique of the hypocrisy of European Enlightenment humanism, while expressing discomfort

with his proclamation of “a New Humanism”¹¹ to replace it. Others emphasize his sensitive analyses of contingent realities and particular forms of oppression, while neglecting his effort to discern a pathway to “the universal”—understood by Fanon as “a world of reciprocal recognitions.”¹² And others applaud Fanon for emphasizing local forms of subjugated knowledge in his analyses of Caribbean and African realities, while voicing irritation at him for elaborating what Henry Lewis Gates calls “a grand unified theory of oppression.”¹³

To be sure, the problem of doing justice to the internal coherence of Fanon’s thought has proved challenging for more than postcolonial theory. Adolfo Gilly presented Fanon (in his Introduction to *A Dying Colonialism*) as a veritable orthodox Marxist-Leninist, going so far as to write “For it is certainly obvious that, if in Algeria the masses had and have the inner life of their own that Fanon describes, the same life with the same aim exists in the Soviet Union, although it is expressed in a different form.”¹⁴ As if Fanon’s sharp critique of the single-party state and his call to “leave this Europe . . . [which is] now teetering between atomic destruction and spiritual disintegration”¹⁵ didn’t imply a criticism of that totalitarian monstrosity! From the opposite perspective, the French social critic Alain Finkielkraut accused Fanon of advancing a variant of “European and *völkisch* nationalism” in his writings,¹⁶ despite Fanon’s sharp critique, not just of European nationalism but of nationalism itself in *The Wretched of the Earth* and other writings. And Hannah Arendt famously contended that Fanon’s work is defined by the “metaphysics of violence,”¹⁷ even though he did not write extensively on violence until his last book—which discussed violence in terms of the specific realities facing the Algerian and African independence movements of the 1950s and early 1960s instead of as a universal principle applicable to all situations.

One reason for the difficulty of accurately grasping what Fanon was about—and discerning the *unified* message that informs all of his work—is that his writings are easily misconstrued when abstracted from the philosophical framework that he is proceeding from. It is important to be attuned to that framework from the outset, even if its delineation must await the exploration of Fanon’s life and work as a whole.

Fanon's Philosophical Standpoint

First, of foremost importance is the impact upon Fanon of phenomenological philosophy. Phenomenology is a philosophical school of thought, first developed by Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the twentieth century, that focuses on being open to the immediacy of experience by bracketing out or suspending any attitude or claim about the world for which there is no *evidence* within our temporal and spatial horizon. The aim of the phenomenological method is to get us to “see” what the everyday, “natural” approach to the world conceals: our being-in-the-world as an active subject. By suspending any judgment about what is prior to or independent of our lived experience—such as what seems “natural” or “normal”—a path is opened to grasping the nature of things themselves, *including what it means to be human*.

Fanon became enamored of phenomenology early in his career, when he studied under one of the most astute continuators of Husserl's work, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in Lyon, France in the late 1940s. Fanon's subsequent indebtedness to phenomenology is evident in virtually all of his work. He was especially taken with Merleau-Ponty's view in his *Phenomenology of Perception* that “no philosophy can afford to be ignorant of the problem of finitude.”¹⁸ Idealism and empiricism face great difficulties in adequately dealing with the finite character of our natural and social existence. Empiricism *reduces* mind to a *reflection* of finite objectivity, thereby presenting the world as given and immutable. This fails to account for how the human subject *shapes* the external world and reaches for “infinite” self-expansion.¹⁹ Idealism envisions an active role for subjectivity but does so by reducing the world to the activity of an abstract constituting consciousness. In both cases our active inherence in *history* is obscured. In contrast, the phenomenological reduction aims to “bring back the living relationships of experience” by showing that “the world is not what I think, but what I live through.”²⁰ This stress on the irreducible *interaction* between subject and object is one of the most important contributions of phenomenology.

Fanon makes direct use of this phenomenological approach in his critical analyses of colonialism and racism. He was especially

attuned to Merleau-Ponty's insight that *the body* is our vantage point upon the world. Consciousness is never disembodied, as the idealists claim; nor does it merely exist in the form of an object, as the empiricists profess. In direct contrast to the mind-body dualism that pervades much of Western thought, phenomenology contends that consciousness is forever embodied, just as the *human* body is constantly "invaded" by consciousness. Merleau-Ponty held that when we ignore the vantage point provided by our "bodily-schema,"²¹ social phenomena become treated as fixed, independent entities. The world is taken as a *given* and we appear as passive recipients of its messages. While such leading phenomenologists as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty did not delve into the issue of race, Fanon saw that their approach made it possible to philosophically comprehend "the lived experience of the black person." Colonial domination trains the eye to "see" skin color as an essential determinant of a person's being and character instead of as the social construct that it really is. This directly impacts the consciousness of both the victim and perpetrator of racism, by "fixating" them into certain roles and attitudes. As we will soon have occasion to see, all of Fanon's subsequent work—as philosopher, psychiatrist, and political activist—was aimed at liberating the human subject from the seemingly "innate" series of complexes that accompany this tendency toward fixation.

Second is the impact upon Fanon of Hegel's philosophy. This is evident in his first work, *Black Skin, White Masks*, which contains an explicit engagement with the "master/slave dialectic" in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. What is often unappreciated, however, is the extent to which Hegelian ideas and concepts permeate Fanon's *entire* body of work—including his last book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. From his first moment of encounter with Hegel's philosophy, Fanon was especially attuned to its central category—the dialectical movement from the individual to the universal through the particular. Hegel summarizes this movement as follows: "Thus the object . . . is, as a totality, a syllogism or the movement of the universal through determination to individuality, as also the reverse movement from individuality through superseded individuality, or through [particular] determination, to the universal."²²

From a phenomenological standpoint, the individual, the specific *person*, is not some abstract ego existing outside the world, but a being-for-itself saturated with the determinations of experience. The universal is that which all individuals aspire for—which Fanon defines as “a world of mutual recognitions” (that is, the “‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’”²³). The critical issue, in Hegelian philosophy, is that we move *from* the individual *to* the universal through the mediation of “specific determination”—the *particular*. Fanon will appropriate this notion by arguing that racial pride and national culture are not minor terms but rather *conduits to the universal* on the part of those facing colonial oppression and racial domination.

Third is the impact upon Fanon of the work of Karl Marx. Although Fanon was engaged in discussions and debates with Marxists from the beginning of his intellectual career, he never explicitly aligned himself with any specific current of twentieth-century Marxism—in large part, as we will soon see, because he did not think that they spoke to his lived experience as a black person. But this does not mean that Marxian *ideas* are not integral to his political and theoretical project.

Does this indicate that Fanon was a Marxist? The answer largely depends on what one means by “Marxism.” If Marxism is defined as a series of fixed conclusions about social structures, the working class, and political organization that is applied to differing historical realities irrespective of their specific content, it is easy to contend that Fanon’s heterodox views of the peasantry, the lumpenproletariat, and the centrality of anti-colonial struggles shows he was not a Marxist. Yet by the same token one could just as easily conclude that Marx was not a Marxist, given his insistence (voiced near the end of his life, and often against his own followers) that the non-Western world was not fated to repeat the course of capitalist industrialization delineated in Volume One of *Capital*—and that in Russia the *peasantry* was the major revolutionary force.²⁴ On the other hand, if “Marxism” is defined as a method of elucidating revolutionary possibilities from ever-shifting social realities, the situation appears quite different. Fanon stated in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “a Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched when it comes to addressing the colonial issue.”²⁵ *Slightly* stretched—but not rejected or abandoned. This *stretching* is evident from as early as *Black Skin, White Masks*, in

which Fanon tackles an issue that was never discussed by Marx—the psychological impact of racism upon colonized peoples—while acknowledging that “the true disalienation of the black man implies a brutal awareness of social and economic realities.”²⁶

Fanon’s emphasis on “disalienation” directly derives from Marx’s theory of alienation. According to Marx, the fundamental problem of capitalism is not that it exploits workers by extracting more value from their laboring activity than they receive in the form of wages and benefits. The fundamental problem is much deeper—it is that workers become separated or alienated from their very *activity* of laboring in being treated as no more than a source of monetary value. In being alienated from our productive activity, we become alienated from our very humanity. Exploitation involves being robbed of the fruit of our labor, whereas *alienation involves being robbed of our very being*. Fanon views racism as the fullest expression of alienation, since blacks inhabit “a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline stripped bare of every essential from which a genuine new departure can emerge.”²⁷ Disalienation, the process of overcoming or transcending alienation, serves as the subject matter of all of Fanon’s work—from his very first writings to his last. This study will have occasion to demonstrate this by exploring much of Fanon’s relationship with Marx’s thought.

These are by no means the only influences upon Fanon’s life and work. His study of the major figures in European psychology—Freud, Adler, Reich, Jung, and Lacan—is of critical importance. After exploring the major figures of modern psychoanalytical theory in the 1940s, he went on to serve as a practicing psychiatrist for much of his adult life—a concern that he did not leave behind once he became an active revolutionary. Fanon did not attach himself to any of the leading schools of psychology, since their theories were developed irrespective of the actuality of racism and the lived experience of the colonized subject. As we will see, this did not prevent Fanon from making use of some of their major insights when it came to his effort to grapple with these issues.

No less important is the impact of such literary figures as Aimé Césaire and others who were part of the negritude movement. The impact of Césaire’s political ideas and literary production

upon the French West Indies cannot be exaggerated, and much of Fanon's work consisted of a dialogue with Césaire in particular—albeit one that became increasingly critical as he progressed in his intellectual career.

Most of all, Fanon was a student of life—of what he saw, heard, and experienced in *his* life, as lived first in the West Indies, then France, and finally in Algeria and Tunisia. Indeed, in exploring Fanon's work it is of utmost importance to be closely attentive to the specific situation and historical context in which he elaborates his ideas. One of the biggest mistakes made by both critics and followers of Fanon is to take his words out of context by detaching his pronouncements from the lived experience that produced them. Fanon addressed the world, but always from the zero point of his orientation. Does that voice still speak to us today? *Let us see.*