Independent Intavenshan: Frantz Fanon and the Dialectic of Solidarity

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Power concedes nothing without a demand.
—Frederick Douglass

To reach these conclusions, we travelled far and we changed a lot.
—Che Guevarra

INTRODUCTION

FRANTZ FANON’s books are infused with the incandescent spirit of a remarkable man. They also diagnose our condition with penetrating accuracy, unfurl the banner of uncompromising revolt and develop a deeply sophisticated and profoundly radical social analysis. And so it’s no surprise that the life and writings of Frantz Fanon inspired our best people - including Steve Biko and shaped key moments in our struggle making us all to some degree, as the poet Lesego Rampolokeng puts it, the “spawn of Fanon” (1999:51).

But Fanon is far more than just the specter haunting the specter of Biko. On the contrary his work, and in particular *The Wretched of the Earth* with its fecund narrative of personal and collective coming to consciousness, struggle, transcendence, betrayal and return to struggle remains relevant, inspirational, challenging and, more than anything else, illuminating. And Fanon has much to say about an enormous variety of pressing issues like authenticity, the cultivation of identity, democracy as well as ideology, racism, xenophobia, imperialism, violence, corruption, the cult of the leader, despotism in the name of invented custom, the promise and danger of national consciousness, the prioritising of the urban over the rural, the excesses and failures of the national bourgeoisie, the nature of neo-colonialism and the dialectical transcendence of futile oppositions like the universal and the particular, nationalism and internationalism and race and class. And, indeed, a convincing case can be made to support the view that Fanon’s work also
contains the seeds of a non reductive radicalism which can be developed into a dialectical transcendence of totalising modernity and nihilistic postmodernity.

However in this paper I have chosen to explore Fanon’s ideas about political struggles waged in the name of ethnicity, nation and race. I focus on The Wretched of the Earth and my aim is to extract and organise Fanon’s ideas on this issue and then to argue that his insights provide a coherent and valuable set of principles that can be effectively employed to assess the extent to which, from a radical perspective, such struggles are progressive or regressive.

There is a renewed urgency to think through and to rethink the issue of political solidarity in an era when African leaders are increasingly using the rhetoric of nationalism, and even Pan-African solidarity, to legitimize their surrender to The Market and to demonize opposition from social movements, students and trade unions. Since Thabo Mbeki shifted the ANC from a moderately social democratic programme to neo-liberalism in 1996 over one million jobs have been lost, 10 million people have been disconnected from water and the same number have been disconnected from electricity and 2 million have been evicted from their homes due to an inability to pay ‘market rates’ for basic services and housing. These disconnections and evictions, as with the exclusion of poor students from universities, are often effected at gun-point by private security companies sub-contracted by the state. In South African neo-liberalism is, amongst other things, an armed assault on the poor by a state determined to shift the burden of social services away from the rich and on to the poor in order to lure ‘investment’.

In July 2002 the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) was adopted by the African Union in Durban. NEPAD seeks to extend South Africa’s self-imposed (and catastrophic) structural adjustment pogrom to the rest of Africa. In this context of crisis it is vitally important that questions about solidarity are carefully negotiated.

For example while it is clear that the African elite often uses the language of nationalism and African solidarity to defend their co-option by international capital and to demonise opposition as ‘unpatriotic’ it is also clear that many radical social movements use similar language to express and defend their desire for an African economy run in the interests of Africans and to assert the particular nature of the African economic crisis. Similarly while it is clear that the agendas of Western donors and NGOs have often co-opted the critical energies of African social movements it is also clear that internationally solidarity has strengthened some radical African social movements enormously.

And in the world after the Battle of Seattle where global opposition to the (global) subordination of society to The Market is an encouraging possibility Africans have to carefully consider our relationship with the movement that can put 300 000 people on the
streets of GENOA but inhabits a different material reality to, say, the Zambian and Namibian trade union federations that aren’t yet online.

THE NEED FOR A RADICAL IMAGERY

Critics who dismiss Utopian imagery and theories of liberation with words like universalizing, totalizing, reductive, tyrannical and oppressive forget a lot about the world outside of the seminar room. They forget, for instance, that the debt servicing, the brain drain and resource transfer together mean that Africa—a continent where a third of the population is malnourished—bleeds 8.3 millions US Dollars to the West every hour of every day. They also forget that while wealth is flowing from Africa to the West the West is sending Africa consumer culture, an endless stream of consultants and experts, CNN, the World Bank and the IMF, returning students with new ideas and, sometimes, bombs. Of course the West does include Noam Chomsky and Public Enemy as well as Francis Fukuyama and The Bold and the Beautiful but the fact is that the West has the power to transmit, via seduction, co-option and enforcement, a self-serving set of ideas about what the good life is and how to achieve it.

And while it’s important to be able to say “no” there are times when it is equally important to be able to say “yes” and so effective resistance requires an alternative imagery. The problem is to find a path between “the two extremes represented by the totalitarian myth of the Ideal City, and the positivist pragmatism of reformists without a project.” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:190) Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argue, with some force, that a useful way through is to put aside the Marxian tendency to postulate laws of history, to reduce all subject positions to class and all struggles to the class struggle, to assume that the good life must wait for The Revolution and to turn, instead, to Marx’s vision of a society in which “The free development of each should be the condition of the free development of all.” (Marx 1983: 228) It is a principle that is neither overly reductive nor overly prescriptive but nevertheless has enough substance to provide a profoundly radical challenge to all societies and to what Linton Kwesi Johnson (1999) calls “the new word order”. An order that Anthony Richmond exposes, empirically, to be nothing less than Global Apartheid. (1994) But principles, even if they can steer a course between The Ideal City and postmodern nihilism need to be turned into rooted and compelling visions. And at this point I turn to the penetrating analysis and burning passion of Frantz Fanon.

FANON’S RADICAL IMAGERY

Fanon doesn’t set out a comprehensive theory of justice or a detailed Utopian vision but he does say a lot about his vision of progress and he
says it in a manner that is, in itself, a remarkably powerful normative statement. His vision is of a new humanity and he envisages a new humanity as both a cause and consequence of the struggle against colonialism. This has not always been recognised and so I would like to state it clearly in Fanon’s own words: “The new man is not an *a posteriori* product of that nation, rather he coexists with it and triumphs with it” (1976: 250).

It also needs to be made clear that while the struggle should be directed toward “the veritable creation of new men” (1976:28) a new humanity is not an inevitable outcome of an historical process. Indeed Fanon insists that: “There must be no waiting until the nation has produced new men; there must be no waiting until men are imperceptibly transformed by revolutionary processes in perpetual renewal. . . . the two processes are essential but consciousness must be helped” (1976: 246).

I also need to make it clear that Fanon does not see the struggle against racialised oppression as the only struggle that needs to be waged. On the contrary he makes it clear that oppression occurs along multiple and shifting lines of domination and he specifically endorses the struggle against “customary chiefs” and for democracy (1976:74) as well as various forms of class struggle and the struggle against the “feudal tradition which holds sacred the superiority of the masculine element over the feminine” (1976: 63). It also needs to be stressed that Fanon does not see the Third World proletariat as a revolutionary agent with a unique ontological priority. On the contrary he sees a “new humanity” arising out of every synthetic moment—out of every genuine resolution of conflict and every genuine destruction of the social divisions and hierarchies that trap us in limited, reductive identities. So he looks forward to “the Third World starting *a*” rather than “*the* new history of Man” (1976:245). A new history founded on “not only the disappearance of colonialism but also the disappearance of the colonized man” (1976: 198) and thus logically and necessarily inhabited by “new man” (1976:255).

Fanon does give us some idea of the nature of the new man in the struggle but he does not specify the full and precise meaning that he attaches to the terms “New humanism”, “new history” and “new man” in the context of the synthetic moments achieved when the struggle against colonialism is taken up, advanced and won. But, given that these terms refer to a future synthesis the precise nature and consequences of which are unknown that is perfectly logical. After all, as Sartre puts it “one cannot judge a painting until it is done” (1987: 49). However we do know that synthesis is transcendence and so we can know what it is not. In this case it is a humanity that contains neither a colonizing nor a colonized class. That is useful knowledge. However, given that we are still so far from that goal, we need to look at Fanon’s practical suggestions for advancing and measuring progress.
In *The Wretched of the Earth* Fanon makes use of a whole range of metaphors to describe progress. They include, in descending order of frequency, metaphors of movement, growth, waking up, new vision, rebirth and renewal. The question is what practical goals should the struggle be moving towards, what new possibilities should people be waking up to and what new modes of being should be cultivated?

I will begin by looking at the political goals towards which Fanon believes struggle should be directed and then look at the new mode of being that Fanon identifies. I see three central political goals in his work and I will discuss them in turn under the headings of liberation, freedom and respect. Freedom and respect are in part modes of being but, as I will show, there is also a significant degree to which they are also concrete political goals. But before I begin I would like to point out that Fanon doesn’t try to deduce these three goals from first principles but rather offers them as a compelling subjective vision that is partially an affirmation and partially a development of the Marxian vision.

**LIBERATION**

Fanon repeatedly refers to the fight for “national liberation” which he defines as “the fight against oppression” and liberation, both “social and individual” (1976:245) is a key theme in *The Wretched of the Earth*. He seems to understand oppression as domination that prevents movement out of a restricted geographic, psychic and economic space. So for examples he argues that “The immobility to which the native is condemned” results in her being hemmed into “a world divided into compartments, a motionless, Manichaeistic world” of which “apartheid is simply one form” (1976:40). “The first thing the native learns is to stay in his place, and not go beyond certain limits” (1976:40) with the result that, amongst other outcomes, “The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich” (1976:31).

This understanding of liberation fits in well with Foucault’s view of liberation as the overcoming of domination which is defined as the situation where “an individual or social group succeeds in blocking a field of power relations, immobilizing them and preventing any reversibility of movement by economic, political or military means.” (1996: 434)

In the American context some commentators seem to have focused exclusively on Fanon’s rejection of racist objectification, captured so well in his idea of “thing” becoming “man” (1997:28) through the act of rebelling against incarnate oppression in order to free himself. And in the African context elites have often sought to reduce liberation to the ‘political kingdom’ which in turn is reduced to nominal independence (i.e African management of the colony) And so it needs to
be made very clear that for Fanon liberation includes equal access to “political and economic power” (1976: 78). He argues that the former can be achieved by extending and radicalising democracy at all levels of human interaction. This differs from the orthodox marxian view in that Fanon believes that democracy doesn’t have to wait until after the revolution has been consolidated and that, on the contrary, radical democracy is a cause and consequence of the revolution. And with regard to economic power he insists that “an indispensable condition for the existence of men and women who are truly liberated” is that they “are truly masters of all the material means which make possible the radical transformation of society” (1976:251).

FREEDOM

Fanon looks forward to “a living man, working and creating himself” (1976: 253) and while he doesn’t give this a name it is very similar to Foucault’s definition of freedom as “an exercise of the self on the self, by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being.” (1996:434) There is an implicit rejection of limiting essentialisms and an affirmation of the social nature of the preconditions for the effective practice of freedom. Marx explains the latter more explicitly:

Only through the objectively unfolded wealth of human nature can the wealth of subjective human sensitivity - a musical ear, an eye for the beauty of form . . . be either cultivated or created. . . . The cultivation of all the five senses is the work of all previous history. Sense which is a prisoner of crude practical need has only a restricted sense. For a man who is starving the human form of food does not exist . . . and it would be hard to say how this way of eating differs from that of the animals . . . the society that is fully developed produces man in all the richness of his being, the rich man who is profoundly and abundantly endowed with all the senses. . . . (Marx quoted in Eagleton 1990: 202).

In view of the highly individualized (and often implicitly bougoise) nature of much post-structuralist thinking about self creation it is important to note that for Fanon freedom is, explicitly, both an individual and a communal cultural practice. With regard to the latter he speaks of the development of national culture and “the actions through which . . . (a) people has created itself” (1976:188).

It is equally important to note that Fanon doesn’t postpone the possibility of the practice of freedom until after the revolution. For
Foucault “the struggle for liberation . . . (is) indispensable for the practice of freedom” (1996:434). And Fanon does seem to agree when he argues that: “The relations of man with matter, with the world outside and with history are in the colonial period simply relations with food” (1976: 249). And he makes an even clearer connection between liberation and the development of the conditions most conducive to the practice of freedom when he argues that “No one can really wish for the spread of (a progressive) African culture if he does not give practical support to the creation of the conditions necessary to the existence of that culture; in other words, to the liberation of the continent” (1976:189). But while he does affirm the connection between liberation and freedom he does make it clear that in his view there is no necessary connection between the two. So on the one hand he points out that the struggle often generates “a mutual current of enlightenment and enrichment. Traditional institutions are reinforced, deepened and sometimes literally transformed” (1976: 114). And on the other hand he cautions that after independence “The warming, light-giving center where man and citizen develop and enrich their experience in wider and still wider fields does not yet exist” (1976: 64).

Fanon is right to deviate from Marxian orthodoxy and to argue that there is a clear but not necessary connection between freedom and liberation. After all Biko was, in this sense in which freedom is understood here, more free in prison than his jailers were outside and yet the general conditions maximally conducive to the cultivation of freedom require the fruits of liberation which include free time, non-commodified access to ideas, education and culture, and a vibrant media and civil society which are autonomous of the state and the market.

RESPECT

It’s well known that Fanon’s major extension of the Marxist utopia is that his demand for liberation and freedom includes a specific demand for the authentic recognition of all individual and group particularity. This means respecting both oneself and others.

This vision is part of what Fanon is referring to when he speaks of “bread and dignity” (1976:34) and its particularly well explained in Biko’s vision of “free participation by all members of a society, catering for the full expression of the self in a freely changing society as determined by the will of the people.” (1996:24) I have labeled this aspect of Fanon’s Utopian imagery Respect because of the way the word is used on the street and because although Erich Fromm looks at recognition from an individualistic rather than group perspective his theory of Respect resonates extraordinarily well with Fanon’s vision. Fromm argues that:
Respect is not fear and awe; it denotes, in accordance with the root of the word (respicere, to look at), the ability to see a person as he is, to be aware of his unique individuality. Respect means the concern that the other person should grow and unfold as he is. Respect, thus, implies the absence of exploitation. I want the . . . person to grow and unfold for his own sake, and in his own ways, and not for the purpose of serving me. . . . I feel one with the him or her, but with him as he is, not as I need him to be as an object for my use. It is clear that respect is possible only if I have achieved independence; if I can stand and walk without needing crutches, without having to dominate and exploit anyone else. Respect exists only on the basis of freedom (Fromm 1995:22).

Although the injunction to Respect the particularity of oneself and others is in part an injunction to adopt a respectful mode of being Respect is also a concrete political goal in so far as its achievement requires practical changes in areas like curricula, media policy and the law. In the case of the law examples would include everything from awarding legal recognition to non-Christian marriage ceremonies, up-grading the status of marginalised languages, requiring schools and employers to respect non-Western modes of dress and adornment through to requiring medical aid schemes to allow their customers to choose the type of medical and psychological care of their preference.

The idea of Respect transcends the sterile dichotomy between universalism and particularism with typical Fanonian élan because while Respect is a universal injunction it clearly precludes any particularism from masquerading as a universalism. So neither European Man nor the American consumer can be taken as the only, the singularly correct or the highest form of human life. And recognising the universal right to particularity is also an affirmation of self-respect the development of which is, as is well known, one of Fanon’s central goals.

AUTHENTIC, PRINCIPLED REBELLION AS A MODE OF BEING

Fanon sees the rebellions against colonialism and the national bourgeoisie’s accommodation with neo-colonialism as a social rupture that should be used to encourage a mode of being that is authentic, principled and courageous. He doesn’t see this mode of being as a spontaneous cause or consequence of the struggle. On the contrary he speaks of the “cerebral desert of the citizen” (1976:162) and makes it very clear that raising “the standard of consciousness of the rank-and-file” (1976:108) is a difficult struggle in itself.
AUTHENTICITY

Fanon uses the idea of authenticity in the Sartrean rather than the Romantic sense. The Sartrean concept of authenticity takes as error or bad faith any failure to recognise the freedom and responsibility which stem from the priority of existence to essence or, as Sartre puts it, the view that “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (1973: 28). For Fanon an authentic existence is one lived in full consciousness of the realities and choices that confront one in the context of an embodied existence lived in particular circumstances in a particular place and time. He specifically warns that while it is a mistake to identify with particularity at the expense of universality the colonised subject should take special care to prevent her embodied, located existence from being dissolved into a European particularism masquerading as the universal human experience. He also cautions against fetish and reduction and in particular the reduction of the nation to any image of its past or future, the reduction of human beings to the racialised reifications of both colonialism and the struggle, the reduction of justice to liberation, progressive consciousness to national consciousness, dialectical process to event, event to process, and, finally, the nation to the race, the region, the capital, spectacle, elite, party or leader. Fanon also specifically cautions against romanticizing the oppressed, projecting one’s own responsibility to fight for liberation, freedom and equality onto the hero, the leader, the party or European condescension and confusing means and ends and committed action with facile gestures.

So an authentic consciousness rejects ideology and embraces the lived and embodied experience of reality. And a key part of seeing things as they are is recognizing one’s authentic nature which means, amongst other things, that “it is necessary at all times and in places to make explicit, to demystify, and to harry the insult to mankind that exists in oneself.” (1976:246)

Sartre, of course, argued that “the actions of good faith have, as their ultimate significance the quest for freedom itself as such” and that “freedom is willed in community.” (1973: 51) And Fanon agrees that there is a clear connection between an authentic mode of being and the assumption of political responsibility. “The more the people understand”, he says “the more watchful they become, and the more they come to realize that finally everything depends on them” (1976:154). He also affirms the value of the burning intensity at which life in the struggle is lived and argues that for the most oppressed choosing the struggle is “choosing the only means whereby they can pass from the status of an animal to that of a human being” (1976:99). And he suggest that the authentic intellectuals can find redemption by joining the people in the
fluctuating movement which they are just giving shape to, and which, as soon as it has started, will be the signal for everything to be called into question. Let there be no mistake about it; it is this zone of occult instability where the people dwell that we must come; and it is here that our souls are crystallized and that our perceptions and our lives are transformed with light (1976:182). It is important to note that Fanon is not, as Edward Said recommends in his Reith Lectures, *Representations of the Intellectual*, suggestion that the intellectual should her preserve her autonomy in order to be able to speak truth to power. Fanon is suggesting that the intellectual must take aside *with* the people. This means, as Ashwin Desai notes in a memorable phrase, that it will sometimes be necessary to lie to power. (Desai adds the interesting observation that while Nietzsche recommended that we philosophize with a hammer in neo-liberal South Africa, where people, and even whole schools, are regularly disconnected from water by the state and radical social movements ‘illegally’ reconnect people it is necessary to philosophize with a pair of pliers.)

**PRINCIPLED REBELLION**

The principles by which the struggle should be waged follow logically from the affirmation of authenticity and the goals of freedom, liberation and respect. They include solidarity with others facing the same challenges, a “voracious taste for the concrete” (1976:74), a resolute focus on ends, a recognition that this requires guerrilla style revolution—with bullets or words—to be a permanent mode of being rather than an event or even a single process and a clearly spelt out commitment to radical, maximally decentralized democracy which, amongst other things implies bottom up development and an injunction for intellectuals to “speak the language of every day” (1976:151). He makes an equally clear commitment to prioritizing the well being of the worst off when ever there is a clash between the interests of different groups of people or between the achievement of different political goals (such as the injunction to respect particularity and the injunction to work for liberation). An authentic consciousness, he argues, must recognize that “the unemployed man, the starving native do not lay a claim to the truth; they do not say that they represent the truth, for they are the truth” (1976:38). And so the struggle should be “by the people and for the people, for the outcasts and by the outcasts” (1976:165).

**COURAGE**

Along with authenticity and principled rebellion Fanon, like rebels from Frederick Douglass through to Che Guevara and Steven Biko, places an
enormous value on courage. It is the mode of action which turns authenticity and principled rebellion into a material force and it is driven by the unflinching self respect which comes from the recognition of one’s authentic humanity. It means a willingness to transgress boundaries, to take risks and to refuse to “surrender a principle” (1976:114). It injects into consciousness that fortitude which makes “hunger with dignity . . . preferable to bread eaten in slavery” (1976:167).

WHY FANON SUPPORTS STRUGGLE IN THE NAME OF THE PARTICULAR

Nazism, “a reality that still exhausts the resources of our language” has made clear “the potentialities for the evil of race as an organizing principle of political solidarity” (Appiah 1992:6). Biology has revealed race to be a social construction and Paulin Houtondji has convincingly argued against the myth of African unanimism and for the view that “cultural traditions are always a complex heritage, contradictory and heterogeneous, an open set of options, some of which will be actualized by any given generation, which by adopting one choice sacrifices all the others (1996:161). Moreover many thinkers have persuasively used Lenin’s theory of imperialism to argue, as Nkrumah did, that:

the struggle against imperialism today is in fact an international class war, and that therefore the real opposition is no longer between an exploited nation and its colonial or neo-colonial metropolitan power but between the exploited classes in the neo-colonies and the bourgeoisies of these same neo-colonies, allied and subordinated to the bourgeoisies of the great imperialist powers (ibid: 167).

Fanon subscribed to this Leninist theory of imperialism and was well aware of the barbarism conducted in the name of race, the fact that race is a social construct with no objective biological reality, the myth of African unanimity and the extent to which both Africa and Africans are inventions of European colonialism. And while he was well aware that the lived experience of racism is as real as Agent Orange on the skin or electrodes on the genitals he reported that during the development of the rebellion against racialised oppression “Many members of the mass of the colonialists reveal themselves to be much, much nearer to the national struggle than certain sons of the nation.” The result of this is that “the barriers of blood and race-prejudice are broken down on both sides” and so “consciousness slowly dawns upon truths that are only partial, limited or unstable” (1976:116/7).
Nevertheless Fanon actively supported racialised struggles for two reasons. The first is that he saw race and ethnicity as the inevitable language and structure through which rebellion against racialised oppression would express and develop itself. The second is that he thought that this was a good thing. I will argue that he was correct on both accounts.

WHY FANON SEES STRUGGLE IN THE NAME OF THE PARTICULAR AS INEVITABLE

Fanon takes it as inevitable that when the oppressed begin to resist they will, on the whole, resist within the broad framework of their oppression, that they will draw on and develop their own cultural resources to nurture and sustain their rebellion and that they will seek common cause with other people waging the same struggle. He does make it clear that “you’ll never overthrow the terrible enemy machine, and you won’t change human beings if you forget to raise the standard of consciousness of the rank-and-file.” (1976:108) But he’s equally clear that the struggle can’t be perfected if it hasn’t started and that all effective rage directed against the machine must, despite any weakness, flaws and contradictions be supported because “our historic mission is to sanction all revolts” (1976:166) And while Fanon’s highly dialectical theory would never countenance any static either-or dichotomies his sense of urgency - his injunction to seize the time - implies that a rebellion where “old warrior-like traditions spring up again, the women cheer, the men organize” (1976:72) is, despite its patriarchal articulation, a major advance over docility and submission.

It is true that many effective progressive organisations, movements and struggles understand that neo-liberal oppression racialises its victims but have no explicit identification beyond that of principle, e.g. The Treatment Action Campaign. But even in these cases the movements are invariably rooted in the life-world of the people that make them and there is, usually very clearly, an implicit affirmation of the identities (more likely to be manifest in songs and discussion than policy statements and press releases) created by the categories through which racist and other ideologies legitimate exclusion or exploitation. Fanon is quite right to assume that rebellion against racial, ethnic or national oppression will tend have some conscious racial, ethnic or national identification. As he points out “Colonialism’s condemnation is continental in scope. ...The efforts of the native to rehabilitate himself and to escape from the claws of colonialism are logically inscribed from the same point of view as colonialism” (1976:170). And this is not a phenomenon solely linked to colonial oppression. Mahmood Mamdani offers convincing empirical evidence to support his claim that in neo-colonial Africa “Every movement of resistance was shaped by the very
structure of power against which it rebelled. How it came to understand this historical fact, and the capacity it marshaled to transcend it, set the tone and course of the movement” (1996: 24).

Many people oppose any attempt to employ any form of nationalism as a principle of political solidarity. For example orthodox Marxism has often tried to reduce all struggle to class struggle and to dismiss struggle waged in the name of race, ethnicity and the nation as, at best, a side show and, at worst, a divisive, retrogressive and thoroughly ideological tendency. It’s no surprise that the leading South African Marxist Harry Gwala wanted to change the struggle anthem from *Nkosi Sikelel’iAfrika* to the *Internationale*. And with obvious exceptions like Richard Rorty (1989) liberal thinkers are often just as suspicious of politics which consciously evokes ethnicity or nationalism. Michael Igantieff, typically, valorises cosmopolitanism, argues for civic nationalism and against ethnic nationalism, and suggests that “If patriotism….is the last refuge of a scoundrel, so post-nationalism and its accompanying disdain for the nationalist emotion of others, may be the last refuge of the cosmopolitan” (1994:11).

Three points need to be made. Firstly much of what appears in Europe or North America to be policy chosen on the basis of objective, reasoned principle appears as gross ethno-centricism to those for whom it means bombs, cut backs in education and health care, submergence of ancestral lands under World Bank backed dams or being subject to what Ngugi wa Thion’o calls the “culture bomb” (1994). Secondly, despite the suspicion of the defenders of European man’s status as Man, there is nothing new about any of this. After all just as Sparticus inspired the slaves to rebel together as slaves in order to no longer be slaves feminists have inspired women to resist patriarchy as women and in solidarity with other women. And thirdly, while it is clear that a sense of revolutionary fervor can sometimes be inspired and sustained by commitment to abstract principles like justice or human rights many, and perhaps most people’s energies are best fed by the resources of the culture to which they feel most connected.

Indeed, as Terry Eagleton points out Marx him self argued that since we are constituted by our past we must reimagine it and dream it, in order to wake from its nightmare and so the awakening of the dead in these revolutions served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given task in imagination, not of fleeing from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of the revolution, not of making its ghost walk about again (1990:213).

You don’t *have* to be female to be inspired by the example of Helen Joseph, Cuban, Argentine or white to be inspired by Che Guevara or Zulu, Black, African or colonised to be inspired by Bambatha. But if a woman who sees herself as a powerless victim of society is inspired by the story of Helen Joseph to reimagine herself as a fighting woman and
begins working, exclusively, for the feminist cause the progressive agenda has, clearly, been advanced. And there’s no reason why ethnic struggles should be any different. If the Russian soldiers who broke the back of the Nazi army were inspired by an emotional allegiance to an imagined Mother Russia rather than reasoned socialist principles the fact remains that their courage turned the tide in the fight against Nazism. Of course the progressive agenda should never be reduced to the progress of any particular group or struggle and no group or struggle should ever be given any sort of permanent ontological priority. After all, as in the case of many of the Afrikaners who suffered at the hands of British imperialism and many of the Serbs and Jews who suffered under the Nazis, the oppressed have very often become oppressors. However for as long as progressive energies are a rare and precious commodity they all need to be treasured irrespective of how they are articulated. It is the direction of the movement they inspire that matters. The critical question is ‘where are we going?’ and not, not at all, ‘are we being faithful to our political sect?’.

WHY FANON SEES STRUGGLE IN THE NAME OF THE PARTICULAR AS DESIRABLE

For Fanon it is both inevitable and desirable that progressive struggles pass through a phase where they are identified with race, ethnicity or the nation. He doesn’t insist on any specific mode of identification and he doesn’t argue that identify politics should, at any stage, be the only politics. And the South African struggle, where both the racially separatist Black Consciousness movement and the racially integrated Communist and trade union movements struck major blows for freedom, seems to bear out the wisdom of this flexibility.

Fanon identifies four key reasons why struggle should move through a phase where race, ethnicity or the nation is the organising principle of solidarity. The first is that rooted and particular culture has more resources that can be used and developed to inspire and fuel resistance than abstract universal principle. The second is that while all progressive struggles have some common concerns and aims which they are more likely to achieve if they work together the fact remains that different struggles exist in different times and places, confront different material realities and thus have some particular concerns and aims. And its abundantly logical that those who face particular challenges in a particular context should work together towards highlighting and resolving their particular problems. It’s no surprise that Aimé Césaire’s famous letter of resignation to the French Communist Party stressed “The peculiarity of our place in the world. . . . The peculiarities of our problems which aren’t to be reduced to subordinate forms of any other problem. (Biko 1996: 67) And, for example, its clear that while the
arbeiter and the gastarbeiter both have some common interest the
gastarbeiter has a particular interest in not having her home burnt down
by skinheads. As Stokley Carmichael warns “coalescing from weakness
can mean absorption, betrayal” (1995:197) and this particular interest
runs a great risk of being marginalised or subsumed in a general workers’
struggle. And just as Fanon sees a need for national, continental and
racial identities he sees an equal need for these identities to be challenged
when they obscure the particular within the particular. For example, he
argues that the events of the American civil rights struggle “have very
little in common in their principles and objectives with the heroic fight of
the Angolan people against a detestable Portuguese colonialism”

This leads to Fanon’s third point which I’ll explain by mean of
Biko’s distinction between assimilation and integration. Biko is for the
integration of people who are economically, politically and culturally
equal but firmly against “an assimilation and acceptance of blacks into
an already established set of norms and code of behavior set up and
maintained by whites...I am against the superior-inferior white-black
stratification that makes the white a perpetual teacher and the black a
perpetual pupil.”(1996:24)

This distinction makes perfect sense from a Fanonian point of
view and its clear that Fanon totally rejects the idea of assimilation for a
number of reasons. One of which is that it denies people the opportunity
to work together to root out of their psyches the factual distortions and
pejorative projections of racism. And although Fanon doesn’t mention
this it would make equal sense to make the same space available to
people who need to work through the ways in which being socialised into
a racist class has distorted their consciousness and confronted them with
specific problems. A second important reason for the rejection of
assimilation is that it increases the likelihood of the oppressed identifying
with the oppressors and therefore with the ideologies of the oppressors
with the consequence that critical energies would be stifled. This is a
point of enormous significance that Biko has developed at length. It
remains disturbingly relevant to contemporary South Africa where
phrases like ‘in line with international norms’, ‘international experience
has shown’ and ‘international experts caution’ never refer to the norms
and experiences developed in the successful Ugandan struggle against
AIDS or in the struggles of the Zapatistas, Naxalites and Ruwenzururu.
On the contrary they are a coded way of saying that this the Western way
of doing things. And that comes with the implication that the information
to follow is beyond question. And so our scandalously overpaid National
Youth Commissioner feels no shame in saying that “declining youth
activism is part of a global trend. It shows that we are becoming a normal
democracy.” (Mail and Guardian, June 18 1999) A ‘normal’ democracy
is assumed to be a Western democracy and a Western democracy is assumed to be what we want and need.

A second central problem with assimilation is that it would also destroy the native without destroying the structure of colonialism and would, thus, mean the universalisation of European man rather than the triumph of the New Man. For Fanon this is not just a pity in the way that it is a pity when another species of butterfly becomes extinct. On the contrary it would be a disaster precisely because European Man is a disaster. Anyway, assimilation is a project that is doomed to failure in this political economy because while the system does seek to legitimate itself through co-option it still creates ‘non-whites’ in order to create non-people to, as Bob Marley puts it, tread the wine presses. Assimilation is a dangerous fantasy for all but co-optable elites.

The final point is that because racialised oppression operates by undermining the self respect of the oppressed real progress requires that respect to be won back in a struggle by the oppressed. This is part of the reason why Biko suggests that progressives whose throwness has placed them in the dominant group ought to “realise that they themselves are oppressed and that they must fight for their own freedom.” (1996:66) Fanon agrees that ideas like whiteness mutilate the humanity of those whom they thrust into domination and believes that settlers thus have a personal interest in the struggle against colonialism and can and should choose to join the natives’ struggle. But he would certainly be revolted by Richard Rorty’s patronising suggestion that “these people must be helped” (1989:191).

WHY FANON CAUTIONS THAT ETHNIC POLITICS CAN BE REGRESSIVE

For Fanon justice is neither a bourgeois intellectual puzzle to be worked out after dinner nor a facile taking of positions that changes the ego but not the world and so he does not make the mistake of judging struggles more harshly than the oppressive structures they oppose. His focus is clearly and resolutely on the actual cultivation of a progressive consciousness and the actual achievement of liberation, freedom and respect. And so progress towards these goals is welcomed and defense of privilege is condemned in proportion to the degree that the progressive agenda is actually advanced or inhibited. I wish to make it clear that Fanon’s commitment to assessing progress in the realm of ends rather than means keeps him well away from the trap of making essentialist fictions or totalising metanarratives a greater enemy than racialised privilege. The Mau Mau wouldn’t pass the anti-essentialist test but they did successfully resist British imperialism and that, for Fanon, is the bottom line.
Nevertheless given that Fanon sees identity politics as a strategic intervention rather than a preferred mode of being it is no surprise that he argues that ethnic, racial or national mobilization can often be regressive. The politics of race is, he tells us, regressive in the specific cases of racialised colonialism and neo-colonial domination and when used to simulate cultural capital in order to legitimize privilege. He specifically mentions the post-independence racism of the national bourgeoisie, tribalism, discriminatory religious absolutism, racism between Negroes and Arabs, working class xenophobia against non-national Africans, patriarchy, the rural elite which exploits the ‘custom’ invented by colonialism to defend the “feudal” system which keeps their subjects “bogged down in fruitless inertia” (1976: 87) and, finally, the “rapacious bourgeoisie” (1976:135) that, as in the case of Mobutu, employs Parisian made leopard skin hats and the rhetoric of ‘authenticity’ in an attempt to disguise the extent to which it is content to play “the role of the Western bourgeoisie’s business agent” (1976:122) and to restrict its ambition to “to keep in the running and to be part of the racket” (1976:120) in order to keep “filling its pockets as rapidly....(and).... prosaically as possible.” (1976:135)

Fanon is also very clear that while there are circumstances in which “attachment to traditions” is “a refusal to submit” (1976:191) and therefore valuable it can also be a grave mistake to follow “forms of culture which are already condemned to extinction” as instead of a “taking of the offensive....There is simply a concentration on a hard core of culture which is becoming more and more shriveled up, inert and empty.” (1976:191)

This is an enormously complex issue but if one takes race, ethnicity and culture as contingent social constructions then all tradition, be it an ancient or more recent construction, should be understood as a means to an end rather than an end to be valued in itself. However it is important to remember that while tradition can be disablinly archaic and can be a cloak used to disguise oppression it is often the case that aspects of culture which appear irrational or archaic to the Western(ised) gaze are in fact vitally important because they nourish self respect, create a critical distance between the located self and Hollywood, bond communities and meet a variety of psychic and economic needs. Fanon does not give his readers a precise formula for balancing the injunction to respect difference with the injunction to move forward towards freedom and liberation but, as I have already mentioned, he does imply that in the adjudication of any conflict of interests the guiding principle should be the well being of the worst off. So clearly tradition should be respected when it does not compromise the progressive agenda and, equally clearly, any attempt to reduce need to what can be measured by the Market should be resisted. However it should be remembers that, as Ziauddin Sardar argues:
Traditions of resistance have maintained non-western enclaves of cultural autonomy as heavily defended redoubts. But fortified earthworks cannot be moved. There is a cultural resistance that does not go forward and is coming perilously, indeed fatally, close to being a dead weight, submerging Other cultures in illusory pasts instead of anchoring them to the continuing flow of history. (1998:273)

But Fanon’s most important criticism of identity politics is perhaps his regularly repeated and often quoted warning that:

nationalism, that magnificent song that made the people rise against their oppressors, stops short, falters and dies away on the day that independence is proclaimed....If you really wish your country to avoid regression, or at best halts and uncertainties, a rapid step must be taken from national consciousness to political and social consciousness. (1976:163)

Social consciousness refers to the struggle to cultivate a progressive consciousness and to work towards the goals of liberation, freedom and respect. He cautions that “Without out that struggle...there’s nothing but a fancy-dress parade and the blare of trumpets. There’s nothing save a minimum of readaptation, a few reforms at the top, a flag waving: and down there at the bottom an undivided mass, still living in the Middle Ages, endlessly marking time.” (1976:118)

This warning is both tragically prophetic and perfectly logical in a context where national oppression has been overcome and nationalism is steadily becoming a means of control rather than the fuel for rebellion. It will be difficult to let go for Comrades who’s lives have been built around the struggle. People will take comfort from reciting the events of the struggle like the stations of the cross long after the goals of the struggle have been forgotten. Comrades will continue to sing the national anthem even though the words don’t mean what they did when they sang them, through the bars of their cells, to the condemned as they walked to the gallows. But the logical force of Fanon’s point is undeniable. Nationalism, and equally other forms of identity politics, are only a means to an end and should therefore be transcended when they begin to hinder rather than assist the achievement of that end.

But, since national independence is never total and since it certainly doesn’t free us from the racialised inequality of the neo-colonial order nor the racism and racist ideologies which sustain that order it seems that Fanon is uncharacteristically undialectic on this point. It
would perhaps be better to argue that national consciousness should be
developed into social consciousness to the degree that the nationalist
agenda has been met in specific areas. So for example in South Africa
the national agenda is still necessary in order to complete the
deracialisation of society but it needs to be vigorously challenged by a
social consciousness when it becomes xenophobic and chauvinistic and
when there are attempts to reduce progress to deracialisation. And even a
country like Nigeria which does not suffer from a direct internal
colonialism and which is in obvious need of a radical social
consciousness still requires national consciousness in the form of an
aggressive Pan-African nationalism to be directed at beating back
cultural, economic, political and military imperialism; opposing elite co-
option by a global economic system that literally transfers wealth from
Africa to the West and ensuring that the particular nature of the African
crisis is not subsumed in the global movement against market
fundamentalism. The latter is significant in the context of the current
popularity of theories that claim that we have now entered a ‘smooth’,
evenly developed global economy based on ‘immaterial labour’. (Hardt
and Negri 2000). It is true that neo-liberalism has, globally, produced
states with, in Bourdieau’s terms (1998), powerful right arms and
withered left arms. But because of a racist disregard for Africa life in the
West, and because of the weakness of African states and other African
collectivities, neo-liberalism is inflicted far more severely and brutally
on the African poor than the Western poor. This is not to say that black
America does not also face an armed assault by the state and its partners
in the prison-industrial complex. But there is a meaningful difference
between those parts of the world where the state can, quite casually,
disconnect the water supply to state schools in poor areas in the middle
of a cholera epidemic, or parts of the world where the police quite
regularly shoot poor students protesting their exclusion from education
and those parts of the world where actions like this remain impossible or,
at least, a scandal. Africa needs to build stronger local, national and pan-
African collectivities to oppose authoritarian regimes that seek to
plunder, to oppose regimes that seek to regulate their people in the
interests of international capital and to develop a strong and particular
voice in the growing global movements for economic justice.

CONCLUSION

I have explained what I understand to be Fanon’s idea of what constitutes
the key goals of a progressive agenda. I have also outlined his argument
for the necessity of an independent intervention in response to racism
and his warning that the politics of racial solidarity can be regressive. I
also hope to have shown that in The Wretched of the Earth Fanon
develops a clear and coherent set of criteria for assessing the extent to
which struggles waged in the name of ethnicity, race and nation are progressive or regressive.

The application of these principles is material for many more papers but, briefly, Fanon makes a good argument to the effect that where a generally progressive struggle has some regressive elements progressive intellectuals should support the progressive elements of struggle and work, in a spirit of critical solidarity to overcome the regressive elements. Once democracy has been achieved and political agendas are pursued in decision making bodies and civil society this makes for a relatively straightforward calculation. Even if a murderous and generally reactionary organisation like the Zulu Nationalist IFP makes a progressive proposal, for example to make isiZulu a medium of instruction at Universities in KwaZulu Natal, then that proposal should be supported. And if the same organisation makes a regressive proposal, such as the introduction of compulsory virginity testing for female university students, then it should be opposed. But there are some situations where one is called upon to decide whether or not to support an individual, organisation or struggle in its entirety. And if that situation is a contest for power between two individuals or organisations who both subscribe to a set of policies which are partially progressive and partially regressive then, in Fanon’s view the determining principle would - because he speaks for and with the wretched of the earth - be the interests of the worst off rather than the majority. And so, I conclude with Mamdani’s view that

the question we need to ask when assessing the democratic content of a movement.... underlines the social character of its demands: Do they tend towards realizing equality or crystallizing privilege? Are they generalizable to other ethnic groups or can they be realized only at the expense of others? In other words, when do they signify a struggle for rights and when a demand for privilege? (Mamdani 1996:203)

I have ended this paper with Mamdani which, given that he begins Citizen and Subject with Fanon, is fitting. I hope to have shown that The Wretched of the Earth contains valuable insights which can be used to illuminate some of the darker corners of Western political theory. In particular I hope to have show that it casts welcome light on the problem of when the politics of identity are progressive and when they are regressive.
Notes


3. For a detailed account of this shift see Patrick Bond’s *Elite Transition* (Pluto Press, London 2000).

4. These statistics are taken from David McDonald and John Pape’s *The Crisis of Services Delivery in South Africa* (Zed Books, London, 2002).

5. Again, see Ashwin Desai’s *We are the Poors* as well as my *No Hope Without Struggle – Critical Choices* (Quarterly Review of Education and Training in South Africa, Vol. 9 No 2, June 2002 pp 32 – 35).


11. Desai makes these comments in a recent paper, *Neo-liberalism and its Discontents* which is online at [http://www.nu.ac.za/ccs](http://www.nu.ac.za/ccs).
12. This is particularly well theorised by Steven Biko in *I Write What I Like*


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