



## *Re-Reading Frantz Fanon*

### **Language, Violence, and Eurocentrism in the Characterization of Our Time**

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**Abstract:** The highly critical way the work of Frantz Fanon was received by the most important national liberation movements of the African continent has, in the last thirty years, more or less disappeared from our collective recollection. This is so much more anomalous as his most important writings were produced within and for one of those movements, the Algerian FLN. After discussing other more well known readings of Fanon, this article recalls some of the basic aspects of that specific, politically-engaged, militant way of reading his work within the liberation movement. It asserts that this side-by-side consideration of different readings allows a more accurate, stimulating, and multidimensional approach to Fanon's work, in general, and to his conclusions about colonial language, spontaneous violence, and Eurocentrism, in particular.

Since they were written—most of them within the *maquis* of the anti-colonial armed struggle for the national liberation of Algeria—the two books, articles, and published communications that constitute the complete work of Frantz Fanon (1952, 1959, 1961, 1964) have been the object of various interpretations which, usually, seek to understand and respond to social, political, cultural and, sometimes, academic conjunctures related to the on-going deepening of the systemic crisis of the modern world-system. In necessarily brief terms, the present reflection will begin by identifying some of those readings in their relative importance to the overall knowledge of our social reality and for political activism. To

do this, I will divide such readings into two groups.

The first one, which I defend, accepts and tends to prolong in time—into our present and towards the future—Fanon's suggestions about liberation and for what he called, in a strikingly Enlightenment language and following Aimé Césaire, a “new humanism.” In very critical, often condemning terms, this way of reading Fanon sees him as an important if not indispensable reference to our present understanding of world-historical social reality—in particular the unequal, structural interrelationship between core and periphery. To be sure, this is the type of politically engaged reading<sup>1</sup> made within national liberation

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movements or other social movements in the periphery and semi-periphery of the world-system, and by an illustrious group of political activists and scholars among whom we find names like those of Eldridge Cleaver and Edward W. Said.

A second group of readings has its origins within some of the most prestigious universities of the systemic core. As it happens with the first, this second approach to Fanon's work has produced texts intellectually very stimulating and with high levels of innovative scholarship. However, and among the aspects which are common to them, there is the fact that methodologically they tend to ignore everything directly or indirectly related to the life experience, hypotheses, and objectives towards a better and more equitable future of social justice and liberty as they were lived and expounded by Fanon himself. In other words, they tend *to kill the author* by ignoring in his texts what Mbembe (2001: 6) calls their "meaningful human expression." To be sure, these readings are made to selectively isolate some of his ideas as springboards to other texts and other ideas. But the result implies, as well, unforeseen, maybe unwanted, consequences.

In the first place, by ignoring the author and his conjuncture, they ignore as well not only the fact that Fanon's texts were mostly produced within a context of antisystemic struggle and are *about both* the periphery *and* the core of the modern world-system, but also the fact that his approach to social reality was done in a highly innovative, revolutionary way, from *the perspective of the periphery*.

Secondly, by eliding all reference to the time and space of Fanon's writings, in particular their peripheral origins, these readings neutralize or substitute by other

<sup>1</sup> Such as that undertaken in Colloque de Brazzaville, between December 12 and 16, 1984, which was particularly important for the number and level of its participants and their communications (cf. Elo Dacy: 1986).

tensions the tension that is a central feature of Fanon's work as much as that of the modern world-economy and of our socio-historical reality, i.e., the effective and potential conflict determined by the unequal, polarizing relationship between the core and the periphery.

Finally, by ignoring contexts, perspectives, tensions, time, and space, they overlook what I contend is a foundational characteristic of Fanon's research methodology: his personal struggle against and, often, rupture with some of the main features that characterize our systemic structures of knowledge in general, and those of social sciences in particular, as instances of a dominant Eurocentrism that consciously or, often, unconsciously, systematizes knowledge, its self-organization, and social reproduction, not only within the core but also within the periphery and semi-periphery of the modern world-system.

Sometimes also known as European universalism, Anglo-American cultural modernity, or even, in the coined expression of Jalal Ali Ahmad (1961/1984) *occidentosis*, Eurocentrism is one of the major characteristics that in an a priori fashion and implicitly define the modes of thought that emerged from more than five hundred years of the long term historical processes that changed Western Europe first, and the United States afterwards, into the core of an expanding, evolving capitalist world-economy. As Dipesh Chakrabarty points out (2000: 5), this tradition often described as stretching itself back to the ancient Greeks "is a fabrication of relatively recent European history.... However... fabrication or not, this is the genealogy of thought in which social scientists find themselves inserted." Social scientists, I would add, but not only.

The final part of this article will further discuss this feature. Because it implies the active criticism and denunciation of intellectual distortions, oversights, and assumptions from within the structures of knowledge that produce and justify them,

this is not an easy task. This is, however, what Fanon has exemplarily tried to do in his work: his antisystemic reflection was not only made from within the system but also *using* the system. By analyzing what his work implies and, sometimes, tells us about his own endeavor, I will try to pin down the starting points of the methodological strategy he assumed to actively neutralize the direct and indirect, always present, and usually unconscious, manifestation of those euro-centric structural features.

Based on his arguments about language as an instrument of colonial oppression and the revolutionary role of violence, this will allow me to discuss what I contend is one, if not *the* most important, of the intellectual legacies Frantz Fanon left us. To recognize how, in the struggle with the monster of unbridled and distorting Eurocentrism, how he was able to locate and place it under control to be able *to think past colonialism*. His effort is today, more than ever, not only a referential model for a renewed epistemological practice but also an indispensable intellectual project for all of us who want, as Susan Buck-Morss (2006) so eloquently proposes, *to think past terror*. This is a central requirement of our time.

## I

Two essential characteristics of the work of Frantz Fanon are not usually taken into interpretative consideration.

The first, the most important, has already been mentioned above: Fanon's writings were mostly done within the context of a liberation movement involved in the protracted armed struggle for the liberation of Algeria. What this means is that his reflection about colonialism and national liberation is the reflection of a politically engaged cadre of the liberation movement in a very specific context of armed confrontation and, obviously, at least in part subordi-

nated not only to the hierarchy but also to the strategic and tactical objectives of the movement and its struggle.

Secondly, the work of Frantz Fanon was produced from the early 1950s to the early 1960s, that is, in about ten years: a very short period of time in intellectual terms. What this means is that his work must be read as an incomplete work that was cut short by his untimely, sudden death in 1961. If attentively considered, this fact makes his assertions a work in progress, involving often vague and contradictory reflections. I believe that it is important to point out these factors because they are seldom taken into consideration, in particular in scholarly readings of Fanon's work.

In very general terms it can be said that such academic readings of Fanon started within the core, particularly in the universities of the English speaking core, in the second half of the 1980s. This coincided with the aggravation of what was then and there an ongoing crisis of the disciplines within academia. It led not only to the academic discovery of his work but also to its transformation, almost twenty years after his death, into a basic reference in contemporary scholarship. The circumstances of such a discovery are well known: Homi K. Bhabha, the influential critical theorist, was invited to introduce the 1986 British re-edition of *Black Skin, White Masks (BSWM)* (1986) and the result was a remarkable text: "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche, and the Colonial Condition" (Gibson 1999: 179-96). In it, Bhabha laments the lack of attention the Left (and the academia) had given to Fanon's work, implicitly emphasizes his import to what was then starting to be known as Postcolonial Studies, and proposes his more open re-reading according to psychoanalysis and an incipient post-structuralism. After emphasizing the very deep influence of Lacan in *BSWM*, Bhabha concludes that by "shifting the focus of cultural racism from the politics of nationalism to the politics of narcissism, Fanon

open[ed] up a margin of interrogation that causes a subversive slippage of identity and authority.” The “need for Fanon becomes urgent,” he tells us, before adding that “the time has come to return to Fanon... with a question: How can the human world live its difference? How can a human-being live Other-wise?”

This text and its questions became since then central to literary criticism, feminism, race studies, post-colonialism, subject-formation studies, and, crowning them all, so-called post-structuralism. It was followed, when not echoed or confronted, by other equally influential references to Fanon’s work by, among many others, Abdul JanMohamed, Benita Perry, Gayatri Spivak, or Henry Louis Gates Jr.; as Nigel Gibson points out, “inside the academy one might wonder how there could be life for Fanon before Bhabha” (Gibson 1999: 14). This had also been noticed by Louis Gates Jr. who characterized the situation as the “reinstatement of Fanon as a global theorist.” Discussing the many instances in which Fanon started to be “used,” Gates coined the phrase that better reflects this whole period: Frantz Fanon, he wrote, had been made into “a Rorschach blot with legs” (1991; Gibson 1999: 252).

This mode of reading Fanon is problematic. But it is not necessarily a bad thing. On the contrary, it often leads to highly inspirational debates on the conceptualization of our world while confronting at the same time a still dominant but old, surpassed, inefficient paradigm. In what is, at least since the late 1960s, a more or less open confrontation against the intellectual hegemony of that paradigm and its Eurocentric structures of knowledge, reading Fanon became essential. Even if this was not the intention of all those (usually) Anglo-American scholars, this was the result of their close reading—a type of reading that continues today. We must be glad for that.

## II

To be sure, that was not the first time Fanon was read and debated within the core of the world-system. Actually, and starting in France where his work was published between 1952 and 1964, he soon became one of the central references for those wanting to understand the origins, nature, and possible futures of the national liberation movements—the liberation movements of Asia, in general, that of Vietnam, in particular, but also those of Africa and Latin America. The public opposition to the French war in Algeria as well as the development of a generalized world protest against the U. S. aggression in Vietnam coincided with the popularization of Fanon’s writings. At the same time, the writings founded theoretically what was to become the third great ideological building block of what is sometimes described as the 1968 world-revolution: an expanding anti-colonialism of active solidarity with the liberation movements of the periphery, complementing a generalized opposition to American imperialism and to the Soviet totalitarianism of state-socialism.

The importance of Fanon in the 1960s and 1970s can be measured by that influence and its expression all over the world. But it can as well be seen in the multiplication and intensity of the debates involving some of the main ideas in his work. Writing about them, E. J. Hobsbawm (1973: 6-10) points out that they draw attention to the genuine defects of analytical Marxism and this is how Fanon seems to have been read, with some intellectual anguish, within traditional social movements of the Left or institutionalized parties of a self-declared communist, Trotskyite, or socialist designation. The reason was the generalized crisis of political theory and ideologies, in general, and of Marxism in particular. But this was also coincident with the core counter-offensive against the expectations of the 1968 world-revolution and the launching of

the Anglo-American process of neo-liberalization of the world-economy. It led to a vast political debate around some of Fanon's ideas.

Among the more confronted and discussed ideas were the ones related to the revolutionary nature of both African peasants and the marginal *lumpen* of the colonial cities *against* urban workers considered by Fanon as a "labor aristocracy"; his condemnation of the national bourgeoisies in post-colonial Africa as exploitative and ready to take the place of the colonizer; and what was read as his contention that spontaneous violence was the way out, perhaps the only way out of colonial oppression and repression.<sup>2</sup> In an article published at the time, Immanuel Wallerstein discussed those theoretical debates to end up correctly disposing of them as what he calls an often blinding "fetish of terminology" (1979: 266). He concluded with a couple of interrelated invitations to his reader: the first one is to get away from polemics and get involved into a closer analysis of social reality. The second, echoing Fanon, points to the level of liberation processes in Africa as the way to assess those ideas in debate. Fanon, he writes, "pushed us to look for who would take what risks and then asked us to build a movement out of such a revolutionary class" (Wallerstein 1979: 267).

<sup>2</sup> This point, one of the most controversial in the work of Frantz Fanon seems to have been the main inspiration, with the Cuban Revolution itself, for Che Guevara (and Régis Debray) construction of the so called "foco theory"—which failed in Latin America but not only: although less known, it failed in Africa as well (Mota Lopes: forthcoming). On the other hand, the centrality of violence in Fanon's work originated another, very different reading of his work that makes of him a "theorist of terrorism." This kind of interpretation started to appear in the sixties in France, to continue today, with particular emphasis after 9/11. Its foundation is, of course, Fanon's reflection about violence by the colonized as originating a spontaneous response against the violence of colonialism. See, as examples for this counter-insurgency type of reading, Franks 2006: *passim*; 33-34; 69; 111; and Richardson 2006: 30, 143).

### III

The movement built out of and by those who chose to take what risks existed already in the periphery. It was, to be sure, the national liberation movement. As emphasized above, we tend very often to forget that, with the partial exception of *BSWM*, the work of Frantz Fanon was produced and mostly published within the historical context of an anti-colonial armed struggle by one of the most famous liberation movements of which he was an active member: the Algerian National Liberation Front, or FNL. We tend, as well, to forget that the armed struggle against the French colonial occupation of Algeria was being waged while, at the same time, a great number of former European colonies in Africa were peacefully claiming for and were granted their national independence as part of what is usually known as decolonization.

National liberation movements appeared where and when the peaceful recognition of national independence by the European centers of colonial power was denied. Among their instruments to achieve freedom, the armed struggle constituted a last option to be used in case of the failure of all other possible, peaceful alternatives. Vietnam was, obviously, one of those cases; Algeria, in the North of Africa, was another; Southern Africa, with its complex mixture of domination by apartheid, British and Portuguese colonialism, and settler's independence, was yet another. What this means is that national liberation, the national liberation movements, and the objective of their armed struggle were *not* part of that decolonization process. Decolonization, I contend, is a core-originated and controlled process; national liberation is a process of the periphery (Mota Lopes 2005). Another important distinction is that while armed struggles of national liberation were without exception protracted struggles, often determining profound changes in those involved (their mindset, their worldviews,

and their objectives) decolonization was a peaceful and very rapid process—as quick as the political, economic, and administrative processes through which the occupation of the African continent by European colonialism took place.

It was within the parallel historical contexts of decolonization by the core and of national liberation in the periphery that Fanon's work was conceived, tested, written, and published. Basically, his work was the result of his engagement with the Algerian FLN: working as a psychiatrist in the colony and, at the same time, clandestinely as a FLN militant; and, later on, as a cadre and representative of the movement in Tunis and Accra. This is the reason why Fanon's work must be read not only as a theoretical reflection about the deep nature of colonialism as its subject matter, but also, perhaps primordially, as the result of a personal, totalizing, life experience.

Secondly, Fanon wrote to be read by his comrades of struggle within the FLN, by those outside who supported the on-going anti-colonial struggle (particularly in the French Left), and by those within Africa who were feeling the first post-colonial abuses from their own decolonized elites in power. Those political, didactic, organizational, and practical objectives were essentially destined to serve the liberation movement as a whole. They implied mobilizing objectives, that is to say, of bringing new members into the struggle, at the same time transmitting not only the hope but also the certitude of a better future. This is why his work chronicles and analyzes the experience of the armed struggle, to offer it as an example for other coetaneous or future liberation movements, and to project it into the future of the struggle, that is to say, into the independent national state. This was also the basic way Fanon was read throughout the two long decades of African antisystemic national liberation, from Algeria to Southern Africa—but with important political and practical differences and concerns.

## IV

To read Fanon's work in a non-Algerian situation of anti-colonial armed struggle means, first of all, to read it within a context very similar to the one in which it was produced. His writings give testimony, assert, propose, or discuss individual and collective experiences that often belonged not only to the writer but also to the reader. But this reading, based on a personal, sometimes pleasurable identification, had limits. Fanon was seen as an Algerian writing about his own struggle and, consequently, expressing ideas and giving testimony about situations which were historically located and specific. To his non-Algerian reader, this implied a concern that is not only very different but almost opposed to that first sense of personal identification. It consists in a position of radical criticism towards the writer and his writings. In other words, the way Fanon was read in other situations of national liberation struggle was, dominantly, a very careful, deeply analytical, and critical reading—often to the level of rejection.<sup>3</sup>

Two examples will be helpful to further elaborate some of the characteristics of this way of reading. The first one, inevitably, is related with language. As we all know the European language of the colonialist and its pathological use by the colonized is the central object of *BSWM*. In methodological terms, what Fanon does in his first important study<sup>4</sup> is to privilege language as a relational element to analyze the psychiatric, individual consequences of its daily, per-

<sup>3</sup> As Terence K. Hopkins never tired to half-jokingly tell his students, it is undeniable that contrary to academic readings, more or less physically inconsequential for their authors, a less accurate reading within the liberation movement could be passable of being punished by the fire of the enemy.

<sup>4</sup> More correctly, *BSWM* is Fanon's *second* published important work. It follows, by some months, the publication of "Le Syndrome Nord-Africain" in *L'Esprit*, February 1952.

manent imposition and utilization as a way to further characterize colonialism as generalized oppression,<sup>5</sup> its repressive nature, and its traumatic and social consequences.<sup>6</sup> This characterization of colonialism makes clear why this long essay must be primordially read as also expounding in depth the reasons why the colonized, the oppressed, the marginalized, or the repressed subaltern, has often no other solution than join other wretched of the earth to destroy the colonial situation and conquer his freedom—by all means necessary, including the use of violence. But the subject matter of *BSWM* is not, as sometimes hurriedly stated by readers in the core, the *colonial situation*. It is, rather and perhaps more importantly—and more revealingly, because usually less discussed—the *condition of the colonized* from a peripheral perspective. It is a kind of scientific, first person *narration of sufferings* located in the transition between the individual and the collective, in that complex juncture where the personal becomes social, political, cultural, and historical. It is this general characteristic that

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<sup>5</sup> This generalization of individual, psychological, individual cases into the collective or common characteristics of a whole population is, of course, problematic. To legitimize it, Fanon presents them as part of a historical, long-term, structural trajectory. He is not always convincing. This will be further discussed below. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the violence of colonialism originates serious collective psychological traumas in a colonized people. But there is very little in language, as presented by Fanon, to single it out as a major traumatic cause.

<sup>6</sup> In her excellent biography of Frantz Fanon, her personal friend and colleague, the psychiatrist Alice Cherki (2006) writes that his “pronouncements on the function of language, though significant are not the important thing” (218). She is right. But a 1995 public declaration by no other than the U. S. General Colin Powell makes one think twice about this. Asked about the reasons why a surprisingly large number of white Americans were supporting his candidacy to the U.S. Presidency, the former African-American Secretary of State explained it by saying: “I speak English reasonably well, like a white person.” Besides, he continued, visually “I ain’t that black” (Beinart 2007: 6).

makes very easy, almost immediate, the personal identification between the militant reader of *BSWM* and what his author writes in highly innovative, ground-breaking, and pioneering terms. But, at the level of the liberation movement combatant, this does not imply that the reader ceases to be critically active in his reading: on the contrary.

A major criticism often made at the leadership level of the liberation movements of the former Portuguese colonies was that the language problems denounced and discussed by Fanon concerned what historically and sociologically was no more than very small colonized minorities, those *assimilated* by the colonial system. To be sure, the great majority of the populations in the colony did not use, speak, or sufficiently understand the language of the colonizer. In relation to the Portuguese colonies, this is an obviously correct assertion as the preoccupation of speaking the language “like the Portuguese do” was, in the terms of the colonial law classifying them as such, a *sine qua non* requirement and, as such, a major, most probably traumatic preoccupation of those “assimilados.” The great majority of the population was equally submitted to the violent oppression of colonialism but that was a very different form of oppression, exercised through the guns and other weapons of the police and the military, through the whip and the “palmatória,” through the personal brutality of the colonialist, through the many ways used to obtain “forced labor” or *chibalo*. In other words, the great majority of the population under the yoke of Portuguese colonial oppression felt it directly on their bodies and souls, but not dominantly through the use of the language of the colonizer or the denial of their own mother-languages.

On the other hand, within the Southern African liberation movements, and particularly after the early 1970s, language as a problem had been relegated to a very dif-

ferent level of relative importance. In situations of struggle like those then going on in South Africa, Namibia, and today's Zimbabwe, where the great majority of the population spoke English, the language of the enemy had been universally adopted by the different liberation movements as the major language of organization, communication, and expression. A similar process happened as well in Angola and Mozambique: since the first years of preparation for the armed struggle, the dominant idea became that the colonizer's language *did not belong to him*: it was being conquered by the armed struggle and, consequently, it belonged as well to Mozambicans and to Angolans.

Moreover, language was an important feature in the construction of their national unity, identity, and international communication. Without marginalizing the many African languages spoken in both territories, the European language was assumed as a second, sometimes as a third language by the liberation movement. In addition, it was designated as the official language of the future, independent country. In other words, the colonial language was transformed into an instrument of liberation because the direct confrontation with the Portuguese forces of repression destroyed its oppressive, colonialist nature. As such, and particularly in Mozambique, the Portuguese language started to be taught within the military bases of the liberation movement and in the schools of the liberated areas controlled by it. It also became not only the major language of communication, but also the language of poetic and literary expression. This led to a historically ironic situation: never the Portuguese language was so widely spoken, understood, read, and written in Mozambique as it was *after* the beginning of the anti-colonial liberation struggle against Portugal.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, a closer reading of Fanon shows us that despite the importance he allocates to language, he is also very much concerned, as I

will emphasize below, with the culture, history, individual and collective survival of the colonized, as well as with anti-colonialist resistance in all its forms and as determined, construed, and usually transformed in their confrontation with the daily violence of colonialism.

If language is one of the main themes discussed by Fanon, violence, in its relation to liberation, is perhaps *the* most important question addressed by him. It is also the most controversial, the most distorted, and the least understood of his operative concepts. Historically, it constitutes as well the single most important issue around which the criticism within non-Algerian liberation movements seems sometimes to approach the political rupture with the Algerian militant and author. One reason for this, to a certain extent complementing what was said above about language, is that Fanon tends to collapse into a single meaning what are two very different forms of violence: that of the traumatized colonized individual, and that of the national liberation movement.

To be sure, anti-colonial armed struggle, the collective violence of the liberation movement, is not the sum total of the individual violence of some of its members or combatants. Both in its role and in its objectives the armed struggle is obviously a very different kind of liberatory action. Secondly and directly contradicting the idea that spontaneous violence was the major condition for the conquest of national independence, the liberation movements in Southern Africa soon assumed the idea that spontaneous action was easily confronted by the armed forces of the colonial or apartheid regimes—leading to various massa-

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<sup>7</sup> Both in Mozambique and in Angola, this process continued after independence. It was, however, slowed down in the last ten years due to the South African fomented civil wars in both countries and to the IMF/WB imposition of neo-liberal programs of structural adjustment in Mozambique.

cles of thousands of innocent men, women, and children in the region. Finally, and because easily confronted and neutralized, “spontaneous violence” tended to become part of the counter-insurgency arsenal used by the colonial enemy: by fomenting and controlling actions of pseudo-spontaneous violence in order to violently neutralize them, colonialism was able to create strong deterrents (“exemplary actions,” in the lingo of their Special Forces) against the effective or potential activity of the liberation movement.

Moreover, in the perspective of liberation, armed struggle was *the last instance* in the struggle for national independence—not its beginning: it would be declared and started only after and when all the peaceful means of national and international dialogue, pressure, and contact with the colonial power had been exhausted. While those other means were being used, at all different levels of eventual communication with the colonial power, the anti-colonial armed struggle in the different colonies and other occupied territories of Southern Africa was also being carefully prepared, in geo-strategic, political, ideological, and military terms. This was done during relatively long periods of time—until the massacre of Sharpeville, in the case of the ANC, for more than two years in the case of FRELIMO, etc. What this also means is that the liberation movement was *not* specifically created as an instrument of violence, that is to say, its primordial objective was not to confront militarily the enemy. But it means as well that since the formation of the liberation movement, violence, under the form of militarized, anti-colonial armed struggle, was one of the means at its disposal. This was the reason why the military training of the combatants of the liberation armed forces included their political and ideological preparation through courses carefully programmed and taught to all its combatants and cadres at all and every level of the hierarchy of the movement.

Finally, in the perspective of the liberation movements, armed struggle was considered as being *the opposite* of spontaneous violence. Samora Machel, the leader of the liberation movement in Mozambique, was very clear about this: “spontaneous violence underestimates the enemy,” he wrote, before adding: “[To] believe that a few terrorist actions would be enough to persuade the enemy to give in... was in effect in opposition to the principle of people’s armed struggle, since it implied that the struggle should be launched immediately without any prior mobilization of the masses, without any preparation of cadres to guide and lead the process” (Machel 1985: 40).<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, these ideas imply a different, more precise definition of the enemy than the one we find in Fanon’s writings. On the one hand, at the level of the Southern African liberation movements, the enemy soon started to be defined in terms of the colonial system itself and of those defending it, not at the level of the individual. On the other hand, these ideas about the role of violence and on the definition of the enemy were assumed more than ten years after Fanon’s death. They result, obviously, from the theoretical, ethical, and ideological advancement of the ideas defended and practiced by the liberation movements in the following decade of struggle and, consequently, they could not be present in his work. But they are not, as well, totally absent. If we read Fanon as he deserves to be read, that is to say, closely, we have to conclude, against often hurried readings, that

<sup>8</sup> In a personal interview, Samora Machel told me that during the armed struggle for the liberation of Mozambique the potential combatant had first to be instructed about the reasons of his or her future task: “the combatant using a gun without knowing why in political terms, without knowing who the enemy was, and who, what, and how he was fighting,” he said, “was not a freedom fighter: he would be no more than a criminal, a common murderer without place in our struggle” (Mota Lopes 1974). This was a basic principle, often repeated within the liberation movement.

many of the ideas about the liberatory role of spontaneous violence have a fluid, changing form in the intellectual trajectory of his writings. This is natural: the Fanon who in 1952 published *BSWM* was not the same Fanon writing the *Wretched of the Earth* (*WE*) at the end of that same decade. His conceptions were in a quick process of change, becoming more precise, more effective, less emotional. Many of the ideas of *WE* are present in *BSWM* but the two books are not the same—just like the young psychiatrist finishing his studies and starting to work in Algeria in the early 1950s was not, or was not yet, the militant of the FLN at the end of that same decade. Besides, Fanon died two or three days before being able to correct and probably edit the first printed proofs of *WE*. Had he been able to do it and many of the contradictions, repetitions, ambiguities, vaguenesses, and imprecisions so easily detected in its pages (but usually as well not taken into account by readers within the core) would most probably have disappeared.

In particular, it is obvious that his conceptualization of violence as an instrument of liberation had evolved into new forms. Just like in *BSWM*, violence is in *WE* a central element of his political reasoning. But with an important addition: in some pages of *WE*, not all of them, he talks about it as armed struggle, as a process of liberation extended in time and transforming those who are involved in it. In many passages, *spontaneous violence* becomes “*violence organized and educated by its leaders*.” And, as such, it becomes a way to “make possible for the masses to understand social truths [as it] give[s] the key to them.” Contrasting this with then already well-known instances and situations of African decolonization he adds: “Without that struggle, without that knowledge of the practice of action, there is nothing but a fancy-dress parade and the blare of the trumpets. There is nothing save... a few reforms at the top, a flag waving; and down there, at the bottom an

undifferentiated mass, still living in the middle ages, endlessly marking time” (1964: 117-8). Moreover, violence continues to be for Fanon the only solution against the violence of colonialism—as it was in the specific case of Algeria. But he also admits, reflecting important changes in his reasoning, that “[t]here are other peoples and other directions” and that “[w]e know for sure today that in Algeria the test of force was inevitable. But other countries through political action and through the work of clarification undertaken by a party have led their people to the same results” (1964: 154).

What I am emphasizing here is the need to re-read Fanon not only critically, as within the liberation movements, but also as a work in progress, often incomplete, ambiguous, and contradictory in many passages—not forgetting the fact that with his work Fanon opened up new roads, new perspectives, new areas of reflection that had not yet been attempted, not only within the core but also, even less, in the colonized periphery. Among those roads and perspectives, and despite the fact that it is rarely if ever mentioned, I would say that his suggestion about the need to confront Eurocentrism, the unconscious conditioning exerted by the hegemonic Anglo-American intellectual tradition, pseudo-universalism, and structures of knowledge, was perhaps the most important.

## V

Eurocentrism, not the Cartesian good-sense, is the thing in our world which is better and more equally distributed by everybody and everywhere. With very small localized exceptions it dominates today individual and collective consciousnesses within the core of the modern world-system, and in most of its semi-periphery and periphery, without distinctions of race, class, or gender. Basically, Eurocentrism

can be defined as the conscious or, usually, unconscious collective and individual intellectual processes through which European cultural, political, economic, religious and philosophical assumptions, concepts, structures of knowledge, and values (today also designated as Euro-American) are considered or tend to be construed and assumed as *the* normal, *the* natural, or *the* universal—that is to say, as being intellectually and practically superior to all other assumptions, values, and concepts still more or less surviving in the modern world-system.

As a long-term historical process, Eurocentrism is intrinsic to the development and global expansion of the capitalist world-economy and its structures of power and accumulation. As Arif Dirlik correctly points out, “without the power of capitalism and all the structural innovations that accompanied it in political, social, and cultural organization, Eurocentrism might have been just another ethnocentrism” (Dirlik et al. 2000: 33). Besides conditioning all our forms of knowledge, Eurocentrism is also expressed through the so called universality of canonic literature, the perspective of the victor in the dominant historical interpretations, the division of the world between civilized and primitive cultures, the expansionist assumptions and practices of Christianity with its missions and propagation of the faith, the assumed superiority of Western science, including social science, cartography, art, and numerous other cultural and social practices (Ashcroft et al. 1998: 93). This is historically true in the core as it is true, as the result of a more or less violent “cultural imposition” or through simple adoption and influence, in the periphery, semi-periphery, and the different diasporas of the world-economy.

Edward Said, one of the rare scholars who extensively studied Eurocentrism concluded that it is more than an expression of superiority of the west: it tends to destroy, distort, and irreversibly change other cul-

tures into a new culture. It is, he wrote, “the western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority” over the rest of the world (Said 1978). This is why Eurocentrism continues to be dominantly present not only in our individual and collective everyday practices, but also in the theoretical questioning, methodologies, approaches, concepts, categories, theoretical contexts, fields, and research strategies of the dominant forms of thought of the modern world-system. At the level of the individual, Eurocentrism can be described, as Fanon does, as being a usually unconscious set of central conceptions, ideas, images, values, and *topoi* which structure our world-historical knowledge and social interrelationship according to equally built-in notions of truth, objectivity, and reality. When and if detected, these notions tend to be wrongly described as if they were claims of universal validity—and they are accepted as such without any kind of further epistemological questioning. In other words, Eurocentrism is dominant and permanent not only because it serves and consolidates the dominant power of the capitalist world-system—namely today through the so-called neo-liberal economic projects of structural adjustment and their global imposition—but also because it is universally accepted and allowed to influence without questioning.

What is exemplary in the work of Frantz Fanon is that he is very much aware of that influence, of its highly detrimental consequences, and he does not accept them. This is the origin of what will be here discussed as being one of the most striking features in Fanon’s work, as impressive as his multifaceted characterization of colonialism as a violent, traumatic form of interrelationship between the European core and the periphery: the way he recognized and confronted, in his work, the pernicious, distorting, blinding effects of the European cultural hegemony or Euro-centrist intellectual tradition. To do so, I contend, he

constructed and followed an original and methodologically innovative strategy of research without which this type of understanding of colonialism and liberation would not have been possible. I will try below to synthesize them in three or four basic points.

In the first place, Fanon assumed fully, professionally, what can be described as his own perspective of social psychiatry. The individual, the traumatized “colonized” (but also the “colonizer”) is his object of observation (and eventual healing) not only through his or her general behavior, including introspection, but, also, through his/her language, through the way the patient learned (by imposition or by imposing it) and now speaks or expresses him/herself with the language of the colonizer. This approach originates some of the more impressive pages of *BSWM*. They can be read as expressing a *vertical*, in depth descent into the mind and consciousness of the oppressed. To a great extent, this descent reverses the trajectory followed, for instance, by John Searle who tries “to climb up the levels from mind to language and social reality generally” (Searle 1998: ix). On the contrary, Fanon “goes” from the language and the violent social reality of colonialism towards the individual mind. What he finds there is the dominant weight of a massive psycho-existential complex and the anomalies of affect responsible for its structure and influence (1952: 10). He finds also that the inferiority complex of the colonized has its correspondence in the superiority complex of the colonizer. In the depths of the human mind, he finds, in short, a pervasive, ever-present, interrelated, traumatic psychosis only possible of being solved (healed) through violence. For him, this constitutes a universal, systemic, structural characteristic.

Secondly, Fanon tries to root his psychological approach in time, in history, but not only: “Ideally,” he adds, “the present will always contribute to the building of the

future” (1952: 12-3). Looking back in time, he points out the centuries of incomprehension that, in the juxtaposition of white and black races, have created that “massive psycho-existential complex.” This represents as well, he points out, not only the “failure of Europe” but also the need “for a new Humanism.” But he looks also towards another future: by analyzing that complex he wants “to destroy it” (1952: 12). To a great extent, what Fanon does is to establish a *longue durée*, historical, *horizontal* trajectory that permits his generalization of psychiatric, individual cases to the whole of society—at the same time projecting itself into better, more just, more humanistic and equalitarian possible futures.

Thirdly, Fanon assumes his subject matter, colonialism and its violence, in relational terms. What this means is that he does not assume the perspective of the victim—he correctly considers negritude and Afro-centrism as avatars of Anglo-American universalism—as he obviously does not assume the position of European modernity that collapses or hides expansion, violence, and racism with the mirage of progress and civilization. To a great extent, he keeps firmly in view and discusses both realities as if they were (as they indeed are) a single one related in his study of them through language, the language (as well as the culture, the history, the existence, and the violence) of the colonizer imposed and destroying as inferior the language (as well as, the culture, the history, the existence, but also the self and the liberty) of the colonized. Fanon’s approach is a multidimensional approach that destabilizes Eurocentrism by frontally refusing what Ashcroft (1998: 92) calls the authoritative interpretations of Euro-centric conceptions and practices of History, written from the point of view of the victors, that is to say, of colonialism.

Finally, and perhaps as importantly, Fanon is quite aware that in his own mind, education, culture, and experience of life,

he was also deeply affected not only by Eurocentrism but also by the psycho-social, existential complex of the colonized. He finds them inside himself, particularly the former, always ready to distort his statements, the way he frames the result of his analytical research, his conclusions. These are the reasons why he raises what he calls his “antennae” (1952: 32-3; 172; 191) to confront them.

Sometimes, these antenna with which, he tells us, “I touch and I am touched,” collapse. With anguish, with horror, he then feels that he tends to become condescending and recognizes in himself “the stigmata of a dereliction in my relations with other people” (1952: 33). In a different passage he also tells us how “archetypes belonging to the European” are easily taken over by the “collective unconscious” of the oppressed. It happens to him, his own consciousness is often taken over by those archetypes: “I too am guilty,” he explodes: “There is no help for it: I am a white man. For unconsciously I distrust what is black in me, that is, the whole of my being” (1952: 191).

Simultaneously, Fanon fights here another, radically different and probably even more difficult combat. It was Dipesh Chakrabarty who first called our attention to it: his combat to “hold on to the Enlightenment idea of the human even when he knew that European imperialism had reduced that idea to the figure of the settler-colonial white man” (Chakrabarty 2000: 5). This is important at two levels.

According to the first one, and as it is obvious in his work, Fanon was able to carefully distinguish inside the dominant and repressive legacy of historical Eurocentrism what is or is not important both to the understanding of the present and to the construction of possible futures. In doing so, he becomes aware of ways and means of empowerment within Eurocentrism (for instance in his professional condition of psychiatrist) and that it is possible to use Eurocentrism against or to denounce Euro-

centrism.

Secondly, and with that objective, Fanon is able to avoid the simplistic dichotomies to which so many authors have lazily reduced this question: to be or not to be against reason; to be or not to be against Enlightenment; to be or not to be against modernity and its Euro-centric intellectual tradition; to be or not to be a victim. Rather and as already pointed out, Fanon assumes the existence of a common, relational history in which the either-or of the easy dichotomies is substituted by a single, long-term, structural trajectory. And it is in that trajectory that he finds starting points capable of offering critical approaches and alternatives to Eurocentrism as an intrinsic part of world-systemic, global, structures of power. In such a protracted struggle, and perhaps as in all liberation struggles, there is no doubt about how difficult it is to keep away or, at least, under control in our consciousness the heavy, usually unconscious, lurking influence of Eurocentrism.

But, without this effort, the study of our subject matter (as the success of the struggle) will always be incomplete, distorted, manipulated. In other words, without it we will not be able to understand our social reality, the social reality of the modern world-system, and, eventually, to change it. This is what Fanon taught us and, for a better understanding of our world, this is what we can learn with Fanon.

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