



Fanon: Violence and the Search for Human Dignity

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Abstract: Fanon informs us that interdependence in economics, politics, ethics, or aesthetics (and/or the social institutions with which they are associated) encompasses the interdependence of psyches in the form of confrontations, threats, forbearances, negotiations, accommodations, control, and domination, as persons and groups of persons seek to influence the conduct and shape the social being of others. Today, global and sub-global interdependence is often neither based on reciprocity nor equality. Rather, what one generally finds in the multiplicities of continuing and new (sometimes, instantaneous) connections, is a system of non-reciprocal, imposed interdependence, where one's peace is another's subjugation, one's wealth another's poverty, one's enlightenment is another's ignorance, and where one's winning and thriving are another's losing and suffering. Oppression, which he saw in all of human history, had a trajectory, however. That trajectory is, as he saw it, one of increasing human social consciousness and, thus, one that is against the indefinite extension of oppression. Aligning himself with this history/trajectory, he sought not only to inform that consciousness but also to see if he could thereby help human beings to co-create systems of human encounters that are non-oppressive, reciprocally beneficial, and mutually nurturing of human development. Such a co-created system could (and can) only be realized if human dignity is acknowledged and made operational. He therefore called for a struggle to effect a "radical mutation of consciousness," the pursuit of political education. A university is a proper forum within which one should extend the political education to which Fanon invites us.

Part of the vocabulary of current discourses on inter-societal and inter-national, as well trans-societal and trans-national relations is the idea of *interdependence*. One finds it on the lips of almost everyone.

The term, as used in some quarters, is employed to denote the absence of self-sufficiency. So, as we saw recently, the sudden decline in stock markets in China had reverberating repercussions throughout the world. Or, an escalation in a civil conflict in

Nigeria sent oil prices soaring, globally, and the perceived dishonor visited on a religious symbol in Denmark and Germany elicited riotous uprising throughout the international system. Some use the term to designate certain kinds of reciprocal relationships. The term is also used in an ecological sense, touching not so much on the absence of something—self-sufficiency—but more so bespeaking the network of natural and artificial constitutions within

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which all phenomena appear to live and move and have their being. So, from those employing all three meanings just stated, one hears discussions concerning economics, public health, history, travel, tectonic plates, terrorism, wars, food, and carbon emissions.

Fanon, who embraced all three of the meanings mentioned above, informs us that interdependence in economics, politics, ethics, or aesthetics (and/or the social institutions with which they are associated) encompasses the interdependence of psyches in the form of confrontations, threats, forbearances, negotiations, accommodations, control, and domination, as persons and groups of persons seek to influence the conduct and shape the social being of others. Today, global and sub-global interdependence is often neither based on reciprocity nor equality. Rather, what one generally finds in the multiplicities of continuing and new (sometimes, instantaneous) connections, is a system of non-reciprocal, imposed interdependence, where one's peace is another's subjugation, one's wealth another's poverty, one's enlightenment is another's ignorance, and where one's winning and thriving are another's losing and suffering.¹

This was the world in which Fanon found himself, with domination rationalized in every form, including fields of learning and culture—in novels, in plays, in music, in politics, psychology, history, philosophy, and in religion. Oppression, which he saw in all of human history, had a trajectory, however. That trajectory is, as he saw it, one of increasing human social consciousness and, thus, one that is against the indefinite extension of oppression. Aligning himself with this history/trajectory, he sought not only to inform that conscious-

ness but also to see if he could thereby help human beings to co-create systems of human encounters that are non-oppressive, reciprocally beneficial, and mutually nurturing of human development. Such a co-created system could (and can) only be realized if human dignity is acknowledged and made operational.

At the heart of human dignity is the concept of the spiritual and moral equality of all human beings; and with it, the right to self-willed and self-chosen, co-created modes of living and being. So, domination, he claimed, is contrary to that dignity, since domination has at the axis of its operation the moral and spiritual inequality of human beings, despite the rationalizations, previously mentioned, to the contrary. Associated with that "axis of operation" is a most damaging feature—one which facilitates and in most cases makes possible the very rationalizations referred to. That feature is indirect violence or what has come to be called "structural violence."

The late Thomas Merton, who reflected and wrote eloquently about this type of violence, aptly captured Fanon when he (Merton) wrote about *oppressive power* that is so well established that it does not have to resort openly to the "method of the beast," because its laws and other institutions are already powerful enough. In other words, when a *system* can, without the use of overt force, compel people to live in "conditions of abjection, helplessness [and] wretchedness...[those conditions] are violent."²

It is this condition, this system of violence—although we are not here overlooking direct violence, such as force, which is so often resorted to because its indirect counterpart legitimizes it—that is used to construct the "other," and in that construction, makes him or her an instrument of another's will, belittles and demeans him or

¹ Hussein A. Bulhan, *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression*, (New York: Plenum Press, 1985), pp. 37-38. See also, Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 1968).

² T. Merton, *Faith and Violence*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 7-8.

her being, causes him or her to betray friends, to betray oneself, to doubt one's worth, and, thus, in the final analysis, to live with a self one cannot approve. This, to Fanon, is violence against personhood, against one's identity as a human being, against human dignity.

At its most elemental level (and hence the inherent danger it poses) domination and oppressive power—whether seen in the colonial setting, in gender relations, in social class divisions, in racial or ethnic subjugation—denies a basic human need, a need which all seek to have fulfilled, even in the most dire wretchedness. It is the need, in encounters with others, to experience reciprocal recognition, to have others affirm our being as humans. The subjects of oppressive power continuously seek and get that recognition; the objects of that power are denied it. So, Fanon accepted that overt violence might be necessary to gain that affirmation. To the extent that such overt violence (including force) becomes necessary and is used to gain that recognition, Fanon saw that the oppressed could become the new oppressor, with overt violence assuming almost an indefinite office in the human affairs. Indeed, like a prophet, he saw what was to develop in the postcolonial world.

He therefore called for a struggle to effect a “radical mutation of consciousness,”³ the pursuit of political education. The structure of this education would consist of a number of things, including announcing the death of the “great man” theory of history, and substituting in its stead the co-responsibility of the masses of people everywhere; rejecting Europe “as leader”—not its people or because of its humanism, but because its intellectuals, its workers, and its political leaders on whose shoulders the spirit and promise of that humanism

had rested, have failed—especially in their implicit and other support of domination; that structure should also consist in breaking and destroying the narcissism of nationalism; in radically uprooting the so-called superior virtues of the oppressed; and in socializing all human being into a new sisterhood of all, an ethic of care, and an inter-subjective, mutually reinforcing pursuit of an organic development for human beings, based on a common universal consciousness of our humanity and our primary identity as humans.

A university is a proper forum within which one should extend the political education to which Fanon invites us. So, it is particularly fitting that you should have chosen Umass Boston as the site of this meeting, a campus that houses a cross-section of the human family. Welcome to the campus, welcome to a discourse on a thinker who offers us some promise out of our continuing structures of oppressions, and on a human being who, like a great tree which, even after its falling, opens for us a clearer view of things. Fanon offers us a clearer view of human oppression, consciousness, and the possibility of human emancipation.

³ Nigel C. Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination*, (Cambridge Polity Press, 2003). p. 10