

# **Frantz Fanon as the theorist of the political subject: An essay**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In political and historical literature, decolonization is seen mostly as a process. Therefore, the question is forgotten: who decolonizes? Or what is decolonized? The issue of the subject—once colonized and now to be decolonized—is thus absent. A question needs to be raised in the necessary discussion: Are we speaking of the nation now being decolonized, or are we thinking of the political subject beyond the nationalist framework? This is not a purely speculative question. How we look at nationalist power and political strategies is an intrinsic part of the discussion. Besides several other reasons, this will be the justification to study Fanon once more.

## **Fanon and the postcolonial time**

In effect, between a relationship of power and a strategy of struggle there is a reciprocal appeal, a perpetual linking and a perpetual reversal. At every moment the relationship of power may become a confrontation between two adversaries. Equally, the relationship between adversaries in society may, at every moment, give place to the putting into operation of mechanisms of power. The consequence of this instability is the ability to decipher the same events and the same transformations either from inside the history of struggle or from the standpoint of the power relationships. The interpretations which result will not consist of the same elements of meaning or the same links or the same types of intelligibility, although they refer to the same historical fabric, and each of the two analyses must have reference to the other. In fact, it is precisely the disparities between the two readings which make visible those fundamental phenomena of “domination” which are present in a large number of human societies (Foucault, 1982:208).

Let me begin with a brief personal note—flimsy and common in an ex-colonial country, but that will be its reason. I first heard the name Frantz Fanon in the mid-1960s when we had just started learning the art of throwing stones at the police, taking shelter in the small bylanes of Kolkata as we ran away from the tear gas shells whirling at our feet, escaping lathi charges and bullets of the armed constabulary, erecting barricades with various street artifacts, and scribbling and painting eye-catching slogans on walls, and on banners and posters to be hung at noticeable points, and, of course, in order to do so, learning to scale walls and mount the rooftops. I was told Frantz Fanon was an African revolutionary, but he was an extremist, and he preached violence as a remedy of all occasions. The party leaders grimly told us that to be Fanonist was being an “ultra”—which meant being careless about patient mass work, particularly work among the peasantry, careless about the consequences of violence, and preaching “total revolution.” We were to be good Maoists, and figures like Che or Fanon were inappropriate as role models. After a while, I found myself arriving at the state guesthouse along with others for what turned out to be rather long stays, and it was there that for the first time I saw a book by Fanon brought in by somebody, the book’s name: *The Wretched of the Earth*. It was the closing year of the sixties of the last century. I read it quickly; it did not seem a particularly difficult book. As a teenager I was too innocent to understand the background or the nuances. Yes, some of the phrases seemed unfamiliar, smelling of a different climate, certain expressions sounded alien, but it was a clearly a manifesto. And as all manifestos are, it was argumentative yet decisive and clear; it employed rhetoric with skill to persuade the reader; it was dialogic yet categorical. Above all, as a manifesto should be, it was unapologetic. All the dense commentaries that came to my notice years later were simply inconceivable for me at that time. It was politics, radical and communist politics, in an anti-colonial setting—that was all. I was rather intrigued as to why our leaders were so cautious about Frantz Fanon, and what there was in the book to make their faces dark as soon as they would find a group of youth and student activists reading Fanon in closed rooms or at the numerous reading clubs of those days.

Fanon’s books were never banned in India. Years later, in the late 1970s, I came to read more of his writings—here and there, in essays, compilations and discussions. But Fanon was known most by his last work. Also, I found interest in him had subsided by that time, and inquiries about his other writings and his life produced little results. However, in the past decade—thanks to postcolonial studies, cultural studies, race studies, poststructural studies and other post-studies, as well as the efforts of English language and literature professors—the name of Fanon began to be heard again in the universities; his books can be found now, and he is discussed again. Yet in this return, something has been missing—the *political*, by which I mean relevance, context, strategy and the concentrated madness about revolts and the possibilities of revolution. Algeria was again in bloodbath,

meanwhile globalization ushered in neo-colonialism or, as some say, re-colonization, people began dying in the same way Fanon had described, racist politics emerged in the name of controlling terror and preventing the migrant carriers of terror from entering the homes of democracy, national chauvinism was now on the rise, and the desire for a new type of internationalism that Fanon symbolized also emerged roughly around the same time. All this is very recent history. In short, we have a remarkable similarity of the two situations—the fifties of the last century and our time now; the process of decolonization then and its need now; the emergence of the political subject in the colonies that Fanon reflected in his writings and the ever more loud reverberations today of the emergence of the postcolonial political subject. Characteristically, this decline and reappearance of Fanon coincide with the weakening of socialist and communist politics worldwide, the eventual collapse of official socialism and the resurgence of anti-imperialism in the last few years. We may not be living under conditions of Hardt and Negri's (2001, 2004) diffused empire, or we may not be exactly the multitude they speak of, but certainly the anti-empire is shaping up in front of our eyes, enveloping all the phenomena in this material world.<sup>1</sup>

### **How is Fanon to be politically read?**

The claim of this observation does not lie purely in the context. I strongly feel that the recommencement of Fanon studies for various reasons, which I shall touch upon in the course of this essay, has taken little note of him as a theorist of the political subject of the modern world, particularly the colonial and the postcolonial world. Fanon simply is an exceptional figure from this point; his ideas go straight into the heart of the matter. The works of Mao and Che are the only two other figures that come to mind whenever we speak of theorizing the postcolonial political subject. Can one think of anything else than the political subject when reading Franz Fanon today? His life, always appearing before our eyes as a succession of passing shots from one experience that must end and break into another, is the story of the emergence of the political subject in the most material or physical sense of the term. *Experience*, that word associated with the physicality of life and sneered at and hated by the thinkers, was the key word of his writings. The colonized experience colonialism, the blacks suffer racism, the oppressed are victims of oppression, an entire continent remains the victim of domination and occupation—as if Franz Fanon wanted to say: all these consist of the other side of “bleaching.” The mask, face, torture, killings, veil, occupation, liberation, ecstasy—all these are matters of the body; they constitute the physicality of political life. Either you bleach them white by refusing to believe, secluding, excluding, expelling, exterminating and covering your life of the nasty things (that is how you bleach them), or you must

face up and do the reverse, that is to say, bring out in the open what is being bleached and try to remake the world on the basis of this experience—the experience of division, and more important, this perpetual act of bleaching as the strategy of racist and colonial domination. In this fantastic act of transference, Fanon was suggesting, we are becoming political. In *Black Skin, White Masks* we read that being colonized by a language has larger implications for one's consciousness: "To speak...means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (1967:17), to take the burden of another collective consciousness. Fanon, I suggest, did not teach us: What is colonialism? Or what is occupation? But, rather, how do we decolonize? How do we cleanse ourselves of centuries of occupation of our homes, bodies and selves? This was the mark of an agenda of the political subject. Fanon compels this return even today, or more than ever today, when neo-colonialism combined with globalization and neo-liberalism persuade us to forget politics altogether—either in the name of cultural studies (or postcolonial studies) or in the name of commerce, economy and intellectual rights.

But, of course, Frantz Fanon is the best help against all such attempts to break him into early Fanon and late Fanon, and play the cultural game. For the character of the manifesto remains from the first to last. *Black Skin, White Masks* begin with these words,

The explosion will not happen today. It is too soon...or too late.  
I do not come with timeless truths.  
My consciousness is not illuminated with ultimate radiances.  
Nevertheless, in complete composure, I think it would be good if certain things were said (1967:7).

And years later, on the verge of death, he ends his writings with these words,

Come, then, comrades; it would be as well to decide at once to change our ways.... Let us waste no time in sterile litanies and nauseating mimicry. Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe.... Come, then, comrades, the European game has finally ended; we must find something different.... The Third World today faces Europe like a colossal mass whose aim should be to try to resolve the problems to which Europe has not been able to find the answers.... No, there is no question of a return to Nature. It is simply a very concrete question of not dragging men toward mutilation, of not imposing upon the brain rhythms which very quickly obliterate it and wreck it.... If we want to turn Africa into a new Europe, and America into a new Europe

then let us leave the destiny of our countries to Europeans. They will know how to do it better than the most gifted among us.

But if we want humanity to advance a step farther, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries. If we wish to live up to our peoples' expectations, we must seek the response elsewhere than in Europe (Fanon, 1963:311–316).

But, of course, a passive depoliticized reading of Fanon would be scandalized at this suggestion. Stuart Hall could not even suppress his annoyance at these words, and blurted out—and I am sure Fanon would have laughed, were he alive today, at hearing Stuart Hall—that all these words of revolutionary politics were “incendiary Third Worldism” and that we should better recognize Fanon as a major figure in psychoanalytic theory than a revolutionist (Hall, 1996:15).<sup>2</sup> The *fact of blackness* can be erased not by anti-colonial revolutions and social-political revolutions in both the colonial and the colonized countries, but by cultural analysis, campus Marxism and an ever-increasing academic refinement of psychoanalysis. And, of course, whom is Hall defending here? Homi Bhabha, his way of *locating culture*, his invention of the method by which the poststructural and the postcolonial can be merged, placing Frantz Fanon in a psychoanalytical frame and claiming this framing as an instance of the “postcolonial prerogative” (Bhabha, 1994b:40–65). We shall have occasion to interrogate Bhabha as to why he chose not to address the fact that Fanon wanted in a particular sense to end identity, which stands as a mark of inequalities and oppression; but let us take note of the fact here that Bhabha's reading of Fanon in the mid-1990s is the high water mark of the culturalist turn and was influential for some time, though Bhabha changed his position somewhat a decade later when he wrote a new preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*. After all, the word “colonial” must mean something.... But let us wait for all that a little.

### **The discovery of the anti-colonial political subject**

Let us go further along the line of learning from the political Fanon, whose lines from his first treatise to the last are bound by one thread—namely, the *discovery of the anti-colonial political subject, and the manifesto for action*. The question for the political subject in the aftermath of World War II, as decolonization began, was this: how to turn an understanding of colonialism, which the colonized had gathered through long years and centuries of experience—therefore a specific understanding—into a strategy to decolonize. And further, how can the colonial subjects turn this specific experience into something universal, namely freedom and

emancipation, and thus turn the experience of colonialism into a *concrete universal*? We find Fanon repeatedly gesturing this transference—by turning Senegal into Martinique, Martinique into colored immigrants of Paris or Lyons, the colored immigrants of Paris or Lyons into Algeria, black skin into white mask, white mask into black skin, Algeria into Africa, death into emancipation, and the concrete into the universal. This is the sign of the emergence of the political subject, whose destiny is to turn concrete actions into something transcendental. Politics, of course, does it by two means: by discovering its foundations that make politics possible, and by destroying or transforming those foundations as a result of which politics itself becomes impossible, whence “im-politics” must give way to the search for new foundations. In Fanon we have this interplay of metaphysics and physicality, enunciation of politics and its limits, and the effort to transgress those limits. Fanon represents the strength of the constituent power of the anti-colonial revolution. He also represents this power at its clearest, most awesome and fearful moment, after which the denouement must come. This constituent power rests, as it has always been in the history of revolutions and great changes, on the realization and hence the despair of the fundamental disjuncture between the colonized person’s consciousness and his/her body—a fundamental condition of alienation, which modernity has brought about. The insistence that Fanon carried was that the “white” depended for its stability on its negation, the “black.” And since neither existed without the other, and both came into being at the moment of imperial conquest, the task was to create a rupture in the historically bound politico-cultural systems that perpetuated in the form of colonial domination and age. Therefore violence purifies, destroying not only the category of white, but that of black, too. This is the insurgent moment when the fury of the constituent power must destroy the foundations of the system that had in the first place given birth to the constituent power.

Yet why was not Fanon considered a theorist of the revolution, of constituent power? The fact is that, as there are bourgeois and proletarian versions of social change, and as all phenomena can have their “white” and “black” versions, similarly the received histories of revolutions have their white and black versions. Accordingly, the English, the French, the American, the Italian, the Russian and so on all had their revolutions, but the blacks and browns did not. The white had great ideologies of revolution; the rest did not. Thus the anti-colonial or Third World did not have great changes; they had only political independence. The white’s revolutions were successful, thus the white democracies are all results of those revolutions and not the deficits or negations of those revolutions, while the process of decolonization did not usher in great changes. It is in this background of enormous arrogance that we have to understand Euro-Marxism’s or Euro-Communism’s—and Stuart Hall’s essay is a perfect illustration—dismissive attitude toward political writings and manifestos originating from the Third World. Thus, anti-colonial changes do not need, according to this *white mythology*, their

constituent power; that power need not accelerate, mutate. All that the discourses of these changes can do is lament over failed revolutions, for, after all, they are the precursors of “failed states.” We are confronted here with not only the issue of imperial foundations (see Maier, 2006:pt. I), but also with that of the foundations of anti-colonial revolutions, which mark Fanon’s writings and which we are now being desperately told to forget.

What I would like to tell here is that there are some gross methodological problems that result in these reifications (of Fanon, of revolutions), which may appear somewhat enigmatic. You may think they are so obvious, they should not have happened.

The first problem is historical. We may ask how the subject of the anti-colonial revolutions could become objects of knowledge in the West, in the academic campuses and for a wide variety of scholarly journals. We can say that certain academic practices, which Fanon too had hinted at in his lifetime, have engendered domains of knowledge that not only bring new objects, new concepts and new techniques to light, but also give rise to totally new forms of subjects and subjects of knowledge, which have relation to history but only in a surreal way. The object of knowledge itself, as we can see, has a history; and this history is now overwhelmed with another history: the history of an academic discipline. Thus, certain knowledge of racism, colonialism, culture and so forth was formed in the last quarter of the last century—certain knowledge that now erases the knowledge of (making) revolutions.

The second problem springs from the excess of what which might be called discourse analysis. A few decades ago this was fine. Language held the key to poetry, literature, philosophy and discourse in general. Now we must understand discourse as a game, a strategic game in action, steps of evading, counter-attacking, etc., as parts of a strategy. Fanon’s writings are moves in a struggle, polemical tracts, manifestos. At the same time, the cultural studies, too, form a discourse that is a part of a wider game.

The final methodological problem lies in the way the theory of the subject is now being studied and modified. It is mainly through “cultural practices” (whatever that means) that we assume that the subject is profoundly renewed. Yet in these studies that carry the baggage of confusion in Western philosophy between the subject and the self, we have only theories of knowledges (of self and other) and not actions and practices. In the process, the materiality of the emergence of the political subject is lost—the subject that emerges not through thoughts but through contentious actions. The theory of the subject has remained very philosophical, and with its influence, the only history that this theory can do is a history of representations—“representation as the point of origin,” whence knowledge became possible and truth appeared. What is lost in this epistemology is the way in which a subject constitutes itself within history and acts on that history. That is the clue to the journey Frantz Fanon made from *Black Skin, White Masks* to *The Wretched of*

*the Earth*. That journey is a radical critique of the theory of the self. This critique is based on the notion of autonomy that the political subject claims by taking up politics against identity, the autonomy that the subject gains through revolutionary practices. The knowledge of practice and actions tells us who did what, under what conditions, and at what moment, what were the impediments, the enemies and so on. This knowledge has, of course, helped through centuries the political, juridical and penal ways to curb the space of the subject. But the foundations of politics intransigently veer toward autonomy notwithstanding the severe defeats politics at times suffers. Therefore we would do well to remember that the theory of the self does not lead to a theory of the revolution, but a theory of the political subject can.

I appeal to you to consider this as a significant point, because this can lead us to explore politico-social realities closely, as Fanon would have said—namely, how masses live, how they change themselves once they enter revolutionary practices, how the occupying power's practices change, what are the new techniques adopted; and then while you keep on reading Fanon, you have unknowingly left the world of metaphysics and philosophy and entered the world of reportages of actions, a kind of "militant journalism." There you hear Fanon discuss how radio can be used by the militants (Brecht and Walter Benjamin had discussed similarly the same thing nearly two and half decades ago), how modern medicine can be disentangled from its present attachments to power, how literacy can be spread, and also how you carry bombs, throw stones, refuse to talk or talk, change your culture to claim your own self through an awareness of your subject position. Not surprisingly thus, *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* was originally titled more aptly as *The Algerian Revolution Year 5*, because *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* is not, as Adolfo Gilly the militant Argentinian journalist remarked, "a book by Fanon [that] testifies to the death of colonialism, as the life of the masses in this age of revolution" (1965:18). The details of this book will still engage you, grip you, well, if you are a postcolonial subject, with the same question: How do we decolonize? How do people decolonize?

Again and again, Fanon shows in the course of his writings that violence is cleansing, but not the main spiritual tool to cleanse the society. Violence is not the foundation of anti-colonial revolution. Yet, we can see from our own knowledge of bourgeois discourses that this is a myth that revolutionaries have to constantly fight against, inasmuch as the occupiers want to sustain another foundational myth—namely, that colonialism was an accident and violence was not the chief weapon of occupation. Fanon indeed comments on foundation myths integral to colonialism, myths that give clean chit to the occupying power and malign the occupied. Both *The Algerian Revolution Year 5* and *The Wretched of the Earth* open with the issue of violence (in the "Preface" of the former and in the first chapter of the latter), where Fanon speaks out against indiscriminate violence, but also discusses violence as a weapon and a problem of revolution, extreme violence that makes the Algerian

war “the most hallucinatory” fought by the revolution. Sartre, as we know, defends the violence of the Algerian revolution, saying that there is no other way. This is true. But when Fanon says that the war is hallucinatory—as we know one million people ultimately die—he locates the problem at a deeper, almost an intractable level, whose features are: the occupying power would listen to none, colonial violence would kill people before they actually die, and the terror of the occupying power would leave you with no option but to violently take on the entire world of establishment at one go, which often means defeat. But without beginning small acts of resistance, how does the political subject gain autonomy and increase its area of operation? And how do you break the old world of dependency? Yet extreme violence destroys politics; its foundations are rendered impossible. Revolution soon exhausts. In Fanon you have the first uncertain awareness of a deeper problematic of the mutuality of war and politics. In politics, then, foundation must be studied in terms of the process.

### **Constituent power as the mark of the political subject**

In short, we can say that the characteristic of the constituent power is the focus of social criticism that it brings to bear on its actions and, therefore, its unbounded nature. Thus, as I show in my essay on Tagore (Samaddar, 2004), in its most critical moment, anti-colonial consciousness crosses the boundaries of national consciousness, or as Fanon called it, “the pitfalls of national consciousness.” No cultural explanation helps us understand this transcendence. It is an issue of political choice made in the milieu of expanding experience that tells us why Fanon went to Algeria or Che Guevara left Cuba for Bolivia. In this moment of anti-colonial cosmopolitanism, we find Fanon telling us in *The Wretched of the Earth* that nationalism fails to achieve emancipation across class boundaries because nationalist aspirations are primarily those of the colonized elite—a privileged class that seeks to defeat the prevailing colonial rule in order to usurp its place of dominance and control over the working classes. Thus, while the opposition between the specific realities known as the colonial and the colonized is in operation, colonialism as a system runs because it is more than a binary opposition between the two; it is rather a complicated network of complicities and internal power asymmetries and operations. Thus,

The national middle class that takes over power at the end of the colonial regime is an underdeveloped middle class. It has practically no economic power, and in any case it is in no way commensurate with the bourgeoisie of the mother country, which it hopes to replace. In its narcissism, the national middle class is easily convinced that it can advantageously replace

the middle class of the mother country. But that same independence, which literally drives it into a corner, will give rise within its ranks to catastrophic reactions, and will oblige it to send out frenzied appeals for help to the former mother country (Fanon, 1963:149).

This is the program of the Black Jacobins—the program of the constituent power at its moment of arrival; this program is unique because it is a concrete universal, whose form in this segmented and power-configured world only a political manifesto (a program) can perceive and give shape to. Therefore, almost apprehending Michel Foucault's coupling of knowledge and power, Fanon thinks of the world of language and its capacity to confer subjectivity and agency of power to a section of people to dominate the rest, and he says famously, "We are trying to understand why the Antilles Negro is so fond of speaking French" (Fanon, 1967:27). We must understand the microphysics of power in order to act, and to act appropriately. Thus, the program must judge carefully the ruling strategies of assimilation and valorization, as well as the cultural traps associated with these strategies. In trying to emancipate, the colonized discovers its collective self, that is to say, only through emancipating, the colonized becomes a collective—it is the moment for the colonized to constitute itself as a political subject. And thus this collective must constitute itself in the following way:

National identity only carries meaning insofar as it reflects the combined revolutionary efforts of an oppressed people aiming at collective liberation.... To fight for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation, that material keystone, which makes the building of a culture possible. There is no other fight for culture which can develop apart from the popular struggle.... A national culture is not a folklore, not also an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions, that is to say actions which are less and less attached to the ever-present reality of the people. A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence (Fanon, 1963:233).

Political actions will thus cause displacements. But contrary to what the sophistry of the cultural studies would have us believe, such displacement is not a continuously deferred problem. This displacement is not toward indetermination. We must consider here the site of the displacements. They occur in his writings which are like his manifesto—the tightest expression, thus the rhetorical form of a certain historico-social program. In that way we shall better understand Fanon's

political strategy to grasp the mobility of the concrete universal, in this case, the mobility of the experiences of the fragmented world of colonialism. Where does Frantz Fanon want us to arrive through the displacements—at times through death? Certainly not toward a completely uncharted future. His gesture is toward a reconstituted present, the criticism of colonial reality toward a future that can be constituted only through a critical present. What matters most, then, is not only an analysis of the past or a narration of a sociological present, but a reintroduction of historicity by locating the constituting moments of our lives. How can the colonized do so? In order to do so, the colonized must move beyond the representations that colonialism has brought in this world and imagine a world whose glimpses its own constitution as the political subject has brought about.

The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity. Obedient to the rules of pure Aristotelian logic, they follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity. No conciliation is possible, for of the two terms, one is superfluous.... This world is divided into compartments; this world cut into two is inhabited by two separate species.... Everything up to and including the very nature of pre-capitalist society, so well explained by Marx, must here be thought out again. The serf is in essence different from the knight, but a reference to divine right is necessary to legitimize this statutory difference. In the colonies the foreigner coming from another country imposed his rule by means of guns and machines. In defiance of his successful transplantation, in spite of his appropriation, the settler still remains a foreigner. It is neither the act of owning factories, nor estates, nor a bank balance, which distinguishes the governing classes. The governing race is first and foremost those who come from elsewhere; those who are unlike the original inhabitants, "the others".... To break up the colonial world does not mean that after the frontiers have been abolished lines of communication will be set up between the two zones. The destruction of the colonial world is no more and no less than the abolition of one zone, its burial in the depths of the earth or its expulsion from the country (Fanon, 1963:39–41).

Decolonization is the abolition of the colonial world, which means also the disappearance of the colonized.<sup>3</sup>

What happens, then, to the imperial foundations? Impure as these foundations are, and resting on physical and discursive groundings, the liberation of the bodies under the imperial order becomes a requirement of utmost importance. But the body can be liberated only when it is freed from all other imagined identities—of the black, the Negro, the colonized, the incapable and the weak. The totalizing power of

the institution of hierarchy must go away; with that must go away the body of the colonizer ("the invisible feet of the White"), of the colonized land, and the bisected body of the city ("the bright streets and the overflowing garbage cans"). The myths of the imperial foundations are destroyed by the politico-cultural criticisms of this dual world. The constituent power is historical, it invokes historicity; it is a historical power that responds to the call to transform the colonial world, with that abolishing all imperial foundations. With this abolition, all other identities that the imperial had created are lost; only the identity of the political action remains. This is of course pure politics, the moment of the constituent power achieving its victory. But how does this constituent power prevent its absorption in the constituted power that will inevitably seek compromises, as it becomes the legally constituted power? Fanon does not seem to be excessively worried about that; he would have argued that decolonization is a process of pure transformation: the weeding out of the comprador and the destruction of the linkages between the two worlds that bring about the compromises. His argument can be better understood when we closely follow his speech to the Congress of Black African Writers in 1959, subsequently incorporated in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

Colonial domination, because it is total and tends to oversimplify, very soon manages to disrupt in spectacular fashion the cultural life of a conquered people. This cultural obliteration is made possible by the negation of national reality, by new legal relations introduced by the occupying power, by the banishment of the natives and their customs to outlying districts by colonial society, by expropriation, and by the systematic enslaving of men and women...

*Vis-à-vis* this state of affairs, the native's reactions are not unanimous.... A national culture under colonial domination is a contested culture whose destruction is sought in systematic fashion. It very quickly becomes a culture condemned to secrecy. This idea of clandestine culture is immediately seen in the reactions of the occupying power, which interprets attachment to traditions as faithfulness to the spirit of the nation and as a refusal to submit....

If man is known by his acts, then we will say that the most urgent thing today for the intellectual is to build up his nation. If this building up is true,...then the building of a nation is of necessity accompanied by the discovery and encouragement of universalizing values. Far from keeping aloof from other nations, therefore, it is national liberation which leads the nation to play its part on the stage of history. It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. And this

twofold emerging is ultimately the source of all culture (Fanon, 1963: 236–248).

Fanon thus resolves the *fact of blackness* (“that crushing object-hood”) that he had set as the great problematic of racism and colonial domination in *Black Skin, White Masks*—the problematic of a feeling of “straddling nothingness and infinity.” Anti-colonial freedom goes through the purifying process of violence and revolt, as it realizes that it must challenge and end the diverse areas of domination and violence such as law, gender, race, class, sexuality and nationalism. What emerges as a consequence of all these is a powerful idea of the political subject in the colonial world—the political subject that can emerge only as the constituent power. How powerful is the idea? It will remain as long as colonial relations keep resurfacing, and therefore Fanon will be recounted in the once colonized lands again and again. In constructing Fanon as a theorist of the constituent power, I am aware of the petty bourgeois remarks and interrogations that tell us that Fanon’s journey from Martinique to Algeria (or from the pre-Martinique Senegal to Martinique) was deeply flawed, that it was a psychic journey all through, or that finally Fanon had to take recourse to the Hegelian idea of the universal through a dialectic play. Experience transcends all flaws and, as Fanon showed, experience with strategy and skill enables the political subject to become the power capable of constituting a society, in fact thus reconstituting the society—in juridical terms, what we would call the constituent power, the basis of all constitutions. I hope my readers will appreciate that my intention in this essay is not to deal with the problem of colonialism as a cultural issue, but with the problem of anti-colonialism as a revolutionary activity. By this I mean that, for me, it is not a question of analyzing the internal or external criteria of a particular discourse that would enable, let us say, race or nationalism to become a subject matter of cultural studies; for me, rather the attempt is how to consider anti-colonialism as a specific activity or as a role. This is I believe what Frantz Fanon meant when he wrote “Pitfalls of National Consciousness” and “On National Culture”—two extensive sections in *The Wretched of the Earth* pregnant with enormous significance and singularly ignored by cultural theorists.

### **Conservatism of the cultural readings of nationalism and decolonization**

We are now in a position to see how cultural readings tend to be conservative and are resistant to transformational approaches. We can take, for instance, some of Homi Bhabha’s writings on Fanon. I do not intend to post here a comprehensive review of all his writings on Fanon. Bhabha, of course, is not Stuart Hall; he claims to speak for the colonial and ex-colonial peoples, cultures and experiences, and he

marries poststructural insights with postcolonial. The result? An assortment of certain insights—mimicry, sly civility, colonial nonsense, hybridity—as possible strategies of resistance, but in effect restrictive in understanding resistance, by which I mean restrictive of the politics that informs resistance. Thus, all these strategies—say mimicry, Bhabha will tell us—help resistance develop within the interstices of a structure in which power should have erased the possibility of resistance. Bhabha (1994b:91) cites Fanon in explanation of what he says, though Fanon, looking at his works—particularly the two sections I referred to above—can never be thought of as advocating hybridity as a permanent subversion, an indeterminate area of spillage and proliferation. This is a strange understanding of Fanon, who, in fact, ends *The Wretched of the Earth* (as I showed earlier) with a programmatic call not to copy or mimic Europe, but to chart out a new path. Who mimics? The weak. Whereas Fanon suggests that Algerians are becoming strong through revolution, which is transforming them: “The Revolution in depth, the true one, precisely because it changes man and renews society, has reached an advanced stage. This oxygen, which creates and shapes a new humanity—*this too is the Algerian Revolution*” (Fanon, 1965:181; emphasis added). Yet Bhabha locates indeterminacy in agency, makes it the latter’s chief mark.

Or take Bhabha’s (1994b) project of “Interrogating identity: Frantz Fanon and the postcolonial prerogative.” He does not for a moment grasp something that I am pressing here as my main argument—namely, that to Fanon, revolution interrogates identity, and only revolution can totally interrogate the identities ascribed to “Man” in this hierarchical, exploitative, racist and colonial world. For Fanon there is no privileging of “the postcolonial,” no recourse to shortcut cultural (by which all we get is “behavioral”) strategies, no road other than that of transformation and revolution. Take what I think to be the best passage from “Interrogating identity: Frantz Fanon and the postcolonial prerogative” and see the magic words can create. Bhabha writes,

Remembering Fanon is a process of intense discovery and *disorientation*. Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present. It is such a memory of the history of race and racism, colonialism and the question of cultural identity that Fanon reveals with great *profundity and poetry* than any other writer. What he achieves, I believe, is something far greater: for in seeing the phobic image of the Negro, the native, the colonized, deeply woven into the psychic pattern of the West, *he offers the master and slave a deeper reflection of their interpositions*, as well as the hope of a difficult, even dangerous, freedom (1994b:63; emphasis added).

And then he cites Fanon to conclude the paragraph, "It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world" (Bhabha, 1994b:63; see also pp. 236–239). We shall have to stretch our imagination to the farthest to argue that this citation from Fanon confirms in any way a postcolonial prerogative—prerogative of unknowingly writing poetry when writing politics or offering the master and the slave a joint or common salvation. Is this, then, what is postcolonial?<sup>4</sup> What remains then of values of liberation, freedom, independence, decolonization and social transformation—all these ideas and hopes congealed in the word "revolution"?

Bhabha has no doubt as to its answer. We find him replying,

What must be left an open question is how we are to rethink ourselves once we have undermined the immediacy and autonomy of self-consciousness.... What remains to be thought of is the repetitious desire to recognize ourselves doubly, as at once, decentered in the solidary process of the political group, and yet, ourself as a consciously committed, even individuated, agent of change—bearer of belief (1994b:65).

So, this is psychic process, and if not the avowal of a fully psychic process, at least a sly invocation of Kantianism here in the form of invoking the individual capacity to be a rational being. This is certainly not a question of historically committed or achieved identity of being political and social at the same time. It is as if a psychic process that ignores the moments of compulsion when to be social is to be political at first, or when to cope with the self-annihilating nature of politics the agent of change must make social liberation an integral part of politics. What does Fanon say of this task of transformation? Let us listen to him:

On every hill the government in miniature is formed and takes over power. Everywhere—in the valleys and in the forests, in the jungle and the villages—we find a national authority. Each man or woman brings the nation to life by his or her action, and is pledged to ensure its triumph in their locality. We are dealing with a strategy of immediacy which is both radical and totalitarian.... *The taking on of nationhood involves a growth of consciousness. National unity is first the unity of a group, the disappearance of old quarrels, and the final liquidation of unspoken grievances. At the same time forgiveness and purification include those natives who by their activities and by their complicity with the occupier have dishonored their country.*

On the other hand, traitors and all those who have sold out to the enemy will be judged and punished. In undertaking this onward march, the people legislates, finds itself and wills itself to sovereignty. In every corner that is thus awakened from the colonial slumber, life is lived at an impossibly high temperature. There is a permanent out-pouring of the all the villages of spectacular generosity, of disarming kindness, and willingness, which can never be doubted, to die for the "cause." All this is evocative of a confraternity.... *The circle of the nation widens* and fresh ambushes to entrap the enemy hail the entry of new tribes upon the scene. Each village finds that it is itself both an absolute agent of revolution, also a link in the chain of action... (Fanon, 1963:131–133; emphasis added).

Yes, this too is, as you can see from the italicized sections in the preceding fragment, imagining a nation, though this is far from the cultural theories on nationalism's beginning and the emergence of the nation form, though Fanon never deliberately wrote a full-fledged theory of the nation—the European nation and the anti-colonial nation, the imperial nation and the enslaved nation, the dominant form and the dominated form. Not only the lines cited above, but coupled with his caution about the "national," yet his invocation of the nation (the famous exhortation that there is no escape from experiencing the national feeling and achieving the national form), Fanon's writings tell us in unmistakable terms his ideas on the nation—unprecedented because no one else combined in the way he did the two problematics of race and nation. Even if there were nothing else in his writings, this and this alone would have made him one of the most rigorous thinkers of nationalism and the nation form.<sup>5</sup>

But what makes Fanon a unique theorist of the nation? It is here where my proposition of the insurgent political subject—the constituent power—becomes relevant in a fundamental way. From Machiavelli to Marx, and from Marx to Lenin and Mao, all resorted to rhetoric to employ the most binding and persuasive arguments to push fellow citizens along the path of radical transformation. And the more the mutation of the form of collective life gathered speed, the more the deployment of rhetoric became absolute for writing, by which I mean writing manifestos, programs. That is how *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* originated, before that *The Prince*, and after that *Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan*. The more the tempo increases, the more the phobic decreases; we discover the physicality of the entire process of transformation in its blinding clarity. In the accelerated process of the emergent political subject, which faces the emergency of occupation, the subject takes on the role of the constituent power determined to constitute a new society. That is the secret to Fanon's astonishing journey, and though this journey can be seen in personal biographical terms—as Ato Sekyi-Out (1996) presents us with a beautiful and poignant account of Fanon's biography and

itches the chronicle on an experiential plane—I prefer to see it as the emergence of the political subject, which, as it realizes more and more the emergency of the situation of occupation, increases its resources and begins the display of its determination to reconstitute the society. Nation is a part of the constituent process, therefore is its liminal presence in a revolutionist account. Nation not by its own virtue, but as part of the emergence of a consciousness, a strategy, a collective, a form at once in micro form (“On every hill the nation is present”) and in its totalizing configuration (“national culture”). Nation as part of revolution, as part of the international (“National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension”; Fanon, 1963:247), as an instance of the *concrete universal*...

I further argue that Fanon’s search for a revolutionary space reflects the dynamics of the constituent power in the milieu of colonial over-determination. The constituent power has to reject the imperial center in all its manifestations, disrupt the neat schema of colonialism and initiate a steady movement to the social, cultural and political margins of the empire and then proceed to constitute society beyond the empire. The constituent power cannot afford to stop in this process and must reject “identification, itself an imperial process of violent appropriation” until society has reconstituted in such a way that it will have no need for such identification (see Peterson, 2007:96–97). The colonized subject, whose intimacy with the colonizer, Fanon recognizes repeatedly, is a problem for the revolution, must become the emancipative subject. Anti-colonial struggle thus becomes part and parcel of self-negation of the colonial status and position of the political subject. Constituent power in this way becomes a founding activity and an extremely radical terrain. “Time and space has to be produced”; indeed “Time and space must be produced”—the constituent power takes this upon itself as its primary task; indeed by producing its own time and place, the constituent power will be constituent, that is to say, will constitute a new society. Therefore the urgency of the manifesto toward African revolution, the urgency of appeal to the wretched of the earth not to delay but to seize the anti-imperial moment. It is only in the mirror of the dynamics of the emergence of a constituent power that we shall understand how Fanon or Che produced their own time, or their own geography of revolution—every hilltop or village, or the trans-Atlantic black world, or Year 5 of the Revolution.

## Power and mutation

Why speak of the Negro and Hegel here? Frankly, there is no reason except for the fact that politics is still not free of metaphysics. Thus, even when Bhabha tries to correct the imbalance of his earlier writings, he cannot come out of the metaphysical trap. In his “Foreword: Framing Fanon,” Bhabha (2004:ix–xl) proceeds to raise and

answer questions like: Is Fanon still relevant? Is his ethical vision of new humanism a vain plea? Or can something be salvaged from his ethics and politics in this age of globalization? In his replies, which are all sympathetic to Fanon, he again falls victim to what is called “critical Fanonism”; therefore, he has to explain the role of violence in Fanon’s writings and has to admit that, notwithstanding complex historical realities, Fanon remains the intimate, if intimidating, poet of the vicissitudes of violence and the phantom of terror. Fanon appears deluded as he confuses the means with the ends of anti-colonial violence. Yet we know that, for Fanon, violence was not a mediating agency between means and ends; whosoever says so must have been ignorant of *A Dying Colonialism*’s or *Toward the African Revolution*’s magnificent chapters on what is revolution and wherefrom the dangers to revolution can come—something borne true by later events—or have read Fanon mainly through the introduction by Sartre to *The Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>6</sup> Fanon in fact argued that the dependence of the slave and the master featured the economy of the colonial space, and he searched all his life as to how this dependence could be cut off. Further, Bhabha says that globalization has brought in neo-colonial domination; therefore Fanon still remains relevant. But this sets a question for postcolonial study itself as a field of inquiry. For instance, what insights do we get from these cultural studies on postcolonial domination, continuing hunger, bloodbaths and an insidious neo-colonialism? Bhabha has no answer; he can only hope for “suggestive perspectives on the state of the decompartmentalized world after the dismemberment of the Berlin Wall in 1989” (2004:xiv). So the *annus mirabilis* of 1989 does not bring in for postcolonial studies the victory of capitalism, but the end of “Manichaeism of the Cold War.” He does not notice any defeat of the struggle, any advance of the bourgeois imperial world; all he notices is the impact of 1989 on the interdependence of the slave and the master.<sup>7</sup> We may in fact raise the question, even if bit recklessly (in the interest of a rigorous understanding of the specific way this field of postcolonial studies has grown as an academic discipline): Is not the way Bhabha defines the problematic of the colonizer-colonized relation—for brevity’s sake let us say, “hybridity,” a key word in that definition—reminiscent of Albert Camus’ attitude to French colonization and occupation of Algeria and the Algerian liberation war? Camus, as we know, was so preoccupied with the issue of violence that he could never bring himself to support the national war of liberation and throughout his life supported all sorts of unrealistic proposals of a France–Algeria union, even while conceding that France was an occupying power.<sup>8</sup>

To get to the root of the issue, if hybridity is all about negotiating borders—borders set about by colonialism and various colonial practices, one of the fundamental forms of which was racist practice—then surely we must see how the various inclusions and interdependencies were brought about and the final limits they had in them. Fanon shows with extraordinary clarity how borders were set in colonial relations, marked by what Etienne Balibar (1991) has called the “internal

exclusion”—a colonial strategy that would encourage the colonized to emulate the colonizer, create a colonial home/world of commonness and interdependence, but a home marked by exclusive limits to inclusion, that is, a home with enormous hierarchies, inequities, distancing and exploitation. So speak the French, yet remain a slave, a Negro and an Algerian.... Bhabha in *Location of Culture* has not even a single word on that. At least the culture of resistance does not generate primarily from that field of master-slave interdependent sociality, but from a refusal to play the game. Fanon would have said, you have set borders; well then, remain on that side, we take care of our own world. Balibar wrote,

We must however observe that the *exteriority* of the “native” population in colonization, or rather the representation of that state as *racial exteriority*...is no means a given state of affairs. It was in fact produced and reproduced within the very space constituted by conquest and colonization...and therefore on the basis of a certain interiority. Otherwise one could not explain the ambivalence of the dual movement of assimilation and exclusion of the “natives” nor the way in which the subhuman nature attributed to the colonized comes to determine the self-image developed within the colonized nations in the period when the world was being divided up. The heritage of colonialism is, in reality, a fluctuating combination of continued exteriorization and “internal exclusion (1991:42–43).

In short, the point remains that metaphysics has little to offer to discussion on the dynamics of the evolution of the political subject into a constituent power. Writing his last tract, Fanon knew it more than anybody else. He knew that the war was on two fronts: against colonialism in Algeria and elsewhere, and against capitalism globally, particularly in the post-independence period. Therefore, he said,

Decolonization, which sets out to change the world is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is *a historical process: that is to say that it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements, which give its historical form and content*. Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature.... The settler owes the fact of his very existence, that is to say, his property, to the colonial system.

Decolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with

their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlight upon them... (Fanon, 1963:36; emphasis added).

Read as part of his entire writings, we can clearly see here Fanon's working on the two factors of time and space—acceleration of time and reworking of space—to make history intelligible, in other words making ourselves capable of knowing that we are part of history. We can also see how Fanon is reworking his theory of the subject, in fact reworking from the first day when he opened his eyes to this world to find the Negro in a particular subject-position, which he expressed in his inimitable language, “the crushing object-hood.” As Alexandre Kojève (1969:Ch. 1) remarked of Hegel while pointing out that knowing the history and the formation of the subject through actions are interlinked, we too can say that Fanon did not need a God who would reveal the truth to him. And to find the truth, he did not need to hold dialogues with “the men in the city,” or even to have a “discussion” with himself or to “meditate.” He knew the actions that had preceded him. Fanon went beyond Hegel and philosophy when he refused to say, even after coming tantalizingly close to a Hegelian reading of the lord and bondsman situation, namely that

The truth of the independent consciousness is accordingly the consciousness of the bondsman. This doubtless appears in the first instance outside itself, and not as the truth of self-consciousness. But just as lordship showed its essential nature to be the reverse of what it wants to be, so, too, bondage will, when completed, pass into the opposite of what it immediately is: being a consciousness repressed within itself, it will enter into itself, and change round into real and true independence (Hegel, 1910, Section B, “Self-consciousness,” Paragraph 193).

All we can say here is that we need less of “the Hegelian shade” to stand under and read Fanon, but more readings of insurgent situations and the biographies of constituent power to appreciate what Frantz Fanon wanted to do.

To conclude, Fanon gives us a magisterial account of the relation between power and mutation, strength and the fact of transformation, and the over-determination of mutation. Revolution is the principle of power; it is strength in action. It exhibits as well as resolves the play between the power of the imperial political-economic means and the powerlessness of the colonized. In this mutation we have not only Fanon's personal dislocation, relocation and death, we have also one of the most radical and astounding feats to found power on certain constitutive principles, such as achieving national consciousness, the way to resolve the question of blackness, garnering spontaneity, and creating time and space in a framework beyond the imperial configuration—which revolutionary readers will discover again and again while reading his tracts. There will be repeated efforts to push these

constitutive principles under the carpet in the post-transformation era. It will be also argued that independent Algeria belied his hope and thus belies his thinking. We have three answers to that apology: first, the state of today does not necessarily tell us that what we did yesterday was wrong. (How many will say that most of France's woes today owe their origin to the French Revolution?) Second, the moment of transformation, as Fanon repeatedly cautioned, was a moment of contest and uncertainty, and the results could be upturned even decades later if corrective measures were not adequate in measure or time. Third, and this is most important—and on this I simply do not have space to elaborate—is the dialectic of the constituent power and the constituted power, when the constituted power precisely because it is the *constituted* power overshadows all other phenomena of the revolution and manages to create a society which will only partially retain the virtues of the constituent power. Fanon, for instance, wrote:

Before independence, the leader generally embodies the aspirations of the people for independence, political liberty and national dignity. But as soon as independence is declared, far from embodying in concrete form the needs of the people in what touches bread, land and the restoration of the country to the sacred hands of the people, the leader will reveal his inner purpose: to become the general president of that company of profiteers impatient for their returns which constitutes the national bourgeoisie (1963:166).

Fanon was aware of this dialectic and the tragic possibility, at the same time aware of the need to work out the mechanisms to bring out resolutions other than the ones which we usually see in the long history of contentious politics, that Fanon's notions of the nation, violence, power, the fact of blackness, internationalism, African revolution all assume liminal positions. Each time he approaches one of these great themes, each time he seems to work on the theme "a little more," to stretch the possibility of the concept "a little more," but that much is enough to make the boundaries of that concept more elastic, capable of showing us new possibilities.

At least this much we can say: Once we remember the key words and key themes of those tracts, which I summarize in one phrase: "armed virtue,"<sup>9</sup> the image of a constitutive power will resurface. In the exertions of power by Fanon, the impending doom is the backdrop, and therefore the urgency of his tone. The colonial world has left no means to transform the colonized societies in any virtuous way. The people are destroyed. Even though arms and virtue can combine in an equation with infinite variables, yet Fanon remains decisive in his thrust: Can armed power close the historical crisis and make mutation positive? Arms and violence—to what extent, in what way and how can virtue be combined with them? It is not only the theme of invoking a revolutionary nation form, but more than ever the invocation of a constituent power, which will reconstitute society by combining arms and virtue.

And here is Frantz Fanon's uniqueness, for on the basis of this combination Fanon literally wrenches away the desire for a political subject, *a new subject*—and please understand that the foundations of this new subject are not the foundations of the preceding, that is the colonial world, nor even its ruins, but their complete absence, *its void*—and constitutes it into a program. In Fanon, therefore, the constituent power of the anti-colonial revolution finds its absolute definition. To understand this we need a little more of Fanon's light on Fanon himself, a little less of Hegel's shade in reading Fanon, and if you allow me, more of Fanon's light to read Hegel.<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Azzedine Haddour (2006:xiv-xv) makes roughly the same point.

<sup>2</sup> With unbridled erudition Hall informs us,

Let us put it simplistically ...For, if this text is "where Lacan makes his interruption into colonial discourse theory," as Gates asserts, it is also where Fanon "reads" Lacan in the light of his own preoccupations. In the long footnote on the "mirror phase," it is Fanon's appropriation of Lacan, which strikes us most vividly. First, the "Other" in this transaction is raced: ("...the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man; and conversely"). It is difficult not to agree that he writes here as if "the real Other" is indeed "a fixed phenomenological point" (1996:26).

Thus, you can read Fanon without knowing a single line about the Algerian war where one million people died; you do not have to know anything about racist torture, discrimination, slavery; all you need is "othering." In this connection, see Samuel (n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> In Fanon's exact words, "After the conflict there is not only the disappearance of colonialism, but also the disappearance of the colonized man" (1963:246).

<sup>4</sup> See also Bhabha (1994a:112–123).

<sup>5</sup> Once again, the only two other thinkers who thought of the nation in a liberationist sense marked by internationalist ideas were Mao and Che, both obviously ignored by historians (for instance, by Hobsbawm, 1992, who listed ten major works on nationalism oblivious of the huge variety of the nation form and hence nationalism's bewildering variety, and consequential uniqueness of each form and its theorization) and by postcolonial theorists and cultural chroniclers working on nations and nationalism—both of these groups appearing in the current repertoire of social thought as byproducts of a metropolitan history.

<sup>6</sup> Alice Cherki, in her preface to the 2002 edition of Fanon's text (p. 11), says that the Sartre introduction exaggerates the analysis of Fanon on violence. Sartre's introduction to *The Wretched of the Earth* influences the reader, particularly the European reader, even before s/he has approached Fanon's text.

<sup>7</sup> For an elaborate reading of Bhabha, see Haddour (2006).

<sup>8</sup> Edward Said says,

What I want to do is to see Camus' fiction as an element in France's methodically constructed political geography of Algeria...the better to see it as an arresting account of the political and interpretative contest to represent, inhabit, and possess the territory itself.... Camus' writing is informed by an extra-ordinarily belated, in some ways incapacitated colonial sensibility, which enacts an imperial gesture within and by reasons of form, the realistic novel, well past its greatest achievement in Europe (1993:176).

For a more sympathetic account of Camus' attitude, see Carroll (2007).

<sup>9</sup> Antonio Negri (1999:49–56) uses this phrase in his description of Machiavelli.

<sup>10</sup> Obviously, I am taking my cue here from Louis Althusser (2001).

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