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## Special Feature: Roundtable on Political Theory Revisited

### Frantz Fanon

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*Contemporary Political Theory* (2004) 3, 245–252. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300182

In order to identify a 20th century thinker who helps to enhance ‘the adequacy of our conceptual resources theorizing politics in the 21st century’, we first need to ascertain the problems that political theorists will have to address in the new century. The way to identify such problems, I humbly suggest, is not to focus upon our internecine quarrels as theorists, but to see if we can work back to an important theoretical contribution from thinking about the political world itself.

Our conceptual resources for theorizing politics in the 21st century will be inadequate if they cannot account for the most profound political change of the last century: decolonization. As the 20th century began, Europeans (and European-dominated states and colonies) could congratulate themselves on a system of global power that was effectively extracting the resources of the world on their behalf. Even though some critics at the turn of that century saw an ossified world, few would have predicted the bloody aftermath of this self-satisfied moment, one that eventually called all of the previous values and ways of thinking of that world into question. After nearly 500 years of European expansion around the world, Europeans in the second half of the 20th century began to surrender their views of their innate superiority and natural legitimacy to rule over all other peoples in the world. For whatever reasons (see Crawford, 2002), and often as a result of violent struggles, European colonial powers began to loosen their political grip on peoples in the rest of the world. Viewed globally, this is a massive transformation in political power, and it has been accompanied by equally massive changes in economic power and in ideas and beliefs as well. Since we are really at the beginning of this transformed world, it is hard for us to see clearly what conceptual tools we will need, and how the core values of Western political theory, freedom and democracy, to name but two, will fare in this ‘brave new world’. Nevertheless, I would therefore say that a centrally important twentieth century political thinker who gave us some useful conceptual tools is Frantz Fanon (1963, 1965, 1967).

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Fanon (1925–1961), a decorated, wounded member of the Free French Army, a psychiatrist who practiced in Algeria and North Africa more generally, died tragically at such a young age that he did not live to react and reflect upon the formal decolonialization of Africa and its aftermath. Fanon has been widely read but not so much within the political theory canon. His two main texts are: *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). The interpretive difficulties posed by Fanon's writing are the kind we might expect, for example, *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) is primarily a universalizing and cautiously optimistic work, whereas *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) has a much less conciliatory tone. Insofar as they differ, then, theorists must decide whether one or the other of these texts is the definitive Fanon, and determine which of his divergent views are most fundamental. What I shall argue in this short essay is that the conflict and ambiguity between a hope for a common humanity and rage about our political capacities to achieve it are at the heart of Fanon's legacy. As theorists, perhaps we should pause and take seriously the compelling though unappealing vision that he offers. I find Fanon somewhat difficult to read: the texts are not beautifully crafted, the argument not always convincing, the tone often off-putting. Jean Paul Sartre's overblown forward to *The Wretched of the Earth* almost makes me put down the book and never consider Fanon's ideas themselves. Nevertheless, there is good reason to keep Fanon on the shelf of essential 20th century thinkers, both his successes and failures as a theorist are illuminating.<sup>1</sup>

For Fanon, 'decolonization' is the global political project for the second half of the 20th century, and the unfinished business for the next century (*WE*, 100). In the future, it may well be that the great revolution understood from the 20th century is not the Bolshevik revolution, or the Chinese revolution, but the anti-colonial movement. Fanon begins *The Wretched of the Earth*, by identifying this concept, decolonization, as the key:

Decolonization is quite simply the replacing of a certain 'species' of men by another 'species' of men....[W]e have chosen to speak of that kind of *tabula rasa* which characterizes at the outset all decolonization. Its unusual importance is that it constitutes, from the very first day, the minimum demands of the colonized. To tell the truth, the proof of success lies in a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up. (*WE*, 35)

For Fanon, decolonization is a necessary revolution because the greatest harm has been done on the global scale of colonialism. In his book *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills (Mills, 1997) suggests that we might think of the experiment of European colonization of the world as a 500- year history that is coming to a close. Fanon, in his most anti-European moments, seems



to suggest the same thing and concludes *The Wretched of the Earth* with a call for the

Third World starting a new history of Man, a history which will have regard to the sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward, but which will also not forget Europe's crimes, of which the most horrible was committed in the heart of man, and consisted in the pathological tearing apart of his functions and the crumbling away of his unity...If we wish to live up to our peoples' expectations, we must seek the response elsewhere than in Europe. (*WE*, 315)

Yet if Fanon repeats in this passage the hope he had expressed at length in *Black Skins, White Masks* that some new humanity was possible (*BS,WM*, 231–232), this is only his statement of half of the reality. For what he sees immediately ahead in the process of decolonization is not pretty, as he writes in the first sentence of *Wretched of the Earth*, 'decolonization is always a violent phenomenon'. (*WE*, 35)

Fanon is sometimes accused of being an apologist for violence, and his remarkable claims about the unifying effect of violence, his view that 'at the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force' (*WE* 94) and his advocacy of terrorist tactics against the French in Algeria (e.g., in *Dying Colonialism*, 55) surely add support to this claim.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, political theorists might best know Fanon as the object of Hannah Arendt's scathing (and ultimately inaccurate) critique of his advocacy of violence (Arendt 1970). Nevertheless, Fanon saw colonialism itself as a form of deep and systematic violence, and as a scientist, he is suggesting that the violence he observes in decolonization is a response to the violence of colonialism (see, e.g., *WE*, 40).

In this regard (and given Fanon's utopian commitment to 'humanity'), Fanon remains an exemplar of another important aspect of 20th century political thought: he is nothing if not a political realist. Fanon did not believe that the avoidance of violence was possible. He distrusted non-violence as a strategy, calling it a tool of the colonialist bourgeoisie, 'an attempt to settle the colonial problem around a green baize table, before any regrettable act has been performed or irreparable gesture made, before any blood has been shed' (*WE*, 61). Nor was Fanon the kind of rational universalist who thought that deliberation or good intentions could find resolutions to the deep-seated and real conflicts that exist between colonized and colonizer. Fanon believed that it would be possible to find progressive Europeans who could join against colonialism, but it was clear to him that the battle lines were formed, that colonialism had created a 'Manichean world', to which one needs to decide (as the old union song puts it): 'which side are you on?'<sup>3</sup>

Another side of Fanon's realism was an acknowledgment, and prediction, that as the colonial powers withdrew, the powerful indigenous leaders who



would take their place would not necessarily be any better at protecting ‘the wretched of the earth’ than the colonialists had been. Fanon’s concerns are prophetic, but not so surprising; he was guided by a genuine grasp of political reality. (This, by the way, makes his Marxist rhetoric often ring hollow; he himself realized even as he used it that ‘Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem’ *WE*, 40.) Fanon was a partisan of the Algerian revolution and of ‘third world’ revolution more broadly. He was willing to accept the consequence of this belief, that he would advocate the use of violence. Nevertheless, Fanon argued that such violence was a response to the pre-existing and deep-seated violence already present in colonialism.

Fanon, trained as a psychiatrist, also brings to bear the other remarkable discovery of the first half of the 20th century: the unconscious. Freud’s ambition to stir the waters of hell (as described in the quotation from Vergil on the title page of *Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900) (Schorske, 1979) is surely realized in some aspects of Fanon’s concerns. Fanon also repeats the interesting Freudian contradiction of describing the centrality of the unconscious and at the same time possessing a faith in reason to uncover and allow access to it. Fanon writes explicitly about the sexualized relations between men and women of different races (*BS, WM*), of the role of the veil in the Algerian conflict (*DC*), about the real concrete human suffering he encountered in patients he treated in Algeria (*WE*). Yet he does so in order to force the perpetrators of an irresponsible violence to see what they are doing: ‘the European peoples must first decide to wake up and shake themselves, use their brains, and stop playing the stupid game of the Sleeping Beauty’. (*WE*, 106) Fanon put his psychological training to work to understand the complex difficulties of colonial and post-colonial people (Gates Jr., 1991; Bulhan, 1999; Gibson, 1999c; de Lauretis, 2002): political actors, rural peoples, the colonial bourgeoisie, intellectuals, will all have their lives profoundly transformed in the colonial struggle. Fanon is not optimistic, though, that most will have the courage to see clearly and to act wisely.

Finally, one of Fanon’s most significant ambivalences also is revealing to us. Fanon is of two minds whether he is interested in describing a universal condition for humans, or whether he finds the separation between the ‘one’ and the ‘other’ to be an insurmountable difference. Some times he seems clearly to advocate a new universal. At other times, he is just as convincingly arguing that the colonizer and the colonized occupy fundamentally different worlds, and can never come to appreciate or to understand one another.

Fanon seems to make one universal claim, though, the great evil in the world is exploitation. Fanon never defines exploitation precisely, but uses it to refer to the treatment of another person in a dehumanizing way. He views all forms of exploitation as basically similar:



All forms of exploitation resemble one another. They all seek the source of their necessity in some edict of a Biblical nature. All forms of exploitation are identical because all of them are applied against the same 'object': man. (*BS,WM*, 88)

For Fanon, then, exploitation is a process by which a person is transformed into an object, or as he sometimes puts it, into an animal. While Fanon is most concerned with the form of exploitation that arises out of colonialism, he found a similar structure in anti-Semitism and racism, and other forms of exploitation: the key characteristic of exploitation is that it denies another's humanity. 'I find myself suddenly in the world and I recognize that I have one right alone: That of demanding human behavior from the other'. (*BS,WM*, 229)

And the solution to all these forms of exploitation is not to reverse the position of the exploited and exploiter, but to end this cycle:

The disaster of the man of color lies in the fact that he was enslaved.

The disaster and the inhumanity of the white man lie in the fact that somewhere he has killed man.

And even today they subsist, to organize this dehumanization rationally. But I as a man of color, to the extent that it becomes possible for me to exist absolutely, do not have the right to lock myself into a world of retroactive reparations.

I, the man of color, want only this:

That the tool never possess the man. That the enslavement of man by man cease forever. That is, of one by another. That it be possible for me to discover and to love man, wherever he may be. (*BS,WM*, 231)

This standard, that every human being is entitled to live a life without exploitation, differs from the utilitarian concern for the greatest happiness, it does ring of the Marxist wish for each person's freedom, and it is paralleled in other arguments made in the century, by thinkers as diverse as Martha Nussbaum and John Rawls and Jurgen Habermas. But it is a settled thing for Fanon, that the standard by which we should judge how people are treated is from the standpoint of 'the wretched of the earth', not those who are best well off, or who live in the metropole, or who have the right skin or religion. Fanon finds European calls to universalism hollow: 'When I search for Man in the technique and style of Europe, I see only a succession of negations of man, and an avalanche of murders (*WE*, 312)'. The true measure of continuing humanity, Fanon insists, is to end all of the distortions of human life and perversions of human psychology that arise out of colonialism and its consequent uprooting.



It might be possible to respond to my argument here by insisting that, now that the world has arrived at globalization, it should be the focus of our theorizing, not decolonization. Given the emerging global economic order, it is beside the point to obsess about the nature of decolonization. Fanon had only one moment, and it ended with the decolonialization process. Furthermore, because globalization is about the effects of global economic and political integration on both colonizer and colonized, it is a more useful perspective from which to evaluate the ongoing nature of political change.

To assert that the problem is 'globalization' rather than 'decolonization' is not a compelling argument. First, it erases, as Fanon had insisted, the fact that the violence of colonialism was already present and must therefore be a central part of the process of decolonization. In making this erasure, the Western theorists of globalization make the violence in the contemporary world seem *sui generis*, a result of irrational peoples in the third world who do not understand the long-term benefits of globalization rather than people responding to the violence around them. It absolves those who would say that 'globalization' is a new phenomenon, and it ignores the long-standing injustices that have already been perpetrated through the construction of the colonial system. By failing to name this system of power properly, an insistence that the problem is globalization rather than decolonization allows western thinkers to elide their ongoing complicity in the consequences of colonization. It is an example of a kind of 'epistemology of ignorance', as Mills calls it.

Fanon insists then, that we relentlessly name the phenomenon of decolonization for what it is. It is not simply a passé political concept in an era in which economic or cultural categories are more important. If we allow this political concept to escape from our vision, we are left with a perspective that cannot determine whose oppression is at the heart of the problem.

As a mid-century figure, Fanon offered an account of the most serious problem facing the world: decolonization, and he offered a way of trying to cope with it, through revolutionary change. He did his best, despite his clear partisan role, to explain to those who would not see it, why and how he justified his actions and concerns. Only when all human beings have dignity, he asserted, will we have ended exploitation and be ready to move forward. Not reparations, not recriminations, but action are necessary. Yes, he was in some ways sexist, homophobic, rhetorically excessive, contradictory. But he also pointed the way to focus political theory for this next historical time: decolonize, believe truly in bringing human dignity even to the most wretched of the earth, or face the violent consequences. This is not a threat, it is a diagnosis. Fanon advises us, as theorists, I think, with these words:

To educate man to be *actional*, preserving in all his relations his respect for the basic values that constitute a human world, is the prime task of him who, have taken thought, prepares to act. (*BS, WM*, 222)

## Notes

- 1 Fanon's writings have been widely studied and used in cultural studies and postcolonial studies. Among some important secondary sources, see Adam (1993), Alessandrini (1999), de Lauretis (2002), Gates Jr. (1991), Gibson (1999), Macey (2000), Sharpley-Whiting (1998), Sullivan (2004), Turner (2001), Verges (1997), Ziarek (2001).
- 2 For an illuminating analysis of Fanon on violence, see Kawash (1999), Mills (1997).
- 3 Gibson argues that Fanon ultimately did not see the world as Manichean, though, but hoped that a dialectical process could replace the one-sidedness of colonialism. Whether one is convinced by this argument partly depends upon how one reads the somewhat pessimistic diagnoses of the problems faced by the anti-colonialists in overcoming this Manicheanism. See Gibson (1999a).

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