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Living Fanon: A commemoration

You must go back into history, that history of men damned by other men.

Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

What better way to celebrate, commemorate, critically reflect on, and think through Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* fifty years after its publication than with a new North African syndrome:¹ Revolution - or at least a series of revolts that continue to rock the region. Fanon begins *The Wretched* writing of decolonization as a program of complete disorder, an overturning of order - often against the odds - *willed* collectively from the bottom up. Without time or space for a transition, there is instead an absolute replacement of one "species" of humanity by another (1968:35). In periods of revolution and counter-revolution such absolutes appear quite normal. Indeed, radical change becomes the "new normal" and the idea that revolutionary change is impossible is simply the rantings and ravings of the conservatives and reactionaries of the ancient regime. In spite of everything, ideas flow across frontiers and borders and people begin again "to make history" (1968 69-71). The Egyptian revolution is dated January 25th, 2011, but its prehistory includes years of labor struggle, demonstrations and revolts.

During the insurrectionary moment of "Tahrir Square," the Egyptian people opened up political space as an ongoing public debate. Cairo, a city of 18 million - abundant in its history and riches and also in the lived realities of the majority of its poor dwellers - became associated with liberation, with the transformative power of social media and the retaking of public space. They implicitly brought into focus the idea of the "right to the city" as a collective project of social transformation. They were not stopped by fears about maintaining order, nor by the police and the state's paid murderers, nor by threats of a coup. It was not simply a revolution of the media savvy young middle class as some analysts have tried to portray it, but of all people - a popular revolution. Once the mind of the oppressed experiences freedom in and through collective actions it also becomes a force of revolution. Fanon's Marxist opinion that people change as they change the world became reality: "They were scared. They are no longer scared," many argued, wondering why it had taken so long. "When we stopped being afraid we knew we would win. We will not again allow ourselves to be scared of a government. This is the revolution in our country, the revolution in our minds."²

¹ Fanon's first published article was "The North African Syndrome."

² See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/09/egypt-north-africa-revolution>.

1. Waking Up?

During the struggle for liberation the leader awakened the people and promised them a forward march, heroic and unmitigated. Today he uses every means to put them to sleep and three of four times a year asks them to remember the colonial period...

Fanon insists that it is the mental liberation, and the radical change in consciousness that accompanies revolution, that begin the process of questioning everything that has been hitherto taken for granted (1968:100). What had been *normal* for so long is fundamentally shaken, not only by the young professionals but also by those who had formerly not counted.

The Argentinian social theorist Raul Zibechi characterizes the moment of insurrection as an “intensely creative outpouring - during which social groups release huge amounts of energy - act like a bolt of lightning capable of illuminating subterranean molecular cooperation, hidden by the veil of everyday inertias that are imposed ... by domination and subordination” (2010:11). Fanon similarly speaks of liberation in *Year 5 of the Algerian Revolution* (called *A Dying Colonialism* in English, though the title relates to the revolution calendar). In his critique of spontaneity in *The Wretched*, Fanon argues that there is no privileged territorial position. Yet in the process of territorialization and deterritorialization, how can the revolution hold onto its epistemological moment?

2. Can we speak of Fanonian Practices?

The social revolution ... cannot borrow its poetry from the past but only from the future.

It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past. The former revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to smother their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content. There the phrase went beyond the content – here the content goes beyond the phrase.

Marx, 18th Brumaire (quoted by Fanon)

What is Fanonian practice? In a word, revolution (using Aimé Césaire's word). Or a cycle of cycles (akin to the original meaning of revolution). On one hand, it is constant return. *Black Skin* expresses this as a frustration and cry of weeping and petrification. Take the last pages of Fanon's critique of Hegel. Historically, he argues, in the Antillean situation, there is no way out. The dialectic is dismissed; in its place, the nihilistic syllogism. But then he begins his conclusion with a quote from Marx's 18th *Brumaire* that the new revolution will have to let the dead bury the dead.

In *Year 5*, the anticolonial revolution, specifically the Algerian, holds an answer. And he writes about the radical mutations that individuals have undergone as part of social movements which use all their resources, transforming society and themselves. Yet *The Wretched* tells a different story. In contrast to the opening up of space detailed in *Year 5*, the dialectic of *The Wretched* details its suffocation, reminding us of the constraints experienced in *Black Skin*. Spaces for politics are quickly closed down.

If it is the insurrectionary mobilizations of the rural and urban poor which become the epistemological dividing line on which *The Wretched* is grounded, Fanon points out on the first page of the second chapter "Spontaneity: Its Strengths and Weaknesses" that there frequently exists a time lag between the leaders of the nationalist party and the mass of the people. This temporal lag is an expression of the "backwardness" of the political leadership and political maturity of the mass movements that have seriously undermined colonialism. The "rationality of revolt" is the ground and basis for Fanon's conception and is in direct contrast to the instrumentalism rationalism of the leaders and intellectuals. Emboldened by the fetish of organization, and an intellectual laziness (1968: 149), Fanon says, the leaders rush into an uncritical embrace of technicism and elitism. The original euphoria of the newly free nation, and the collective will to create something new, quickly dissipates into cynicism and corruption. The language of struggle - brother, sister, comrade, friend - quickly becomes divorced from its social context, becoming instead the language of individual advancement: "My brother" is simply a wallet. Progress seems to flounder and the innermost hopes of the people become dissipated. Formerly honest and moral party members are drawn into the logic as politics if consumed by the speed of consumption and get rich quick schemes (1968:166-176) ever so quickened in our neoliberal times.

The maturity of the political struggle is in stark contrast to the immaturity of the leaders, who Fanon argues age before their time. The masses begin to ask "was independence worth fighting for (1968 75)³ and the leaders, who simply appear at election times or at other times to wave the flag of the struggle, are truly surprised that the people are so discontented. The lack of practical links, Fanon argues, the distance - temporal and especially spatial - between them and the mass of people means that they have no idea of what the people think or feel. For Fanon the time lag that lies behind degeneration betrays an epistemological standpoint. The nationalist leaders and middle classes do not adjust their thinking. They believe they are the nation. So consumed by an administrative mentality and technological fetishism they substitute themselves for the nation that they believe they are building "for" the people.

³ Michael Neocosmos tells of a Nigerian peasant who wonders, "when will independence end"?

While the cynics and opportunists see the state as a personal money bags, even the honest politician still believes what the colonial system had ingrained into their heads, that the mass of poor people are backward; administration, technicism and antipolitics takes the place of a politics where all could be involved in deliberation and decision making and the kind of rethinking and time needed to discover “particular values and methods and styles which shall be peculiar to them” (1968 99). The party simply reinforces elitist attitudes which are defined *a priori* through its centralized hierarchical and authoritarian form and practices, which Fanon argues creates a type of dictatorship: It is the perfect form for an arrogant and unscrupulous bourgeoisie, he says, which sees the state as simply the prize to be taken and its oppressive apparatus to be wielded against anyone who challenges it. The party becomes the means to hem in and immobilize the people.

Yet at the same time, the masses, Fanon argues, understand exactly what has happened. At a meeting on Fanon with members of the shack dwellers organization Abahlali baseMjondolo and the Rural Network in Pietmaritzburg, South Africa, May 2011, Ntombifuthi Shandu from the later organization remarked that though faces changed after 1994, things have been getting more difficult since the end of apartheid. She said, “Can we ponder the truth of the statement that we are free,” and added, “We are led by people who were damaged by the struggle during apartheid”; that is to say, they rule in a brutal way. Fanon as we know was a psychiatrist by training and would have been particularly interested in this insight. Indeed, he understood that while human beings are tough, they are also psychically fragile and his case notes in *The Wretched* and also in *Year 5* expressed concerns about the traumas and stresses of violence and brutality on the psyche, as well as in terms of a politics that is reduced to a cycle of violence and counter-violence. He was concerned about brutality and the building up of another system of exploitation at the very moment when we destroy the old one. Shandu’s point was also concrete and specific, perhaps referring to the violence in the rural areas of Natal in the late 1980s and early 1990s,⁴ and her point was also a brilliantly insightful one that explicates Fanon’s point that hatred, resentment and revenge, feelings often encouraged during the struggle to create action, cannot sustain a war of liberation. What is absolutely essential, he adds, is the force of intellect: “The rebellion gives proof of its rational basis ... and expresses its maturity”. In other words, in contrast to the brutality of some of the leaders, the rebellion uncovers its own thinking and reason “... in defiance,” Fanon adds, “to those who tend to think that shades of meaning constitute danger.” It is not the intellectual, in other words, who brings nuance and shades of meaning ... The intellectual is often in another time-frame; instead it is the political maturity of the mass movement.

Yet Fanon also warns in *The Wretched* that all progressive organisations, parties and social movements can degenerate. Just as organizations of national liberation can become chauvinistic, democratic movements can become professionalized and authoritarian. The transformation into its opposite is, however, neither an iron law nor simply the result of external pressure. In fact, inasmuch as Fanon believes that it is the subjective powers – namely, the hands and brains – of Africans that will create new beginnings on the continent, Fanon’s politics insists on absolute vigilance and checking practice by principle. The achievements of liberation movements become part of the struggle’s history; they are never lost, even if the movements later degenerate.

⁴ I am indebted to Richard Pithouse for this insight.

In the colonial context, Fanon argues, there is no truthful behaviour but there is a veracity: the poor, the unemployed, the excluded, in short the damned of the earth, are “the truth” because they express the truth of the “national cause,” namely promised land, promised bread and promised freedom. This claim has been a cause of some concern among some critics (see Bhabha 2004), dismissed as an essentialism or religiosity. For Fanon the wretched are the truth of the colonial system. Beginning from the absolute as substance, Fanon moves to the absolute as subject. The wretched of the earth are the truth and become the truth in the very movements of liberation. And, Fanon adds, “we have every right to ask ourselves whether this truth is real” (2004:162, 1968:218). The social liberation is a difficult and contested process. It never occurs on a straight line and while the struggle itself provides access to new truths, “Nobody,” Fanon says in *The Wretched*, “has a monopoly on truth” (Fanon 2004, 138).

Rather than as a directive, truth is a collective political endeavour and like Fanon’s concept of education, it emerges with political subjectivity through careful relationships, trials, and mishaps, aware of the “inadequacies, weaknesses and paltriness of their first attempts”(Marx).

Fanon, the revolutionary, looks to continuing the work, the deepening cycle—wary of the blind alleys, the intellectual laziness and arrogance, and ideological failings of the first iterations; regional and local threats, not only that politics and political organizational be decentralized, but that radically different notions of time be developed; time to deepen, democratise and make clear the relationships between militants and the mass movements (intimated in his essay on the radio). Time to discuss with the people who have long been told to be silent so that they can become the decision makers. Without that fundamental temporal change, “development,” whether called capitalist or socialist, is just technical and hierarchical. The necessity to decentralize politics, to encourage grassroots democracy and to make absolutely open discussion and decision making is the task of being a protagonist and the intellectual can only do so through a fundamental shift in hearing inside the “school of the people”.

Thus when Fanon calls on those “comrades” (an organization in the “eminent-historical sense” [Marx:1860]) who have embraced decolonization to “work out new concepts” (1968:316) and take the “rationality of revolt” (1968:146) as the point of departure, a wholly different attitude to praxis is required, which begins from a new conception of time: Fanon argues at the beginning of *Black Skin* that every human problem must be considered from the standpoint of time. He argues in *The Wretched* that time is the yardstick, the space of human development. Time must be found to explain and struggle against the spirit of discouragement and against an uncritical developmentalism. He insists that the time supposedly lost treating a worker like a human being will be gained by rethinking everything from the ground up.

I do not come empty headed to Fanon; of course, nobody does. I come with specific concerns and my readings are influenced by my thinking for over thirty years, but I still regard him as an original thinker who is very much part of his time but has something to think about ours.

While *The Wretched* does reflect on the Algerian and African situation, it provides no blueprints and there are no a priori to a long, reflective and engaged dialectic. Fanon is a source, a guide, a way of thinking that requires, if you will, a shift in the geography of reason. That being said my reading is infused with Raya Dunayevskaya's Marxist-humanism. I can't really say where one thing starts and another ends. I was a student of Dunayevskaya in the 1980s and have been thinking of Fanon and Marxist-Humanism for 30 years (of course there are other thinkers and theoreticians who have been influential), but Dunayevskaya's Marx is my Marx and central to that Marx is Dunayevskaya's conception of the movement from practice as a form of theory. In *Marxism and Freedom*, published in 1958, she describes how Marx completely redeveloped *Capital* based on movements from practice, the black struggle in the US during the civil war of the 1860s, the struggle to limit the length of the working day, the brilliance and creativity of the Paris Commune and so on. The latter is central to his development of the fetish character of the commodity as well as his interest in the late 1870s, after he had written *Capital*, in the possibility of non-capitalist roads to socialism (which is absolutely essential to understand Marx and understand the contemporary world). I make this point not as a caveat, nor to say that I claim Fanon as a Marxist, that is not my point; what they do share is the idea that the oppressed are not simply a force, but are reason. In other words, movements of the wretched of the earth, working people, poor people do not only think and are rational but their thought is indeed the reason for social change and the basis for conceiving a new society.

Philosophically, the problem with the movement from practice as a form of theory is that one has to know when it is when it isn't. And one can't know that before hand, so one has to be continually open to the world and its breaths, as Césaire puts it; and at the same time always self-critical, always questioning and always listening and thinking.

In a sense my book *Fanonian Practices* is a provocation. It is not a theoretical book. It is not concerned with debates between theoreticians (reduced in the main to footnotes) but also it is too theoretical for the activists looking for a program for action. I say in the beginning that I have probably upset both groups of potential readers. But I do think of it as a philosophical work, representing history and its process through a South African lens. It begins in the 1970s with what I argue is Biko's *Fanonian Practice* and the idea of its critique of white liberalism having resonance in our neoliberal times. As Biko put it in an interview 1972 printed in our book *Biko Lives*:

This is one country where it would be possible to create a capitalist black society, if whites were intelligent, if the nationalists were intelligent. And that capitalist black society, black middle class would be very effective . . . South Africa could succeed in putting across to the world a pretty convincing, integrated picture, with still seventy percent of the population being underdogs (Biko 2008: 41–2).

Certainly it has put across a pretty convincing picture. So the second part of the book continues with a Fanonian critique of post-apartheid South Africa, what Fanon calls its "social treason" and also its limited political emancipation.

In an almost counter-intuitive way, then, at least from the point of view of power politics but not from Fanon's last writings, it is not surprising that new articulations of humanism are being expressed in South Africa, even 16 years after the end of apartheid; perhaps because capitalism--namely neo-apartheid plus BEE--has won. It seems abundantly clear to many that struggle is not over and that in such CRISIS ideas of liberation can be generated from the bottom up.

Paradoxically or not (not for me) the shift in thinking can be aided by social struggles and those thinking about these struggles. Fanon makes the point that the intellectual is always out of step with the people who are struggling to be free. They have changed, but the university trained intellectual keeps repeating the old mantras. We need to catch up, and to catch up necessitates opening our minds and ears not only to history from below, but how that thought is challenging thinking. This was the challenge I felt was articulated by the shack dweller's movement Abahlali baseMjondolo, which I argue has reinvigorated Fanon's concepts: the importance of space, the notion of citizenship, the threat of xenophobia and chauvinism and their notion of a living humanism.

Thus rather than an anti-intellectualism, *Practicing Fanon* is then a fundamental provocation to intellectualizing Fanon in academic discourses. It is a deeply intellectual-praxis. Abahlali's writing and thinking is a philosophic source, not simply a practice. It is not that I bring some translation; they represent themselves, but I am interested in bringing their thinking into conversation with Fanon. When they say "speak to us not about us," they are not just talking about policy people, local councillors and academics; they are also talking about people who are committed to social change. Shifting the geography of reason is then a kind of Fanonian practice, at least the kind of thing he says in the chapter on national consciousness in the *Wretched of the Earth*.

4. The call to the barricades?

This is not a call to the barricades even if it is a call to ideological combat, to have one's ears open, to not confine new development in a priori categories.

The struggle is a school, as Richard Pithouse puts it. And let's be clear, sometimes that school comes into contradiction with the academic system and can have dire costs both in terms of employment and in terms of threats of violence. Fanon talks about "snatching" knowledge from the colonial universities; he is also aware of the great sacrifices that this can entail. In *The Wretched* he makes a point to distinguish between the hobnobbing postcolonial intelligentsia and the honest intellectual who distrusts the race for positions; who is still committed to fundamental change even if presently s/he does not see its possibility.

In quite another time - namely in the anticolonial epoch of the 1950s Fanon - had a great job at Blida Psychiatric Hospital. It was what he wanted and he put enormous energy into fighting to reform how psychiatry was practiced in the hospital. He created space - both practical and intellectual (reading groups) for himself and his colleagues.

Indeed the Algerian war politicized him, radicalized him. He began to see its effects; he began to treat the tortured and the torturer. The situation became untenable and he simply couldn't continue there. The authorities were closing in on Blida, suspected as a hotbed of support for the FLN. It was dangerous. He resigned before he was picked up and began to work full time for the revolution. *The Wretched* was a critical reflection on that, its strengths, weaknesses and pitfalls.

I am not saying that the university should be given up on. It is a contested terrain, mired in assumptions about what constitutes academic research, and thus for those of us who work in the academy, one has to be very wary. The spaces of autonomy, the spaces for genuine, collaborate and political work with the poor, the excluded, the so-called illegal or marginal people, the wretched and damned, is always compromised.

What is interesting about Abahlali now 6 years after their self-organization is their understanding. It is a knowledge born of both experience and collective reflection on experience. Their idea of "citizenship" (including all who live in the shacks in democratic decision making regardless of ancestry, ethnicity, gender, age etc.) connects with Fanon's political notion of Algerianness formed in the social struggle (of everyone who wants to be part of creating the new nation, as he puts it in *Year 5 of the Algerian Revolution*). The shack dwellers, in other words, have given meaning and new concretion to Fanon's critiques and his positing of a dialectic of national consciousness that either becomes deepened in a consciousness of political and social awareness, in other words a humanism, or degenerates into chauvinism and the cycles of violence that appeared so frequently during colonialism.

What makes Abahlali smart is not the strength of collectivity, though that is important, but the principle of the centrality of meetings and discussions to their decision-making. They call it living learning. Press statements are written collectively; learning is a collective and living thing that always needs to be nurtured and is quite in contrast to bourgeois education. Of course there are individuals who are more active than others, but aware of how individuals can be co-opted, it is not about an individual but about the group as social individuals. In *The Wretched*, Fanon spoke of these meetings as the practical ethical foundation of the new society and it would be interesting to think through its philosophical implications:

He writes: "The branch meeting and the committee meeting are liturgical acts. They are privileged occasions given to a human being to listen and to speak ... and put forward new ideas ... At each meeting, the brain increases its means of participation and the eye discovers a landscape more and more in keeping with human dignity ... (197)"

There is a wonderful scene in Ken Loach's aptly named *Land and Freedom* (apt for Fanon and South Africa) which first feels, in the context of film pacing, quite tedious. Everyone is sitting around talking about what to do. It goes on for about 10 minutes or so and there is little action. Then you get it. This is politics. This is what they are fighting for; this is what the struggle is about. This is what "democracy" looks like. It is a wonderful example of the liturgical act that Fanon talks about.

Today: Unfreedom in the face of freedom

The people and all their leaders ought to know the historical law which lays down that certain concessions are the cloak for a tighter rein.

Fanon, *The Wretched*

My focus on Fanonian practices in South Africa begins with Biko's engagement with Fanon. It is an engagement made possible by the two-way road of revolutionary ideas between Black USA and South Africa at a moment (1968) when *The Wretched of the Earth* had become the "bible of the Black revolution" (and tells the story of the importance of the American Black struggle to Fanon's after life). James Cone's Black theology provided the first point of contact around the same time that George Jackson was shot and killed in the hellhole of San Quentin maximum security prison in California. In George Jackson, Fanon found a militant intellectual. In Fanon, Jackson found a source of revolutionary hope. In a Fanonian frame Jackson insisted that:

when people begin to express their disgust at the demagogic and reformist manoeuvres of the vanguard parties, they will discover in real action a new form of political activity which in no way resembles the old" (Jackson 1975 37).

In a letter to CLR James, written in 1948 just as Fanon had arrived in Lyon, Raya Dunayevskaya wrote:

If the masses are to be 'represented', then they must submit to elections and so at specific places and specific times; when masses wish, in a burst of revolution, not to be represented but to be, [they create] unheard of organizations[s].

These unheard of organizations no longer resemble the old and become concrete expressions of the idea of freedom (just as we witnessed for a moment, the self-organization of Tahrir Square). And so too with the struggles against unfreedom in post-apartheid South Africa. Fanon argues in *The Wretched* that at a certain moment the people realize that the new nation has not brought freedom at all. Their lives have not improved, land has not been redistributed, work has not become humanized, cities have not become open to all and the despotism in the rural areas has not ended. And they begin to understand the social treason of the huckster politicians. Fanon provides the method to subject post-apartheid South Africa to a test. But the important Fanonian praxis is the thinking of Abhalali baseMjondolo, which puts South Africa's "Freedom Day" (April 27) on trial by organizing "Unfreedom Day" asking the concrete and philosophical question, "Are we free?", highlighting that they are still struggling.

While unfreedom had a resonance with the great ideological work of postmodern capitalist alienation as the mind forged manacles of unfreedom, Abahlali's consciousness of "unfreedom" is a critique of post-apartheid freedom day with its hype, celebration, flags and commercialization. Writing of two kinds of freedom, the internal and the social, Lindela Figlan the vice president of Abahlali penned a poor man's view on unfreedom day. The first, "the freedom that every person in the world has inside of themselves." A kind of double consciousness which "we all had," he says, "under apartheid". And second freedom that requires an irruption into history, critically linking to the historical struggles for freedom the task of radically democratising that struggle. And in a language that echoes Fanon's they claim the struggle's meaning and history: "We have a clear understanding of what that struggle was for and it was not just to replace white politicians with black politicians. That struggle was not just to force white business to take on some partners. That struggle was to ensure that South Africa belongs, really belongs, to all who live in it;" live in it, that is, without claims of indigeneity. Citizenship is not instrumental, and freedom is not realized with houses, toilets, electricity. Freedom means that you counted as a human being. It reminds me of Fanon always asking "what is life," and railing against the many ways of living a living death and thus always demanding we work toward the type of social transformations that creates new ways of life.

Thus Abahlali says, "Delivering houses will do away with the lack of houses but it won't make us free on its own. Freedom is a way of living where everyone is important and where everyone's experience and intelligence counts."

Abahlali did not know of Fanon when they first organized, and why should they? But now they count him as one of their ancestors. The foreword to *Fanonian Practices* by S'bu Zikode, the elected president of the movement, represents a moment of recognition in the most Fanonian sense, and expresses better than I could the importance of Fanon to their struggle. And I want to conclude with a couple of quotes from him (pp vi-vii):

"Fanon believed that everyone could think. He believed that the role of the university-trained intellectual was to be inside the struggles of the people and to be inside the discussions inside the struggles of the people. There is no doubt that Fanon would have recognised the shack intellectuals in our movement. He would have discussed and debated with us as equals. Fanon believed that democracy was the rule of the people and not the rule of experts. He did not think that democracy was just about voting every five years. He saw it as a daily practice of the people."

And while Fanon is certainly being discussed in the elite universities, and this is a good thing of course (though from my experience it is often highly theorized, textualized deconstructions), it is worth pointing out that Fanon is now being discussed among Abahlali intellectuals. In a certain sense it made sense that S'bu Zikode would write the foreword to this book. But that couldn't be known beforehand; indeed now it looks so logical as a final concretization of Fanonian practices. The book could not have been written without the shack dwellers movement, not simply as a movement from practice but as intellectual practice.