

Frantz Fanon: Philosophy, Praxis and the Occult Zone

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In 2011 Achille Mbembe asserted that “the human has consistently taken on the form of waste within the peculiar trajectory race and capitalism espoused in South Africa”². He added that the end of apartheid had shifted rather than undone the lines of exclusion and dispute. Since the massacre of striking workers on the platinum mines in 2012 it has become widely accepted that the state is resorting to repressive measures to enforce these lines and contain the dispute that they occasion. With notable exceptions academic philosophy, and theory more broadly, has offered remarkably little illumination of the widening distance between the promise of national liberation and democracy and the often bitter realities of contemporary South Africa.

A Third Element

Stathis Kouvelakis offers a compelling account of another moment in space and time in which a young intellectual sought rational hope, a material basis for political hope, against the melancholy of political disappointment.³ In 1842 Karl Marx, a young man recently graduated with a PhD in Philosophy, was wrestling with the German failure to

¹ This is a considerably revised version of a paper first presented at a workshop on *African Thinking: And/At its Limits* organised in the Africana Studies & Research Centre at Cornell in June 2015. The workshop was aimed at enabling an examination of the limits of African philosophy. My contribution was an attempt to formulate a response that was also an engagement with conjectural realities in South Africa, including the re-emergence of students as a political force. I would like to express my thanks to Grant Fared for the invitation and the precision of his comments on the first draft, and to all the participants, and in particular Yousuf Al-Balushi, for a rich discussion. The usual disclaimers apply.

² Achille Mbembe ‘Democracy as Community Life’ *Johannesburg Workshop in Theory & Criticism*, 2011 http://jwtc.org.za/volume_4/achille_mbembe.htm

³ Stathis Kouvelakis *Philosophy & Revolution* Verso, London, 2003

redeem the promise of the French Revolution which had heralded the arrival of modern nationalism and democracy in Europe. He quickly realised that making the world more philosophical would require that philosophy be made more worldly, that it take its place in the actual struggles in the world. He saw that the state and capital both tended towards a repression of the political and, looking for what he called 'a third element', a constituent power, he first turned to the press arguing that the "free press is the ubiquitous vigilant eye of a people's soul . . . the spiritual mirror in which a people can see itself, and self-examination is the first condition of wisdom."⁴ Marx hoped that "an association of free human beings who educate one another"⁵ in an expanding public sphere could subordinate the state to rational, public discussion in a process of ongoing democratisation. But when, in the following year, the newspaper that he edited was banned Marx turned towards "suffering human beings who think"⁶ and to the hope that "making participation in politics, and therefore real struggles, the starting point of our criticism"⁷ could provide new grounds for commitment to democracy as a process of democratisation.⁸

⁴ Kouvelakis *Philosophy & Revolution*, p. 262.

⁵ Kouvelakis *Philosophy & Revolution*, p. 265.

⁶ Kouvelakis *Philosophy & Revolution*, p. 285.

⁷ Kouvelakis *Philosophy & Revolution*, p. 287.

⁸ Here, as in the case elsewhere in his voluminous body of work – although not consistently so, Marx's own writing fits well with critical Marxism "understood as a theory of social struggle rather than a totalizing theory of capitalist exploitation and domination and the historical necessity to defeat it. It thus emphasizes social conflict and the real ways in which some men and women struggle against capitalism" (Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar *Rhythms of the Pachakuti*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2014, p. xxx.). There is a fundamental difference between Marxism as the collaborative development and articulation of ideas from within struggle and Marxism as an attempt to legislate from what Jacques Rancière refers to as "the interior of Marxism" (*The Philosopher and His Poor*, p. 152.). But while critical Marxism enables actually existing forms of life and struggle to be understood, and engaged with, in a manner that is far superior to what Aguilar refers to as 'orthodox Marxism', which is the dominant form of Marxism in South Africa, and which often imposes meaning on to people's lives, strivings and struggles, it continues to place the question of the control and exploitation of labour at the centre of its analysis. This offers an invaluable lens for critique but, on its own, it turns the emancipation of labour from capital into a fetish with the result that other modes of domination are elided, including what Cedric Robinson refers to as the forms of political militancy that arise "from the whole historical experience of Black people and not merely from the social formations of capitalist slavery or the relations of production of colonialism" (Cedric Robinson *Black Marxism* University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1984, p. 169.).

The philosophical dogma of the day, which is often the dogma of our own time, a dogma that takes on a particular virulence in the context of racism,⁹ had argued that as a large mass of people sank into poverty they would become a rabble, a threat to society. But Marx insisted that “only one thing is characteristic, namely that lack of property and the estate of direct labour . . . form not so much an estate of civil society as the ground upon which its circles rest and move.”¹⁰ Marx, refusing to hold up abstract ideas of an alternative society to which actually existing struggles should conform, looked to the real movement of the working class - the male working class of parts of Western Europe - for principles to orientate future struggle and the material force to be able to realise them.¹¹ True to his turn to a philosophy of immanence he insisted that theory, philosophy, can become a material force when it is formulated from the perspective of the oppressed and becomes part of their constituent movement.¹² But for this to happen it must be radical in the sense that “To be radical is to grasp things by the root.

⁹ It should be noted though that the idea of ‘the rabble’ is seldom entirely conceptually distinct from racist thinking. The dispossessed of Europe, especially when taking the urban stage as political actors, have frequently been read in racialized terms by European elites.

¹⁰ Kouvelakis, *Philosophy & Revolution*, p. 312.

¹¹ Later on in his life his vision broadened considerably, extended to the colonised and enslaved and included, most famously an examination of the political potential of the Russian *mir*, or rural commune (Kevin Anderson *Marx at the Margins* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2010).

But we should recall that, as I have noted before, Marx was often acutely hostile to the idea that the ‘lumpenproletariat’ could engage in emancipatory political action (*Thought Amidst Waste: Conjunctural Notes on the Democratic Project in South Africa*, Paper for the Wits Interdisciplinary Seminar in the Humanities, WISER, University of the Witwatersrand, 28 May 2012 http://wiser.wits.ac.za/system/files/seminar/Pithouse2012_0.pdf). This has become part of the common sense of much, although not all, Marxism. In Ranci re’s scathing critique the referent of Marx’s use of the term *lumpen* “is not a class but a myth”, a myth that is “inscribed in an already constituted political mythology: bourgeois denunciations of thieves, prostitutes and escaped ‘galley slaves’ as the hidden force behind all worker and republican disturbances” (*The Philosopher and His Poor*, p. 96.).

In the contemporary moment, where the reduction of the human to waste is increasingly an urban phenomenon, and where from Bolivia to Haiti and Venezuela, as well as, although with lesser intensity, South Africa, the urban poor have emerged as political actors of significant consequence, this places a clear limit on the degree to which standard forms of Marxism, and especially what Aguilar terms ‘orthodox Marxism’, offer an optic adequate to the task of thinking actually existing modes of life and struggle.

¹² With regard to a certain figure of the worker this placed Marx at direct odds with the tradition of thought that descends from Plato and in which, in Ranci re’s formulation, “There simply are bodies that cannot accommodate philosophy – bodies marked and stigmatized by the servitude of the work for which they have been made (*The Philosopher and His Poor*, p. 32.).

But for man, the root is man himself.”¹³ For Marx this is not a matter of an enlightened intellectual bringing theory down to the people – “the educators”, he insisted in the *Theses on Feuerbach* written in 1845, “must be educated” in order to attain “the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change [that] can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.”¹⁴ He would go on, Raya Dunayevskaya argued, to “meet, theoretically, the workers’ resistance inside the factory and outside of it . . . Marx, the theoretician, created new categories out of the impulses from the workers.”¹⁵

Today the basic elements of the problematic worked through by the young Marx continue to confront any attempt to think through the failure of national liberation or liberal democracy to realise their promise. Is it realistic to aim to transcend the impasse of the present via the pure exercise of reason when both the state and capital tend towards an anti-political tendency to reduce the sphere of public reason? Or must reason be meshed with the material force constituted by those that suffer and think so that the sphere of public reason can be expanded? Of course in South Africa, as in, say,

¹³ Karl Marx ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right’, *Marxists’ Internet Archive*, 1843 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm> For Marx ‘man’ is not posed as an abstract idea – he is talking about real struggles, often improvised, locally constituted and organised around what he referred to as ‘living interests’ and ‘real wants’ (Cited in Kristin Ross *Communal Luxury* Verso, London, 2015, p. 86.).

¹⁴ Karl Marx ‘Theses On Feuerbach’, *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1845 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/>

¹⁵ Raya Dunayevskaya *Marxism & Freedom* Humanity Books, Amherst NY, 2000, p. 91. Kristin Ross, using Henri Lefebvre’s conception of the dialectic between the lived and the conceived, asserts this as a general feature of radical thought: “the thought of a movement is generated only with and after it” (*Communal Luxury* p. 92.).

But just as orthodox Marxism offers a distorted account of a complex and dynamic body of thought dissident forms of Marxism sometimes elide the problematic aspects of Marx’s legacy. Rancière argues that after the failure of the uprisings that swept through Western Europe in 1848 Marx retreated from his youthful commitment to think, dialogically, from within struggle, and, with Friedrich Engels, opposed a demand to elect a leadership of the Communist League via the mobilisation of considerable contempt towards the militants that had made this request. He writes that Marx and Engels appointed themselves as ‘representatives of the proletarian party’ and affirmed “the absolute One of science” as the “sole representation of the coming revolution” on the basis that, in Rancière’s account of the implicit logic of their position: “Only science concentrates the cutting edge of the contradiction, which is forever socially postponed and always politically stolen away” (*The Philosopher and His Poor* Duke University Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 2004, p. 103). In South Africa aspects of this account are all too familiar, albeit sometimes mediated through race and the NGO form rather than solely via the network aspiring to the status of the party or proto-party.

Bolivia¹⁶ or Haiti¹⁷, Marx's youthful ideas need to be expanded – stretched in Frantz Fanon's famous formulation¹⁸ - to take full measure of the enduring salience of the colonial experience and the manner in which contemporary forces of containment also include both imperialism and enduring nodes of white power, or power racialized as closer to white than the population as a whole, within the nation state.

Fracturing Hegemony

In South Africa in 2015 there is a growing sense that neither the promise of national liberation or democracy has been adequately redeemed. The organisational and ideological hegemony of the African National Congress (ANC) is rapidly fracturing. A decade ago the shack settlement and the urban land occupation started to become sites of acute political intensity across the country. In Durban this led to the emergence of sustained popular organisation outside of the ANC by Abahlali baseMjondolo. More recently the ANC aligned National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was largely displaced from the platinum mines, initially via workers' self-organisation, and later via the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), a union that is independent from the ANC. The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), the largest trade union in the country, has split with the ANC. On the electoral terrain the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a populist breakaway from the ANC, have made a bold entry into parliament. In recent months students, beginning at the University of Cape Town (UCT), have, largely although not always acting outside of the organisational reach of the ANC, taken decisive steps to enable direct confrontation with the enduring coloniality of universities. Although there is a significant degree to

¹⁶ Raúl Zibechi *Dispersing Power* AK Press, Oakland, 2010

¹⁷ Peter Hallward *Damming the Flood*, Verso, London, 2007

¹⁸ Frantz Fanon *The Wretched of the Earth* Penguin, London, 1976, p 31. Enrique Dussel, like Fanon linking this point to the question of how domination and exclusion are inscribed in space, makes a similar injunction with regard to Marxism as a form of global analysis: "orthodox Marxism should be recast from the point of view of a geopolitical worldwide spatiality so that it could devise a hermeneutic with appropriate categories" (*Philosophy of Liberation* WIPF & Stock, Eugene, Oregon, 1985, p.73.).

which this ferment has a fragmentary and at times contradictory character there is some sense of what Raúl Zibechi describes as a 'society in movement'.¹⁹

Ten years after apartheid Grant Farred wrote of:

the 'zone of the not-yet political' where the not-yet counterpartisan operates—the only place from which the current *nomos* can be critically undone, the only space from which a new *nomos* of the South African earth can be thought, the only concatenation of historical forces that can produce a new orientation of the political.²⁰

Today the constituent power of the new counterpartisan is still, as Fared noted with regard to the 'not-yet counterpartisan', often placed under the sign of the enemy, of white power, domestic or foreign, by the ruling party and the state. But the actor for which Fared was waiting is now, even if not always read as legitimate, indisputably present – and subject to assassination in the shanty towns of Durban, lethal police action against street protests around the country and police massacre on the mines in the North West. The new counterpartisans, and they are multiple and diverse, are not, though, committed to a coherent collective project, let alone to a project with realistic aspirations to attain hegemony.

In 2010 Pumla Gqola anticipated the possibilities for “politically inflected creative innovation”²¹ among the young. In 2015 there is no doubt that this moment has also arrived. There is a youthful ferment, in and out of universities, marked by a rapid break among young intellectuals, broadly conceived, not only with the intellectual and organizational authority of the ANC, as well as other sources of authority, including that of the academy, but also with the nature of the post-apartheid deal. As with previous moments of youthful rupture at various points during the twentieth century there is an international dimension to the current ferment. It has often taken on aspects of the

¹⁹ Raúl Zibechi *Territories in Resistance* AK Press, Oakland, 2013

²⁰ Grant Farred 'The Not-Yet Counterpartisan: A New Politics of Oppositionality', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103:4, 2004, pp. 604 – 605.

²¹ Pumla Dineo Gqola *What is Slavery to Me?* Wits University Press, 2010, p. 211.

language and some of the concerns of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States. There are also some connections, at times fruitful, between university students, and other young middle class intellectuals, with popular struggles in South Africa. These connections are not, however, generally present in a sustained and serious way. In some cases affirmations of broader solidarity in the abstract²² are accompanied by a striking lack of concern with the concrete situations and struggles of impoverished people in South Africa.

A writer as astute as Sisonke Msimang²³ has heralded this ferment among young intellectuals in terms that suggest, to play a little with a line from Aimé Césaire, a bright bird in flight through the stagnant air.²⁴ Others have seen only the evidence of the morbid symptoms that, in Gramsci's famous phrase, are characteristic of the interregnum. This pessimism has extended beyond the sort of leftism, often but not always white, that sees any discourse that extends beyond a narrowly conceived concern with class as ultimately reactionary. If there is a poem of the moment it would, by virtue of how often it has been invoked, be Yeats's *Second Coming*.²⁵ I have argued elsewhere that the liberal consensus is breaking down from above and from below²⁶ and that in order to make adequate sense of this conjuncture reason must unshackle itself from liberalism.²⁷ This is not solely a matter of moving from the affirmation of abstract rights to real entitlements, or extending the domain of public disputation and state or popular power into the domain currently monopolised as a site of private power via the market. Liberalism, still rooted in the idea that "Despotism is a legitimate

²² Paulo Freire insists that solidarity is only possible when the oppressed are understood "as persons who have been unjustly dealt with" rather than as an "abstract category" - such as a race, class or gender (Paulo Freire *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Continuum, New York, 2005, p. 67.).

²³ Sisonke Msimang 'The old is dying and the young ones have just been born', *Africa is a Country*, 15 May 2015 <http://africasacountry.com/the-old-is-dying-and-the-young-ones-have-just-been-born>

²⁴ The original line describes "the stagnant air undisturbed by the bright flight of a bird" (Aimé Césaire *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, Bloodaxe, Tarsset, 1995, p. 83.).

²⁵ Richard Pithouse 'After the End of Our Innocence', *The Con*, 29 September 2014, <http://www.theconmag.co.za/2014/09/29/after-the-end-of-sas-innocence/>

²⁶ Richard Pithouse 'South Africa in the Twilight of Liberalism', *Kafila*, 19 April 2015 <http://kafila.org/2015/04/19/south-africa-in-the-twilight-of-liberalism-richard-pithouse/>

²⁷ Richard Pithouse 'Reason After Liberalism' *South African Civil Society Information Service*, 20 April 2015 <http://www.sacsis.org.za/site/article/2352>

mode of government in dealing with barbarians”²⁸, has always been organised around a distinction between the sacred and the profane²⁹, sometimes spatialized and always racialized, in which, in the words of John Locke, equality, far from being a universal principle, applies only to “creatures of the same species and rank”.³⁰ Liberalism cannot be disentangled from racism – that requires an affirmation of equality as a universal and immediate principle.³¹ And as Peter Hallward notes any affirmation of a genuine universal (as opposed to the false universalism of colonialism and its afterlives – in a word liberalism) is inherently divisive: “there can be no mobilisation of the universal interest that does not immediately threaten particular privileged beneficiaries of the old status quo”.³²

Summoning Fanon

Although people like Thomas Sankara and Chris Hani are often invoked the primary figure of the militant among young intellectuals in the contemporary South African moment is clearly Steve Biko. The most significant thinker of the moment is, without a doubt, Frantz Fanon – a militant proponent of a universal humanity and, therefore, like Biko, a particularly divisive figure in the liberal sensibility. Fanon’s books, together with those of Biko and, also, Mbembe, are among the most frequently stolen titles in bookshops.³³ His name is appended to all kinds of projects and positions. From the urban land occupation, to the opinion pages of the newspapers, the university and parliament Fanon’s name has, as Mabogo More has noted, attained an extraordinary

²⁸ John Stuart Mill *Utilitarianism*,. *On Liberty & Considerations on Representative Government* J.M. Dent & Sons, London, 1976, p. 73.

²⁹ Domenico Losurdo *Liberalism: A Counter-History* Vero, London, 2011

³⁰ John Locke *Two Treatises of Government* J.M. Dent & Sons, London, 1986, p. 118.

³¹ For Jacques Rancière “To pose equality as a goal is to hand it over to the pedagogues of progress, who widen endlessly the distance that they promise to abolish. Equality is a presupposition, an initial axiom – or it is nothing.” *The Philosopher and His Poor* p. 223.

³² Peter Hallward *Absolutely Postcolonial*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2001, p.xv.

³³ Isabel Hofmeyr ‘What discerning book thieves tell us about a country’s reading culture’, *The Conversation*, 29 June 2015 <https://theconversation.com/what-discerning-book-thieves-tell-us-about-a-countrys-reading-culture-43799>

presence in South Africa.³⁴ This phenomenon is overwhelmingly, although not exclusively, constituted via intellectual and political practices which take place outside of the formal research and teaching programmes undertaken within the academy.³⁵

Fanon's name has become so ubiquitous in the public sphere that it is not unusual for both protagonists in a debate, even when neither of them are taking a recognisably Fanonian position, to seek to buttress their positions with references to Fanon. Even the bellicose former head of the police, Bheki Cele, has cited Fanon³⁶ and his name is increasingly joining those of figures like Marx and Lenin in the statements of politicians who wish to speak with a certain kind of political authority.

Fanon's name is frequently mobilised as if it carried the kind of authority, sometimes theological or prophetic rather than philosophical or political, that can be deployed to end rather than to enrich a debate. It is used to authorise all kinds of positions and power and, in some instances, the ideas attributed to Fanon cannot be sustained by even a cursory reading of his texts, or a basic familiarity with his biography. But there are also many young people reading Biko and Fanon, and learning about their lives as thinkers committed to action, with real seriousness. There have been extraordinary public intellectual contributions from brilliant young people. There is clearly a growing number of, in particular young people, committed to taking Fanon seriously as a thinker.

Like the young Marx, Fanon poses the free flow of ideas against the degeneration of democratic promise and insists that the living human being rather than an abstract ideal, be it philosophical or statistical, be the measure of society. But the South African crisis is not solely a matter of the inability of a set of liberal political arrangements to redeem their democratic promise in so far as the working class continues to be

³⁴ Mabogo More 'Locating Fanon in Post-Apartheid South Africa', *Journal of Asian & African Studies*, 2014, pp. 1 – 15.

³⁵ With notable exceptions, the contribution to this turn towards Fanon from within the academy has often been via self-directed and organised reading and discussion by students.

³⁶ Bheki Cele, 'Forward', *South African Police Services Annual Report*, 2010, http://www.saps.gov.za/about/stratframework/annual_report/2009_2010/1_content_foreword_etc.pdf

exploited. In the main the often very crude forms of Marxism present in South Africa are not always well equipped to take on board the reality that, as Mbembe notes, “a rising superfluous population is becoming a permanent fixture of the South African social landscape with little possibility of ever being exploited by capital. Only a dwindling number of individuals can now claim to be workers in the traditional sense of the term”.³⁷ Moreover the Marxism that is most often ready-to-hand has frequently not developed an adequate understanding of the salience of race.³⁸ South Africa is a colonial creation that has not fully escaped the iron cage in which it was born. In 2015 it is simultaneously colony and postcolony and we find ourselves, in Gqola’s phrase, “both free and not entirely free of apartheid”.³⁹ This reality is central to the appeal of Fanon, a thinker who, uniquely, theorised the pathologies of both the colony and the postcolony.

Affirmation & Critique

There is an aspect of the current moment that has a certain resonance with Walter Benjamin’s 9th thesis on history. Benjamin, as is well known, offers an image of the angel of history with his face turned to the past. He writes that “Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed”. But the storm blowing in from Paradise, the storm of ‘progress’, propels him into the future “while the pile of debris before him grows skywards.”⁴⁰

In and around the South African academy in 2015 the desire on the part of young intellectuals to anoint and awaken their own dead is evidently motivated by a

³⁷ Mbembe, *Democracy as Community Life*, 2011

³⁸ For a recent analysis of Marxist thought in South Africa see Steven Friedman *Race, Class and Power: Harold Wolpe & the Radical Critique of Apartheid*, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2015

³⁹ Gqola, *What is Slavery to Me?*, p. 2 .

⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin *Illuminations*, Pimlico, London, 1999, p. 249.

commitment to a fuller and freer presence in the here and now. This should not surprise us. After all Fanon was clear that it was, precisely, the inherited weight of racist culture that, as a student in Lyon, had crushed his desire to “come lithe and young into a world that was ours and to help build it together”.⁴¹

The imperative to affirm a body of thought and a history of action that has been silenced and denigrated is not solely present amid the structural racism of the South African academy. It remains the case that in the commanding heights of the global academy “(t)he discourse which witnesses to Africa’s knowledge” often continues to take “geographical or anthropological”⁴² forms; that the process of “speaking rationally about Africa” continues to encounter systematic difficulties and that “the African human experience constantly appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a negative interpretation”.⁴³

However the requirements of an emancipatory engagement with the philosophical dimensions of political thought clearly exceed the necessity to affirm an archive of African, Black and Southern thought against the colonial archive. In the South African universities that are in the process of subordinating themselves to the state and the ruling party, the affirmation of the African archive, is, in some instances, marked by what Paulin Hountondji, in his scathing critique of ethnophilosophy, described as a “crass indifference to the daily tragedies of our increasingly fascistic countries”.⁴⁴ There is also a degree to which state power, often repressive and predatory, seeks to cloak itself in this body of thought with the result that it becomes, to stay with Hountondji,

⁴¹ Frantz Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks* Grove Press, New York, 1967, pp. 112-113.

⁴² V. Y. Mudimbe *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*, Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 175.

⁴³ Achille Mbembe *On the Postcolony* University of California Press, 2001, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Paulin Hountondji *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality* Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 170.

part of the “machine that is mounted against our consciences”⁴⁵, “a discourse of power” and “an ideological placebo”.⁴⁶

The limits to the affirmation of the African archive exceed the risks of its absorption into the ideological machinery of constituted power. The world is in constant motion and the human, is frequently, as Fanon asserts, “motion toward the world”⁴⁷ and always capable of what he termed, throughout his life as a writer, ‘mutation’. In the domain of the political the urgency of the imperative to think the new, to develop an orientation towards the future - what Mbembe calls “a radical future orientated politics in this world and these times”⁴⁸ – an orientation in thought and practice that aims to transcend rather than deny or accept the realities of the present - is undeniable. As Alain Badiou has insisted:

A political situation is always singular; it is never repeated. Therefore political writings – directives or commands – are justified inasmuch as they inscribe not a repetition but, on the contrary, the unrepeatable. When the content of a political statement is a repetition the statement is rhetorical and empty. It does not form part of thinking. On this basis one can distinguish between true political activists and politicians . . . True political activists think a singular situation; politicians do not think.⁴⁹

Although the power of capital over land, labour and society has grown considerably stronger since Marx and Engels announced its arrival as a force on the global stage its icy waters have not washed away all modes of domination and exclusion other than “that single, unconscionable freedom — Free Trade”⁵⁰. On the contrary capital has continued to operate differently in different spaces and with regard to different people.

⁴⁵ Hountondji, *African Philosophy*, p. 170.

⁴⁶ Hountondji, *African Philosophy*, p. 171. To add, at random, just one recent example to the reference made, above, to the citation of Fanon by the former head of the police, the new and acutely xenophobic visa regulations in South Africa have been justified with reference to Fanon. Mayihlome Tshwete ‘Travel regulations well considered’, *The Star*, 30 July 2015, <http://www.iol.co.za/the-star/travel-regulations-well-considered-1.1893221#.Vbxu2Pmqgko>

⁴⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 41.

⁴⁸ Mbembe, *Democracy as Community Life*

⁴⁹ Alain Badiou *Ethics* Verso, London, 2003, p. 82.

⁵⁰ Karl Marx & Friederich Engels *The Communist Manifesto* Penguin, London, 1985, p. 82.

In South Africa the intersection of race and capitalism continues to generate lines of exclusion, domination, exploitation and dehumanization – as well as compromise and incorporation - that exceed those that are sometimes taken to emerge as generic features of life under capitalism. Here - as in the Congo, or Mexico or India – critiques of contemporary capitalism, and the forms of political containment and contestation associated with it, developed in response to realities in the North Atlantic world are often useful, and sometimes invaluable, but seldom, if ever, definitive. The dependence of many intellectuals in and around the academy on concepts uncritically imported from Western Europe and North America has not been fruitful and is one part of the explanation for the general alienation of academic radicalism from popular strivings and struggles, and the ideas developed in these strivings and struggles.

Philosophy as Praxis

There is an urgent need to think our own situation in space, and in race, as well as in time – as well as, of course, the gendered nature of the social relations that are emerging in the current conjuncture. At the end of his first book Fanon declares his willingness to “undertake the possibility of annihilation in order that two or three truths may cast their eternal brilliance over the world”.⁵¹ It is certainly possible to read this declaration, perhaps in conversation with Badiou,⁵² as an eminently philosophical militancy. He concludes his last book by insisting that “we must work out new concepts”.⁵³ This statement, perhaps this time in conversation with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,⁵⁴ can be read in similar terms.

When the necessity for political thought, including in its philosophical dimensions, to take the particularity of specific situations seriously is itself taken seriously it also becomes necessary to think seriously about the ways in which the concept, in some

⁵¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 228.

⁵² *Being & Event* Continuum, London, 2001; *Logic of Worlds* Continuum, London, 2009.

⁵³ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p.255.

⁵⁴ Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari *What is Philosophy?* Verso, London, 1994

accounts the central feature of philosophical thought, “has a becoming that involves its relationship with concepts situated on the same plane”.⁵⁵ It is well known that there is often a generational aspect to the production of new concepts, and new sets of concepts. But for Fanon while the development of radical reason, which is to say emancipatory reason, which is, in turn, to say universal reason,⁵⁶ certainly includes conversation with philosophy as it is defined by Hountondji,⁵⁷ the plane of becoming on which this work constitutes itself is that of struggle – the struggles of the damned of the earth.

A conception of philosophy that departs from the understanding that, to return to Benjamin, “the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” and that, “it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency”⁵⁸ requires not just awakening the dead so that they can become totems in the present but, also, bringing their work into a new conversation that, fully cognisant of the accumulation of catastrophe, is willing to confront the approaching storm. In the Fanonian paradigm the most significant location for this work is within the struggles of the oppressed. This is the work of praxis⁵⁹, of what Antonio Gramsci termed the “common work of clarification” and “reciprocal education” or, in more explicitly partisan terms, “communist practice: discussion in common to arrive together at the truth”.⁶⁰ What Gramsci called the philosophy of praxis is complex terrain but at its heart, ethically and

⁵⁵ Deleuze & Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p.18.

⁵⁶ Affirming the universal capacity for reason, the universal capacity for the communication of reason, and the prospect for universal political principles are all perfectly viable positions. But given that, as Badiou insists, “all true universality is devoid of a centre” (*Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003, p. 19.) the materiality that always undergirds the practice of reason means that universality cannot be attained in the absolute. Gordon prefers the formulation “reaching for more universalizing practices” rather than “the universal, because of the fundamental incompleteness at the heart of being human, the paradox of reaching beyond particularity is simultaneous humility of understanding the expanse and possibility of reality and human potential” (Gordon, *What Fanon Said*, p. 132.).

⁵⁷ “[P]hilosophy is not a system but a history” (Hountondji, *African Philosophy*, p.71.). Peter Thomas writes that in Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis “The word ‘philosophy’ remained, but the form of philosophy had undergone a sea-change” (*The Gramscian Moment* Brill, Leiden, 2009, p.17.).

⁵⁸ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 248.

⁵⁹ The word praxis has unfortunately been elided in the English translations of Fanon’s work.

⁶⁰ Antonio Gramsci ‘Workers’ Democracy’, *L’Ordine Nuovo*, 21 June 1919, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/1919/06/workers-democracy.htm>

epistemologically, is the idea of reciprocity – pithily summed by Gramsci in a phrase that reaches back to *The Theses on Feuerbach*: “every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher”.⁶¹ It affirms what we could, following Jacques Rancière, conceivably call a “communism of intelligence”.⁶² It has a certain resonance, as both an ethical axiom and a political strategy, to the idea that, in Badiou’s formulation: “Wherever a human collective is working in the direction of equality, the conditions are met for everyone to be a philosopher.”⁶³ In this respect it is fundamentally at odds with the reading of Lenin, common to both Stalinist and some currents of Trotskyist thought in South Africa, in which “a Leninist party is in essence a radical intelligentsia that says we have the right to rule”.⁶⁴

The turn to Fanon in contemporary South Africa has largely been animated by energies incited, honed and organised outside the formal teaching and research undertaken within the academy. But the attempt to think through this moment from within the academy doesn’t require an entirely new return to Fanon’s texts. In 1996 Ato Sekyi-Otu began his brilliant new reading of *The Damned of the Earth* by announcing that “The time has indeed come to remember Fanon”.⁶⁵ For Sekyi-Otu the urgency of the injunction to remember Fanon exceeded the imperative to address new questions to old texts, questions appropriate to new locations in space and time. He was centrally

⁶¹ Antonio Gramsci *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* Laurence & Wishart: London, 1971, p. 350.

⁶² Jacques Rancière ‘Communists without Communism’, *The Idea of Communism*, Eds. Costas Douzinas & Žižek, Verso, London, 2010, pp. 167-178.

⁶³ Alain Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*, 2012, Verso, London, p. 37. Gramsci argues, in a manner that has some resonance with the idea of ‘living politics’ developed in Abahlali baseMjondolo, that a philosophy of praxis must begin from common sense, “in order to demonstrate that ‘everyone’ is a philosopher” with the aim of “renovating and making ‘critical’ an already existing activity”. Cited in Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, p.377 cf. ‘To Resist All Degradations and Divisions: S’bu Zikode in interview with Richard Pithouse *Interface* 2(2), 2009, pp. 22-45.

⁶⁴ Kristin Ross *May ’68 & its Afterlives*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2002, p.75. In South Africa this logic (which can take on a messianic dimension that can offer a narcissistic intoxication that can take on cultish forms), and the ruthless attempts to crush or delegitimize modes of struggle that emerge outside of its authority (which are sometimes characteristic of the obscene underside of this mode of politics), can intersect with that of imperial and racial vectors of domination. Of course there are also very different readings of Leninism. For a recent instance of the use of Lenin as a theorist of dual-power see George Ciccariello-Maher *We Created Chávez: A People’s History of the Venezuelan Revolution*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.

⁶⁵ Ato Sekyi-Otu *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience* Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1996, p. 10.

concerned with what he termed ‘the postcolonial condition’ - a morass of suffering emerging at the intersection of the power of predatory and authoritarian nationalist elites with that of foreign overlords – and, in particular, its meaning for the new democracy in South Africa.

In many respects South Africa is following a well-worn path into the crisis of the postcolony or the postcolonial condition. This lends a certain urgency to Skeyi-Otu’s work as what he calls “a postindependence reader”.⁶⁶ But, like Zimbabwe a decade ago, the crisis is characterised by the simultaneous presence of enduring colonial features and the pathologies of the postcolony. The evident injustices of the former are often cynically misused to legitimate the active exploitation of the latter which, in turn, are, with equal cynicism, mobilised against demands for the state to enforce justice with regard to the former. One result of this situation is that critique that does not simultaneously address the pathologies of both the colony and the postcolony risks inadvertent complicity with that towards which it sustains silence. In South Africa in 2015 we also have to read Fanon with his interlocutors from societies that, like the United States, retain colonial features.

Twenty years earlier Hountondji, in a book that, like Sekyi-Otu’s signal contribution, was grounded in an “insistence on the [philosophical] right to the universal”⁶⁷ had lamented an increasing normalisation of outright repression accompanied by modes of politics and ideology committed to “poisoning genuine thought at its source”.⁶⁸ Like Sekyi-Otu Hountondji was centrally concerned with the prospect of reason as an emancipatory force and with disentangling philosophic reason from its long enmeshment with racism. But while Hountondji affirmed reason as philosophy in the sense of an engagement with a history of thought rather than a mode of thought Sekyi-Otu, writing in scrupulous

⁶⁶ Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience*, p. 11.

⁶⁷ Hountondji *African Philosophy*, p. viii.

⁶⁸ Hountondji, *African Philosophy*, 1996, p. 170.

fidelity to Fanon's texts, and in conversation with Gramsci's philosophy of praxis,⁶⁹ affirmed radical reason as, in his revised translation of Fanon's words, "knowledge through praxis".⁷⁰ Similar readings are evident in the work of people like Lewis Gordon⁷¹ and Nigel Gibson.⁷²

Reason & the Ontological Split

Racism, as ideology, is organised around the assertion that humanity is riven by an ontological split. In the consciousness of the racist, and in the general intellect of racist social formations, this ontological split is taken as part of what Immanuel Kant called the *a priori*, the categories through which sense is made of experience.⁷³ This deception of reason, this "racist rationality"⁷⁴ results in racist societies producing forms of knowledge that, while authorised as the most fully formed instances of reason at work, are fundamentally irrational. Consequently their insistence on their right to "lay claim to sincere respect, which reason accords only to that which has stood the test of a free and public examination"⁷⁵ is an instance of ideology, ideology that functions to legitimate modes of oppression justified by the exclusion of most of humanity from a full and equal presence in the category of the human, rather than an affirmation of universal enlightenment.

In *The "North African Syndrome"*, an essay first published in 1952, Fanon wrote that in the French medical establishment:

⁶⁹ Sekyi-Otu declares that "I am tempted to call Gramsci a precocious Fanonist" (*Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*, p. 118). In recent years Gillian Hart has, following Sekyi-Otu, sought to think Fanon in conversation with Gramsci. See, in particular, her piece co-authored with Stefan Kipfer 'Translating Gramsci in the Current Conjuncture' in Michael Ekers, Gillian Hart, Stefan Kipfer and Alex Loftus [Eds.] *Gramsci: Space, Nature, Politics*, Wiley-Blackwell, London, 2013, pp. 323-344.

⁷⁰ Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*, p. 116.

⁷¹ Lewis Gordon *What Fanon Said* Fordham University Press, New York, 2015

⁷² Nigel Gibson *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination* Polity, Oxford, 2003

⁷³ Immanuel Kant *Critique of Pure Reason*, Dent, London, 1969. Kant's own racism is undeniable. See Thomas E. Hill Jr. and Bernard Boxill 'Kant and Race' in Bernard Boxill (Ed.) *Race & Racism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, pp. 448 – 471.

⁷⁴ Gordon *What Fanon Said*, p. 86.

⁷⁵ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 2.

(T)he attitude of medical personnel is very often an *a priori* attitude. The North African does not come with a substratum common to his race, but on a foundation built by the European. In other words, the North African, spontaneously, by the very fact of appearing in the scene, enters into a pre-existing framework.⁷⁶

In other words medical science in colonial France allowed *a priori* ontological assumptions to prevent it from making rational sense of experience.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, published in the same year, Fanon also offers a critique of philosophy in colonial France. He insists that the lived experience of the black person is not congruent with any (philosophically orthodox) “ontological explanation” because “The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man”.⁷⁷ Fanon stresses that racism is not only unreasonable but that it structures the *a priori* categories through which experience is mediated in a manner that makes it impossible to recognise reason expressed from black embodiment as reason: “[W]hen I was present, it was not; when it was there, I was no longer”.⁷⁸

The inability to recognise black reason as reason produces an inability to recognise black political agency – a distortion of reality all too evident in South Africa in both the historiography and contemporary attempts to think the political. In his discussion of the fact that, in the colonial imagination, the Haitian Revolution “entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable as it happened” Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes that:

the contention that enslaved Africans and their descendants could not envision freedom – let alone formulate strategies for gaining and securing

⁷⁶ Frantz Fanon *Towards the African Revolution* Monthly Review Press, New York, 1967, p. 6. Lewis Gordon, in a useful phrase, describes this attitude as “a non-empirical”. *What Fanon Said*, p. 76.

⁷⁷ Frantz Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 110.

⁷⁸ Frantz Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 119 – 120.

such freedom – was based not so much on empirical evidence as on an ontology, an implicit organization of the world and its inhabitants.⁷⁹

He goes on to show that racist ontology – which, crucially, was also foundational to the common sense of “the extreme political left” in France and England⁸⁰ - continued to structure the historiography, including the putatively radical historiography,⁸¹ of the Haitian Revolution for the next two centuries.⁸²

Lewis Gordon, riffing off Fanon as well as W.E.B. du Bois, uses the idea of illicit appearance to theorise the absence “of the right of appearance” beyond the right to appear as reasonable resulting in generalised invisibility and, also, hypervisibility – “the

⁷⁹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* Beacon Press, Boston, 1995, p. 73. Just prior to this observation he quotes a plantation manager who declares that: “I live tranquilly in the midst of them without a single thought of their uprising unless that was fomented by the whites themselves” (*Silencing the Past*, p. 72). Fanon argues that colonial ideas about oppressed people often continue to constitute the common sense of the national bourgeoisie after independence. A similar point has been made with regard to elite nationalism by the subaltern studies school (e.g. Partha Chatterjee *The Nation and Its Fragments* Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993). This phenomenon has often been acutely present in post-apartheid South Africa, both in the ruling party and in nationalist and socialist politics outside of it. To offer just one example in 2014 Gwede Mantashe, ANC secretary general, declared, in response to an ongoing miners’ strike that “The reality is that it is a Swedish citizen who is at the centre of anarchy in the platinum belt” (Peter Ramothwala ‘Platinum strike ‘political’’, *The New Age*, 9 June 2014 <http://thenewage.co.za/mobi/Detail.aspx?NewsID=127730&CatID=1009>). This ‘reality’ was an *a priori* ontological assumption that had very little to do with empirical reality. More than two centuries later the logic here is the same as that of the plantation manager cited by Trouillot.

⁸⁰ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, p. 82.

⁸¹ Gordon’s observation that one can be “economically radical but racially conservative” is of vital import (*What Fanon Said*, p.12). A commitment to socialism (or anarchism or, perhaps especially, the vitalist currents of autonomism) does not magically transform one into a beautiful soul floating above the weight of history in the radiant light of the “innocence” that comes with “the irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist” (Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri *Empire* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, p.413.). It is this delusion that explains the virulence of the (often but not always raced) narcissistic rage of the radical who finds their desire to be the one to lead the oppressed to their redemption spurned by actually existing modes of popular struggle and organisation. Gordon, referring to Heinz Kohut, describes narcissistic rage as “hatred of limitations in one’s desire to live without limitations. The enraged narcissist desires to be beautiful, or special without limitation, the most exceptional, and so on, to the point of becoming, in a word, godlike” (*What Fanon Said*, p. 41.).

⁸² In view of the degree to which *a priori* assumptions about the political capacities of people who are black and impoverished shape the common sense of much of the middle class left in the academy and NGOs with regard to actually existing forms of popular struggle there may be some benefit in taking seriously the Maoist injunction - ‘No investigation no right to speak’ - which was taken up in a very different context from its original formulation in China in France in May ’68. Without the ability to draw a clear distinction between knowledge based on assumption and knowledge based on an attempt to grapple with reality it is very difficult to root discourse in the empirical rather than the *a priori*. Kristin Ross offers an account of this in *May ’68 & its Afterlives*. Cf. Richard Pithouse ‘No Investigation No Right to Speak?’, *The Frantz Fanon Blog*, 26 January 2015 <http://readingfanon.blogspot.com/2015/01/no-investigation-no-right-to-speak.html>

effect of which is the erasure of individuating or contextualizing considerations - that is, human invisibility".⁸³

Lewis and Jane Anna Gordon, writing together, argue that across space and time elites generally assume that the system in which they have prospered is ultimately good and that the people that disrupt its smooth functioning must be problem people – even monsters. Gordon and Gordon point out that in anti-black societies, black people are rendered monstrous “when they attempt to live and participate in the wider civil society and engage in processes of governing among whites . . . Their presence in society generally constitutes crime”.⁸⁴ “When you come down to it” Fanon wrote in *The North African Syndrome*, “the North African is a simulator, a liar, a malingerer, a sluggard, a thief”.⁸⁵

Fanon begins the pivotal fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* with the cauterisation of an affirmation of a desire for sociality: “I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.”⁸⁶ The chapter concludes with the defeat of all attempts to attain recognition in a racist world: “I wanted to rise, but the disemboweled silence fell back upon me, its wings paralyzed. Without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep”.⁸⁷

Fanon’s response to the impossibility of a dialectic of recognition⁸⁸ in a racist context is not to give up on the aspiration of a world of mutuality, of universal humanism (predicated on a universal ontology) – he still aspires to a world that

⁸³ Fanon, *Towards the African Revolution*, p.7.

⁸⁴ Lewis Gordon & Jane Anna Gordon *Of Divine Warning: Reading Disaster in the Modern Age*, Paradigm Publishers, Boulder, 2009, p. 49.

⁸⁵ Fanon, *The North African Syndrome*, p. 7.

⁸⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 109.

⁸⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 140.

⁸⁸ See Gordon, *What Fanon Said*

will recognise “the open door of every consciousness”⁸⁹ - but to accept that he has found himself in a world “in which I am summoned into battle”⁹⁰ and to commit to action: “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, having taken thought, prepares to act.”⁹¹ In Gordon’s estimation the Fanonian position is that “Legitimacy doesn’t emerge from the proof of cultural heritage or racial authenticity, it emerges . . . [Fanon] argues, from active engagement in struggles for social transformation and building institutions and ideas that nourish and liberate the formerly colonized.”⁹²

This commitment to praxis is a politics that, in Gordon’s formulation, requires a commitment to “meeting people on the terrain where they live”⁹³ with a view to forging what, as noted above, Mbembe calls “a radical future orientated politics in this world and these times”.⁹⁴ Such a politics, it is asserted here, must be grounded in what S’bu Zikode first called a ‘living politics’⁹⁵ and what Lewis Gordon calls ‘living thought’ or ‘thinking as a living activity’.⁹⁶ It requires a decisive break with the idea, all too frequently present in South Africa, that radical politics

⁸⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 223.

⁹⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 228.

⁹¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 222.

⁹² Gordon *What Fanon Said*, p. 126.

⁹³ Gordon, *What Fanon Said*, p. 7. This requires taking seriously people’s lived reality (in its material and symbolic forms) – including, among other things, what Lefebvre calls ‘everyday life’ (*Critique of Everyday Life*, Verso, London, 2014), what Gramsci calls ‘common sense’ (*The Prison Notebooks*) and the social forces that inhere in what John Holloway refers to as “the daily weaving of community” (‘Forward to the German Edition’ in Zibechi *Dispersing Power*) and which, he argues, are the foundation of any sustained popular revolt. In formerly colonized countries in which settler power, or other forms of raced power, continue to shape society in significant ways it is often also essential to take language and ideas and practices with pre-colonial origins seriously.

⁹⁴ Mbembe, *Democracy as Community Life*

⁹⁵ Zikode, *To Resist All Divisions & Degradations*

⁹⁶ Lewis Gordon *Disciplinary Decadence*, Paradigm Press, Boulder, 2009. The young Marx uses the term in a similar fashion. The use of the term ‘living’ as an adjective to describe modes of thought and politics that have a vital connection to lived experience – a discursive phenomenon that arises independently in academic philosophy and popular struggle in contemporary South Africa – reaches towards an opposition to the ossification and reification of ideas, ideas that may well have originally emerged within the vortex of actually existing struggle and which may well now be mobilised to contain, silence or delegitimize new forms of thought and struggle. Gramsci warns that “even the philosophy of praxis tends to become ideology in the worst sense of the word, that is to say a dogmatic system of eternal and absolute truths (*Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp. 406 – 407).

is fundamentally a matter of rallying ‘the masses’ to the authority of a small group of people who, whether situated in a network, groupuscule, proto-party, party or NGO, imagine themselves to be an enlightened vanguard in possession of the sacred knowledge of the elect.

This is not the apocalyptic politics that, as is sometimes the case in Aimé Césaire’s work, is more concerned with eschatology than praxis. In the *Notebook of Return to my Native Land* Césaire, in a manner that in some respects anticipates some currents in contemporary Afro-pessimism, affirms that the only thing worth starting is “The end of the world!”⁹⁷ and anticipates the one glorious moment⁹⁸, the brilliant new dawn in which “the volcanoes will break out and the naked water will sweep away the ripe stains of the sun and nothing will remain but a tepid bubbling pecked at by sea birds – the beach of dreams, and demented awakening”⁹⁹, a rising of a new sun that would “burst open the life of the shacks like an over-ripe pomegranate.”¹⁰⁰ In this vision, in which the political is sublimated into the theological, the authentic radical gesture is, ultimately, to disavow the world as it is and to wait for the birth of a new world.

Again unlike Césaire Fanon does not accept the ontological split introduced into the conception of humanity authorised by colonial racism. His evident commitment to the universal¹⁰¹, and action to affirm a universal humanism¹⁰², situates him in a line of black radical thought that runs from Toussaint Louverture¹⁰³ to Biko¹⁰⁴ and Jean-Bertrand

⁹⁷ Césaire, *Notebook of Return*, p. 99.

⁹⁸ At times this is framed in strikingly masculinist terms.

⁹⁹ Césaire, *Notebook of Return*, p. 73.

¹⁰⁰ Césaire, *Notebook of Return*, p. 79.

¹⁰¹ Richard Pithouse ‘That the tool never possess the man’: taking Fanon’s humanism seriously’, *Politikon*, 30(1), 2003, p. 107-131. In view of the recent publication in *Politikon* of malicious fraud, articulated to a long campaign of slander – evidently dishonest and racist - linked to a faction of the left with a well-known history of serious sectarian thuggery, and the editor’s denial of a full and fair right to reply, I cite this journal under protest and affirm, with others, that I will no longer publish there.

¹⁰² Richard Pithouse ‘The Open Door of Every Consciousness’ *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 112(1), 2013, pp. 91-98.

¹⁰³ It was in the name of the “eyes of humanity” that Louverture, writing with two others, excoriated the slave owners in 1792 (*Jean-Bertrand Aristide presents Toussaint Louverture: The Haitian Revolution Verso*, London, 2008, p. 7.).

Aristide.¹⁰⁵ It has a striking resonance with the constant insistence on the barricades on South African streets of words to the effect of ‘we are human not animal’.¹⁰⁶

But like Césaire Fanon’s radical vision is not, at all, a commitment to what Césaire, writing in 1956, termed ‘abstract equality’. Césaire remarks that:

To prevent the development of all national consciousness in the colonized, the colonizer pushes the colonized to desire an abstract equality. But

¹⁰⁴ Steve Biko *I Write What I Like* Raven Press, Johannesburg, 1996

¹⁰⁵ “Everything comes back, in the end, to the simple principle that *tout moun se moun* – every person is indeed a person, every person is capable of thinking things through for themselves. Those who don’t accept this, when they look at the *nègres* of Haiti – and consciously or unconsciously, that’s what they see – they see people who are too poor, too crude, too uneducated, to think for themselves. They see people who need others to make their decisions for them. It’s a colonial mentality, in fact, and still very widespread among our political class. It’s also a projection: they project onto the people a sense of their own inadequacy, their own inequality in the eyes of the master” (Peter Hallward ‘An Interview with Jean-Bertrand Aristide’, *London Review of Books*, 29(4), 2007 <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n04/peter-hallward/an-interview-with-jean-bertrand-aristide>).

¹⁰⁶ The affirmation of the humanity of the oppressed has constantly, and in all languages, been a feature of popular politics after apartheid. These kinds of ideas have been central to the thinking that emerged in Abahlali baseMjondolo, the only successful attempt to organise on a sustained basis across multiple sites amidst the ongoing sequence of popular urban mobilisation usually traced back to 2004. The consistent presence of these kinds of ideas is unsurprising given the centrality of the idea of a graduated humanity to colonial ideology, and the forms of oppression that this ideology legitimated – and continues to legitimate.

However unlike in Latin America or Haiti, where university trained intellectuals have often taken these kinds of ideas seriously, much of the academic and NGO left in South Africa has evinced a more or less complete inability to grasp that when people choose to affirm themselves as human, or to insist on the affirmation of their dignity, they are making political claims. In some circles popular speech that is not peppered with terms like ‘neo-liberalism’, ‘the working class’ or ‘socialism’, or, in others, ‘white supremacy’, is often, implicitly or explicitly, dismissed as pre-political or as, to borrow a phrase from Rancière, “mere groans or cries expressing suffering, hunger or anger”.... but not actual speech demonstrating a shared aisthesis” (*Dissensus*, Continuum, London, 2010, p. 38). It has been striking though, that the EFF has, while operating via a mode of charismatic authority towards which Fanon was deeply suspicious, been able to recognise popular political discourse as political, and to recalibrate its own discourse to resonant with popular discourse.

When, in Hart’s formulation, radicalism that takes the form that “counterposes an all-knowing theorist to the ignorant masses” (‘Gramsci, Geography, Languages of Populism’, in Michael Ekers, Gillian Hart, Stefan Kipfer and Alex Loftus [Eds.] *Gramsci: Space, Nature, Politics*, Wiley-Blackwell, London, 2013p. 302) there is no prospect for what Gramsci terms ‘the democratic philosopher’ to engage in “active and reciprocal relations” – the dialectical pedagogy of Marx’s *Thesis on Feuerbach* recapitulated by Freire that enable the collaborative production of meaning and practice grounded in “the constitution of the self in relation to others (p. 313) – work that, Hart notes, requires translation between different modes of thought that “is not just a matter of transmission but [also] of transformation” (*Translating Gramsci in the Current Conjuncture*, p. 327). Peter Thomas offers a useful discussion of ‘the democratic philosopher’ (*The Gramscian Moment*, pp. 429 – 436.) for whom, “Ends and means are rigorously implicated in a project of democratic expansion” that, in Gramsci’s words, “renders possible a mass intellectual progress and not only a progress of small intellectual groups” (Cited in Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, p. 436).

equality refuses to remain abstract. And what an affair it is when the colonized takes back the word on his own account to demand that it not remain a mere word!¹⁰⁷

From a South African perspective this condemnation of ‘abstract equality’ sounds almost prophetic but it has always been a colonial response to black insurgency. In 1801 Napoleon wrote, from St Helena, of the French policy with regard to Haiti, of “disarming the blacks while assuring them of their civil liberty, and restoring property to the [white] colonists”.¹⁰⁸

For Fanon emancipation has many aspects beyond formal decolonisation. These include a material aspect¹⁰⁹, a spatial aspect,¹¹⁰ and the attainment of equality between women and men,¹¹¹ but fundamentally, emancipation is a project aimed at affirming the dignity and sovereignty of the human person. Liberation must, he insists, in Sekyi-Otu’s revised translation, “give back their dignity to all citizens, fill their minds and feast their eyes with human things and create a prospect that is human because conscious and sovereign persons dwell therein”.¹¹² In contemporary South Africa this cannot take the form of the sole defence of abstract rights, a politics primarily organised against exploitation via the wage relation or the sort of nationalism that is naïve about the cleavages with the nation. It must, to return to Mbembe, “take the form of a conscious attempt to retrieve life and ‘the human’ from a history of waste.”¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ Cited in Nick Nesbitt *Caribbean Critique: Antillean Critical Theory from Toussaint to Glissant* Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2013, p. 86.

¹⁰⁸ Aristide, *Toussaint L’Ouverture*, p. 74.

¹⁰⁹ “For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity” (*The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 34.).

¹¹⁰ “[T]he ordering of the colonial world, its geographic lay-out, must be examined in order to “reveal the lines of force it implies [which] will allow us to mark out the lines on which a decolonized society will be reorganized” (*The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 29).

¹¹¹ He looked forward to overcoming “the feudal tradition which holds sacred the superiority of the masculine element over the feminine” and was clear that in his vision of a decolonised society “Women will have exactly the same place as men, not in the clauses of the constitution but in the life of every day: in the factory, at school and in the parliament” (*The Wretched of the Earth*, p.163.). T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting offers a thoughtful account of Fanon as a ‘proto-feminist’ (*Frantz Fanon: Conflicts & Feminisms* Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland, 1998).

¹¹² Ato Sekyi-Otu *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience*, p. 46.

¹¹³ Mbembe, *Democracy as Community Life*

There are currents of thought that assume that the affirmation of the dignity and sovereignty of the human person will be attained after a revolutionary moment. In so far as the material basis for the denial of the dignity and sovereignty of the human person has to be undone in order to attain meaningful and sustainable emancipation this position has a clear logic. Scepticism towards the sort of contemporary forms of American radicalism that focus on the quality of internal movement processes at the expense of building the sort of political strength required to achieve meaningful material transformation, and the effective exercise of that strength, is entirely rational. But when this conception of the political is willing to reduce the oppressed to 'the masses' it frequently reinscribes subordination and stultification in the name of a redemptive moment to come – a moment that, in most instances, doesn't in fact come, with the result that, in the realm of actuality, all that the left¹¹⁴ does is to seek to impose alienating and at times despotic forms of power over actually existing forms of life, striving and struggle.¹¹⁵ For Fanon the dialectic of struggle, a question of praxis, is

¹¹⁴ Understood, in Badiou's terms, as "*the set of parliamentary political personnel that proclaim that they are the only ones equipped to bear the general consequences of a singular political movement*. Or, in more contemporary terms, that they are the only ones able to provide 'social movements' with a 'political perspective' ('The Paris Commune', *Polemics*, Verso, London, 2006, pp. 272-273.). The emphasis is in the original text. Unsurprisingly Badiou recommends a 'break with the left' as it is defined here.

¹¹⁵ In the context of a country like South Africa, and there are accounts of similar experiences in countries like Haiti and Bolivia, countries in which power relations within the nation state continue to take a form that is raced, subordination and stultification are, on the left, in what we could possibly call a 'South African syndrome', frequently mediated through colonial tropes – impoverished black activists appear as naïve, criminal, dishonest, superstitious, pre-political, irrational and under white control even in cases where the most cursory attempt to root analysis in the empirical rather than the *a priori* would indicate that this is plainly not true - and where the political achievements of impoverished black activists far outweigh those of their professional critics.

Zibechi argues that "It would not be strange if in the future the Bolivian left – even the indigenous – tried to finish a task at which colonial elites have failed" (*Dispersing Power*, p.37). This heresy, which poses a certain complicity between colonial ideas and a certain kind of leftism, deserves a fair and rational hearing. In South Africa there is no doubt that, on occasion, the left has functioned as a vehicle through which colonial ideas about people who are impoverished and black can be affirmed with what, in some circles, is taken as progressive legitimacy. Identifying as, say, a socialist, allows one to do and say things that would ordinarily be seen as outrageous. When the left is effective at reproducing colonial ideas about the political capacities of people who are impoverished and black, and entirely ineffective at transforming economic systems and relations, it is, in practice, functional to sustaining oppression. Until it is fully understood that one can be a socialist (or, in the liberal context, a human rights advocate) *and* invested in a set of colonial ideas about the people one aims to redeem rational discussion of this will remain difficult on some terrains – and in particular the terrain constituted by the intersection between the academy and 'civil society'. Of course it is possible that the emergence of black politics to the left of the ANC on the electoral terrain, a development that will result in active competition to capture popular support, could, in time, simply make

one in which the affirmation of the dignity and sovereignty of the human person is both means and end, principle and strategy.¹¹⁶

Praxis as Return

Praxis is not, at all, a new idea in South Africa. The turn to Biko and Fanon is, even when this is not necessarily intended, in at least some sense, a turn to the politics of the early '70s. From the early 1970s until the end of apartheid, ordinary people became central protagonists in the struggles against apartheid. Schools, churches, urban land occupations, mines, factories and other sites of habitation, labour, education, spiritual communion and sociality become sites of intense struggle.

The first moment in the sequence of struggle that began in the 1970s, and is either understood to have been concluded or temporarily interrupted in 1994, is that of the black consciousness movement that, although its roots are often raced back to a student meeting in Grahamstown in 1967, attained its first flowering in Durban in the early 1970s. The proper name that has come to be assigned to this current of struggle, which began in the universities, among students, as a project with an explicitly intellectual dimension, is that of Steve Biko,¹¹⁷ murdered in 1977. The intellectual resources that were central to its founding moment included Aimé Césaire, James Cone, Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre along with various protagonists in the black power

this terrain politically redundant. While the capture of popular struggles by party politics in a manner in which the former are instrumentalised by the latter would not be a positive development there are certainly some respects in which this would be a very positive development.

¹¹⁶ In Kant's language this is a politics that takes enlightenment seriously – "exit from self-incurred minority" which is predicated on "the courage to use your own intelligence" (Allen W. Wood [Ed.] *Basic Writings of Kant*, Modern Library, New York, 2001, p. 135.). But, unlike Kant, Fanon's politics is rooted in an explicitly universal conception of enlightenment. If the line of thought running from Marx to Gramsci to Rancière equips us to think the exit from a situation of minority – what Rancière calls emancipation - for the working class (in Europe), and the feminist tradition offers an abundance of resources to think about emancipation for women, Fanon is part of a current of thought, reaching back to Louverture, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth and many others who affirm the capacity for emancipation against racist objectification.

¹¹⁷ Xolela Mangcu *Biko: A Biography* Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2012

movement in the United States.¹¹⁸ When it sought to reach out into the wider community Paulo Freire – who insisted that “When people are already dehumanized, due to the oppression they suffer, the process of their liberation must not employ the methods of dehumanization”¹¹⁹ - was taken as a key thinker to guide the work of praxis.¹²⁰ The black consciousness movement organised independently of the ANC and, beginning with a rally organised in Durban in 1974 in support of Frelimo¹²¹ and reaching a high point following the high school students revolt that began in Soweto in 1976,¹²² displaced much of the internal hegemony that the ANC, now in exile, had exercised over the struggles against apartheid since the 1950s. But by the late 1980s the politics of the black consciousness movement had ossified,¹²³ it had taken on the idea of ‘scientific socialism’, was increasingly marginal to popular struggles against apartheid and under attack not just from the state but also from the broader movement aligned to the ANC. Nonetheless there were still instances of remarkable forms of political militancy – such as the work of Abu Baker Asvat in Johannesburg.¹²⁴

The trade union struggles, with their immediate roots in the Durban strikes of 1973¹²⁵, emerged in the encounter between radicals in the university, staff and students, and workers. As is always the case both protagonists in this encounter brought ideas and practices into the movement that they built together. Richard Turner, assassinated in 1978, was the leading figure in the university side of the initial stages of this

¹¹⁸ Mabogo More ‘The Intellectual Foundations of the Black Consciousness Movement’, *Intellectual Traditions in South Africa*, (Ed. P. Vale, L. Hamilton & E. Prinsloo) University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2014, ‘pp. 173-196.

¹¹⁹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 67.

¹²⁰ This is not always noted in the literature but Aubrey Mokoape, a participant in these experiments, has often noted the centrality of Freire.

¹²¹ Julian Brown ‘An Experiment in Confrontation: The Pro-Frelimo Rallies of 1974’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 2012, 38:1, pp. 55-71.

¹²² Nigel Gibson *Fanonian Practices in South Africa*, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2012

¹²³ Gibson, *Fanonian Practices in South Africa*. Mangcu also offers some analysis in this regard, *Biko: A Biography*

¹²⁴ Jon Soske ‘The Life and Death of Dr Abu Baker ‘Hurley’ Asvat’, 23 February 1943 to 27 January 1989’, *African Studies*, 70 (3), 2011, pp. 337-358.

¹²⁵ Steven Friedman *Building Tomorrow Today: African Workers in Trade Unions 1970-1984*, Raven Press, Johannesburg, 1987.

encounter.¹²⁶ Turner was fundamentally a Sartrean, but Freire was also an important thinker in this moment, and the idea of praxis was taken very seriously.¹²⁷ Later on Western Marxism more broadly, including Gramsci, became central¹²⁸ although some people also moved towards Trotskyism. The trade union movement sustained independent mass based democratic organisation until its enmeshment with both the ANC and capital in the 1990s.

The community struggles that came to the fore after the formation of the United Democratic Front in Cape Town in 1983, were also broadly committed, in principle, to radically democratic practices¹²⁹ although this declined as repression wore on in the second half of the 1980s and bitter civil war tore raged in Natal and some of the townships on the Rand. In some parts of the country struggle took on increasingly millennial and militarised forms.¹³⁰ There was also acute hostility to the Azanian

¹²⁶ Billy Keniston, *Choosing to be Free: The Life Story of Rick Turner*, Jacana, Johannesburg, 2013 Cf. Richard Pithouse, 'Choosing to be Free: The Life Story of Rick Turner - A review', *Interface*, 6(2), 2014 <http://www.interfacejournal.net/2014/12/interface-volume-6-issue-2-movement-internationalisms/>

¹²⁷ The centrality of praxis (although not always framed with this precise term) to the thinking of intellectuals working in trade unions in the 70s and 80s comes through clearly in the expanding number of biographies and autobiographies available e.g. Emma Mashinini *Strikes have Followed Me All My Life* Picador Africa, Johannesburg, 2012; Beverley Naidoo *Death of an Idealist* Jonathan Ball, Cape Town 2012; Jay Naidoo *Fighting for Justice* Picador Africa, Johannesburg, 2010; Glenn Moss *The New Radicals*, Jacana, Johannesburg, 2014, etc.

¹²⁸ Andrew Nash 'The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 1999, Vol. XIX No. 1, pp. 66-81. Nash's paper is valuable in many respects but its analytical and political integrity is compromised by the fact that while he mentions, via Mike Morris, the "thuggery, dogmatism, slander" (p.78) of the left within the ANC, no mention is made of the equally atrocious behaviour in the left outside of the ANC – which arguably reached its nadir in the years before the publication of this paper.

¹²⁹ Ineke van Kessel *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams: The United Democratic Front and the Transformation of South Africa*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 2000; Raymond Suttner, 'The UDF Period and its Meaning for Contemporary South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30(3), 2004 pp.691 – 701.

¹³⁰ Ari Sitas 'The Making of the 'Comrades' Movement in Natal, 1985-91' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18(3), pp. 629-641; David Hemson "For sure you are going to die!": Political participation and the comrade movement in Inanda, Kwazulu-Natal', *Social Dynamics: A journal of African studies*, 22:2, pp. 74-104. Nomalanga Mkhize has recently offered a cautionary note with regard to the acutely gendered degeneration of practices of people's power ('Takeover of activism by exiles in '90s just a myth', *Business Day*, 24 February 2015, <http://www.bdlive.co.za/opinion/columnists/2015/02/24/takeover-of-activism-by-exiles-in-90s-just-a-myth>).

People's Organisation (AZAPO) – a synthesis of black consciousness and Trotskyism¹³¹. There is no particular intellectual or theory associated with this sequence of struggle - although Allan Boesak and liberation theology¹³² were intensely present in the Cape in the early years - but ideas about praxis were certainly central and ordinary people certainly became political protagonists.

After apartheid, as had happened throughout the colonised world, the people were, to borrow a phrase from Fanon, “sent back to their caves”.¹³³ The bulk of the radical intelligentsia entered the party, the state or civil society, which principally came to be constituted by NGOs rather than popular organisations. The radical imagination within the ANC and its allies was largely subordinated to the SACP and its version of Marxist-Leninism. This was a resolutely statist conception of politics that was hostile to any independent organisation and, in the name of the national democratic revolution, frequently demanded obedience to the ruling party in the here and now in the name of a socialist future to come at some indeterminate point in the future. In the NGO milieu a different form of statism came to dominate as liberal ideas, characterised, at first, by a profound naivety about the possibilities of lobbying the state on policy questions and, later, about recourse to the courts to achieve social justice, became largely hegemonic. The significant dissident current in the NGO milieu was largely Trotskyist. Its attempts to mobilise people behind its conceptions of what politics should be have not met with any significant or sustained success in the current cycle of popular protest.

¹³¹ Mangcu recalls people affiliated to the UDF chanting ‘U-Steve Biko, I-CIA’ outside the Biko family home in Ginsburg. *Biko: A Biography*, p. 295.

¹³² Liberation theology is often explicitly theorised as a form of praxis. Jean-Bertrand Aristide *Eyes of the Heart*, Common Courage Press, Monroe, ME, 2000; James Cone *Black Theology and Black Power*, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY, 1969; Gustavo Gutiérrez *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY, 1988; Oscar A. Romero *The Church Is All of You* (Compiled and translated by James R. Brockman), Winston Press, Minneapolis, 1984.

¹³³ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 146. Michael Neocosmos offers an account of this moment – ‘From Peoples’ Politics to State Politics’, *LibCom*, 1994, <http://libcom.org/library/peoples-politics-state-politics-aspects-national-liberation-south-africa-1984-1994>

But the limits of the left strung between the academy and NGO based ‘civil society’ exceed the evident fact of its consistent failure to win support or to organise effectively. In contemporary South Africa the political agency of the urban poor is frequently read in terms of some sort of intersection between ignorance, criminality and external manipulation across a range of sites of elite power. It is an undeniable fact that the left in the academy and in NGOs has often reinscribed this¹³⁴ – and often acted to suppress what Zibechi describes as “the epistemological earthquake” that occurs when, in a

¹³⁴ NGO practices have varied, and there certainly are instances of NGO work that has been thoughtful, ethical and rooted in commitments to praxis deriving from thinkers like Freire or traditions like liberation theology. But the critiques of NGOs developed in places like Bolivia (Zibechi, *Territories in Resistance*), Haiti (Hallward, *Damming the Flood*), India (Sangtin Writers & Richa Nagar *Playing with Fire*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2006) or Malawi (Harri Englund *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights & the Africa Poor*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2006) are extraordinarily resonant in South Africa where NGO power has frequently been constituted and exercised in ways that are profoundly raced as well as authoritarian, manipulative and, to use Rancière’s language, stultifying.

NGOs have often invested in the assumption that professionalised modes of politics are real politics with the result that grassroots activists are rendered as automatically inadequate and incompetent. This sometimes intersects with ideas about the imagined right to rule of self-appointed vanguards, backed by donor rather than popular support. In some cases there is a clear structural contempt for the political capacities of people who are poor and black. Bussing impoverished black people into meetings over which they have no control, sometimes to legitimate the authority of NGO power, and in which they are constructed, often in English, as lacking an independent capacity for political thought, is a very common NGO practice. There have been cases where people who are not considered by a grassroots organisation to hold membership in that organisation are repeatedly invited to represent it in NGO networks. There have also been cases where people that have, formally or informally, been expelled from grassroots organisations for very good reasons, and consequently have no popular constituency, are then taken up by NGO networks as if they were credible representatives of some or other community or constituency. It is not uncommon for NGOs to simply offer (precarious) employment to an individual grassroots activist and to then seek to use their power over that person to try and leverage wider influence. Evidently legitimate critiques of NGOs from grassroots activists have been responded to with the usual allegations of criminality, ignorance and external manipulation. One grassroots activist reported public intimidation and threats from an employee of a well-known left NGO and the employee’s husband after the activist had rejected the authority of that NGO. Another grassroots activist, also critical of NGO domination, has reported a threat of violence from an associate of the same NGO. Jared Sacks’ account of the debacle at the COP 17 meeting in Durban offers a useful account of the generally miserable results of the intersection between forms of radical politics organised, even if implicitly, around the idea of a vanguard and NGO power (‘The Climate Change Revolution Will Not Be Funded’, *The Independent*, 9 December 2011 <https://independent.org/2011/12/09/climate-change-revolution-will-not-be-funded>).

Of course to note the importance of a set of critiques of NGO power is not, at all, to assert that popular power is *a priori* virtuous or animated by a unique strategic *nous*. It is frequently not and can, of course, take contradictory or outrightly reactionary forms. However in a context where dominant ideologies often lead people in the academy, the media and civil society (especially when, as is often the case, civil society is understood to be synonymous with NGOs) to assume the *a priori* ethical, strategic and political superiority of the NGO, and that popular power should be subordinated to, or at least approved of by NGO authority before it can be taken seriously, the critique of NGOs, frequently vectors of neo-colonial modes of power in the postcolony, is essential.

society still structured by colonial relations of domination, the oppressed “emerge as subjects, which calls into question the subject/object relationship, one of the most pernicious legacies of colonialism”.¹³⁵

Fanon’s Philosophy of Praxis

The basic outline of Fanon’s thinking about praxis is clear enough. Fanon is, in Rancière’s terms, resolutely anti-Platonic. There is never an assumption, common to some forms of thought that claim to derive from Lenin, elite nationalism¹³⁶ as well as civil society (understood as NGOs) and technocratic modes of authority, that the work of political thought should be the sole preserve of a particular caste of intellectuals. And contrary to much of the Marxist tradition there is no specific subaltern group that is held to have a particular claim to emancipatory reason. Fanon does not turn sociology into ontology and is open to the prospect of the rural peasantry or the urban poor emerging as political actors of weight and consequence – and with the same capacity as all other people to engage in emancipatory action. His commitment, as principle and practice, to ‘recognize the open door of every consciousness’ is a point of departure for praxis as well as an aspiration for a just society.

¹³⁵ Zibechi, *Dispersing Power*, p. 83. Gossip (in the sense of a form of discourse that, while unhinged from the empirical, claims privileged insight), often evidently raced, is a key, albeit often unconscious, strategy in this regard. In Durban this has, for almost a decade now, been accompanied by the active production of slander – discourse that is evidently both malicious and dishonest (and grounded in crude recourse to colonial tropes), and, recently, outright academic fraud. The middle class in and around NGOs and the academy has often functioned as, in Rancière’s precise use of the term, as a particularly obsessive branch of ‘the police’ – acting to entrench ‘the partition of the sensible’, the division between what counts as speech and what counts as noise and who counts as being capable of accessing the realm of the political and who doesn’t (‘Ten Thesis on Politics’ in *Dissensus: On Politics & Aesthetics*, Bloomsburg, London, 2010, pp.35-52.). This has often been acutely raced.

¹³⁶ Partha Chatterjee writes that in India elite nationalism has often responded to the (rural) subaltern, “as an object of their strategies, to be acted upon, controlled, and appropriated within their respective structures of state power” (*The Nation and Its Fragments*, 1993, p. 159). He also notes that elite nationalist thought has often excluded the subaltern from the domain of reason and argues that “Nowhere in the world has nationalism qua nationalism challenged the legitimacy of the marriage between Reason and capital” (*Nationalist Thought & the Colonial World*, Zed Books, London, 1986, p. 68).

In the context of his medical work he writes, in *Black Skin, White Masks* that:

Examining this seventy three year old farm woman, whose mind was never strong and who is now far gone in dementia, I am suddenly aware of the collapse of the antennae with which I touch and through which I am touched. The fact that I adopt a language suitable to dementia, to feeble-mindedness; the fact that I 'talk down' to this poor woman of seventy-three; the fact that I condescend to her in my quest for a diagnosis, are the stigmata of a dereliction in my relations with other.¹³⁷

This commitment to mutuality is sustained in the political context where Fanon is committed, like Gramsci before him, and Freire after him, to a fundamentally dialogical model of engagement. This is strikingly different to some of the contemporary discourse around 'privilege' which is predicated on a commitment, at times implicit, to an ontological fixity. Similarly in some currents of postcolonialism the subaltern is, Hallward argues, "defined in terms of absolute alterity" with the result that she becomes "theoretically untouchable, the altogether-beyond-relation".¹³⁸

Fanon does not disavow the weight of history, economy or culture but he does take the view that no particular type of actor is contained in a "crushing objecthood"¹³⁹ that makes 'mutation' impossible.¹⁴⁰ This includes not just the subaltern subject whose mode of life and capacity for motion, which is to say change and agency, remain, he notes in an observation that precedes a central insight of the subaltern studies school in India, largely hidden from elites.¹⁴¹ As Gibson explains in Fanon's view "Nationalists, even those on the left, [frequently but not inevitably] continue to define the rural

¹³⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, pp. 32-33. There are clear resonances between the ethics at work here and those found in liberation theology as well as, it could be argued, Emmanuel Levinas' commitment to an ethics predicated on the "direct and full faced welcome of the other" (*Totality & Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, p. 80). There is also a similar concern for mutuality, as well as, in some cases, the collaborative action and production of knowledge central to the idea of praxis in some versions of feminist methodology (e.g. Roberta Feldman & Susan Stall, *The Dignity of Resistance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004; Sangtin Writers & Richa Nagar, *Playing With Fire* etc.).

¹³⁸ Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial*, p. 30.

¹³⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 109.

¹⁴⁰ In this respect his thinking articulates productively with Hallward's conceptual distinction between the singular and the specific. *Absolutely Postcolonial*, 2001.

¹⁴¹ Gibson, *Fanon: The Post-Colonial Imagination*, p. 171

masses in colonial terms.”¹⁴² But Fanon never reifies this view and consistently affirms the possibility of the dissident intellectual – able to engage in fruitful conversation and collaboration with the subaltern. His famous insistence in the closing pages of *Black Skin, White Masks*¹⁴³ that no attempt must be made to encase the human person is affirmed as a universal principle.

For Fanon the transcendence of the ontological split introduced by colonialism is something to be worked out, in practice, which requires, as a starting point, the acknowledgment of alienation. He writes, in Sekyi-Otu’s revised translation, that the native intellectual has an historic “inaptitude to engage in dialogue; for he does not know how to make himself inessential in the face of the object or an idea”¹⁴⁴ and must overcome the inability to “carry on a two-sided discussion”¹⁴⁵. Fanon warns against any attempts to “erect a framework around the people that follows an *a priori* schedule”¹⁴⁶ and intellectuals deciding to “come down into the common paths of real life” with formulas that are “sterile in the extreme”.¹⁴⁷ His position in this regard has clear resonances with Gramsci’s assertion that “the philosopher . . . not only grasps the contradictions, but posits himself (sic) as an element of the contradiction and elevates this element to a principle of knowledge and therefore action”.¹⁴⁸

But, as Sekyi-Otu writes, Fanon identifies a second danger, a second barrier to the possibility of mutuality, that confronts the intellectual who enters the terrain of popular life and struggle:

¹⁴² Gibson, *Fanon: The Post-Colonial Imagination*, p. 167. Similar arguments have often been made in India and Fanon’s point often remains true in contemporary South Africa, in particular with regard to the urban poor. V.Y. Mudimbe suggests that anxieties about the African presence in the modern world have often been particular concerned with the urban African: “Marginality designates the intermediate space between the so-called African tradition and the projected modernity of colonialism. It is apparently an urbanized space” (*The Invention of Africa*, 1988, p. 5).

¹⁴³ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 230.

¹⁴⁴ Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience*, p. 179.

¹⁴⁵ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 38.

¹⁴⁶ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 89.

¹⁴⁷ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 117-178.

¹⁴⁸ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 405.

Embarrassed by his erstwhile posture of subjective certainty, the native intellectual turned *maquisard* is now ready to disavow his claim to rational knowledge altogether: 'The danger that will haunt him continually is that of embracing populism; he becomes a sort of yes-man who nods assent at every word coming from the people, which he interprets as considered judgments'. Fanon does not endorse this romance of the people and, with it, the guilt-ridden renunciation of reason.¹⁴⁹

Fanon's conception of praxis is an affirmation of the universal capacity for reason, and not a denial of reason in favour of the assertion of a Manicheanism to counter that of colonialism. It is not a simple matter of, in a single moment of Damascene clarity, taking the other side within the framework of the social structure created by colonialism, including the split which it has introduced into the ontological dimension of existence. The process that, in Fanon's schema, enables what Sekyi-Otu refers to as the "reprieve of prodigal reason"¹⁵⁰ is a world apart from the hope of a moment of apocalyptic redemption, arriving like a thief in the night, evident, on occasion, in Césaire. It is, as Sekyi-Otu's work shows so well, profoundly dialectical. For Fanon "the idyllic and unreal clarity of the beginning is followed by a semi-darkness that bewilders consciousness".¹⁵¹

In their *weary road toward rational knowledge* the people must also give up their too-simple conception of their overlords. The species is breaking up under their very eyes. As they look around them, they notice that certain settlers do not join in the general guilty hysteria; there are differences in the same species . . . The scandal explodes when the prototypes of this division of the species go over to the enemy, become blacks or Arabs, and accept suffering, torture, and death.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*, p.179. However this does not mean that there is not an obligation for the university trained intellectual to learn to listen – to, in Nomboniso Gasa's formulation (offered in the context of a discussion about academic method but, nonetheless, relevant to the question of praxis), "listen, listen very hard to what is said and to that which remains unmentioned, unmentionable and has been rendered invisible" (*Women in South African History*, HSRC Press, Pretoria, p. 132, 2007). Dussel insists that "Respect is silence, not the silence of someone who has nothing to say, but of those who want to listen to everything because they know nothing about the other as other" (*Philosophy of Liberation*, p. 59.) Here respect which, in the context of a radically alienated society requires radical listening, and a political infrastructure to enable it, is the basis of an aspiration to mutuality and not the renunciation of reason.

¹⁵⁰ Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*, p. 172.

¹⁵¹ Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*, p. 26.

¹⁵² Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*, p 114-115. The emphasis is mine.

If the road to rational knowledge is a weary one, one that requires an ongoing dialectic between theory and action that moves beyond the strictures of colonial Manicheism, then praxis is conceived, fundamentally, as thought in the particular kind of collective motion enabled by struggle.

For Fanon the possibilities of mutually transformative dialogue and collaboration on the terrain of equality can only be realised on an enabling terrain. He takes the view that the militant intellectual must commit to presence in the real movements that abolish the present state of things—to be present in the “zone of occult instability where the people dwell”¹⁵³, in the “seething pot out of which the learning of the future will emerge”¹⁵⁴ and, there, to “collaborate on the physical plane”.¹⁵⁵ Working “inside the structure of the people”¹⁵⁶ and “living inside history”¹⁵⁷ is not possible in the absence of organization and struggle. The “inclusion of the intellectual in the upward surge of the masses”¹⁵⁸ is only possible in the presence of an upward surge. So while political possibility is not ontologically determined it is historically constrained.

But despite these cautions Fanon still heralds the possibility of “a mutual current of enlightenment and enrichment”¹⁵⁹ that enables political education, which he frames in terms of an enlightening of consciousness, “as a new relationship between intellectual and the people”¹⁶⁰ encouraging and equipping people to think for themselves. For Fanon this is a crucial step towards new modes of politics. In Sekyi-Otu’s reading: “To the radical intelligentsia, dissident members of the national bourgeoisie, Fanon assigns a crucial role in this work of fashioning

¹⁵³ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 183.

¹⁵⁴ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 181.

¹⁵⁵ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 187.

¹⁵⁶ Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination*, p. 164.

¹⁵⁷ Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination*, p. 165.

¹⁵⁸ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 38.

¹⁵⁹ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 143.

¹⁶⁰ Gibson *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination*, p.164.

what Césaire [in a phrase with striking resonances with Gramsci's thought] called a 'common sense' out of differing languages of existence".¹⁶¹

Fanon's conception of praxis is directly opposed to what Rancière describes as the 'stultification' that is consequent to any situation where "one intelligence is subordinated to another".¹⁶² It is, therefore, opposed to the sort of domination that Paulo Freire describes as "Manipulation, sloganizing, 'depositing', regimentation, and prescription"¹⁶³ and which is common in NGO based civil society, party politics and small sectarian groups in contemporary South Africa.¹⁶⁴

Now that Fanon has arrived as the philosopher of the moment, a moment in which there has been open defiance on mines, in shack settlements and in universities, it may well be worth reading him as a thinker who does not just remain timely as a result of our failure to attain adequate social progress but who could also be read as a philosopher of movement – movement that carries with it the possibility of rendering Fanon less timely. This would require that Fanon be recognised as a thinker who prescribed a mode of praxis grounded in a commitment to the emancipation of reason from the strictures of colonial ontologies and practices rather than, as he is often read, solely as a thinker who offered a compelling diagnosis of the pathologies of both the colony and the postcolony. And for Fanon the emancipatory exercise of reason is with and not for the oppressed. He is, in the Gramscian sense, a very democratic philosopher.¹⁶⁵

Conclusion

¹⁶¹ Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*, p. 177.

¹⁶² Jacques Rancière *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1991 p. 13.

¹⁶³ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 126.

¹⁶⁴ A mode of operation that, on the civil society terrain, often takes the form of a set of practices in which, to return to Biko, there is the sort of "stratification that makes whites perpetual teachers and blacks perpetual pupils" (*I Write What I Like*, p.65.).

¹⁶⁵ Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, p. 434 – 436.

It could be argued that the centering of Fanon in this moment speaks to a major limit of African philosophy and political theory more broadly – a failure to generate a compelling emancipatory vision in the fifty years after Fanon, and the sequence of struggle from within which he thought in the last decade of his life – that of national liberation.¹⁶⁶ But Fanon did not think in isolation from popular struggle and it could well be argued that our inability to transcend Fanon is a consequence of the political failures of the last fifty years and, in particular, the failure to transcend the sequence of national liberation struggles which, in South Africa, is both unfinished and therefore still urgently legitimate and simultaneously, as in, say, Algeria or Zimbabwe, a nightmare weighing heavily on the brains of the living.

In South Africa in 2015 intellectual life in the academy and the elite public sphere is overwhelmingly alienated from escalating popular struggles. Attempts to capture these struggles, whether framed in largely nationalist or socialist terms, or organised by the NGO or party form, are primarily attempts to capture then and subordinate them to would-be vanguards rather than attempts to engage them on the basis of equality. Our inability to transcend Fanon is, this contribution suggests, largely due to our failure to take Fanon seriously. If we wish to go beyond Fanon we need to begin by taking him seriously and shifting the ground of reason from the university, the NGO, the party, the sectarian groupuscule or network, or the rapid chatter of social media to the occult zone inhabited by ‘suffering human beings who think’. If there is a royal road to a new philosophy it will not emerge, this paper suggests, from abstract reason but, rather, from a new sequence of praxis, of thought in motion, in struggle.

¹⁶⁶ I am using Sylvain Lazarus’s concept of the political sequence in the manner in which Michael Neocosmos has sought to use it to illuminate popular politics in Africa. See his forthcoming book *Thinking Freedom in Africa: Towards a theory of emancipatory politics*, University of the Witwatersrand Press, Johannesburg, 2016.