

The Fanomenal Event

May 2011

“A living politics is the movement out of the places where oppression has assigned those who do not count.”
S'bu Zikode, President, Abahlali baseMjondolo.

Introduction

After months of planning and preparation beginning in October last year, CLP's 'Fanomenal Event' came to fruition. In this note we capture key ideas and insights that were shared by our presenters, as well as some of the discussions they provoked during the morning session. We also include the text of Nigel Gibson's lecture that was presented in the afternoon. By way of conclusion, we offer some reflections from the CLP Padkos Committee after the event.

Background

Frantz Fanon died fifty years ago but his radical humanism remains as rich, powerful and relevant as ever. A fighting thinker and a thinking fighter, Fanon's written work emerges out of his deep involvement in popular struggle against racist colonialism and oppression, and for genuinely humanising emancipation. To mark the 50th anniversary of his death, and to engage the legacy of his life and work, CLP invited some of the world's and South Africa's leading radical and Fanonian scholars and activists to present, debate and discuss with us.

The Frantz Fanon Prize is awarded annually by the Caribbean Philosophical Association. In 2009, Nigel Gibson was a recipient in recognition of his “overall body of work in Frantz Fanon studies, which includes many essays and anthologies, including a recent set connecting Fanon's thought to the shackdwellers' movement in South Africa, and especially so for his influential book ***Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination***”. In the year marking the 50th anniversary of Fanon's death, Gibson has been central to bringing out two new books exploring the life, legacy and relevance of Fanon's work and politics.

On May 30th, Nigel was joined by an extraordinary group of writers, militants and thinkers from South Africa in Pietermaritzburg: S'bu Zikode, Richard Pithouse, Michael Neocosmos and Itumeleng Mosala. For us this discussion was a practical matter - a question of praxis and living politics: what are the ways in which Fanon's radical humanism and fighting spirit might still be relevant, helpful and challenging for the praxis of people engaged in, or connected with, grassroots emancipatory struggle here and now?

As the Church Land Programme, we were also interested to explore an important historical line connecting Fanon's work with black theology, black consciousness and emancipatory struggles in South Africa. This history is important, and often sidelined or misrepresented in hegemonic narratives of struggles in our country. Even more important though, is the relevance and power of that tradition for current emancipatory struggles. There are those who resist oppression, and who continue to find God in the liberated minds and actions of grassroots rebellion. They demonstrate how faith and fidelity must always find expression through concrete and costly solidarity with the risen Christ in the midst of those struggles.

In the build up to that event at the end of May, CLP's Padkos mailings shared some fantastic resources which had been generated in the process of publishing these new books:

- Peter Hallward: *Fanon and political will*
- Michael Neocosmos: *The Nation and its Politics: Fanon, emancipatory nationalism and political sequences*
- Richard Pithouse: *Fidelity to Fanon*
- Mabogo More: *Fanon and the Land Question in (Post) Apartheid South Africa*
- S'bu Zikode: *Fanon and Abahlalism*
- Nigel Gibson: *Fanonian practices in South Africa: From Steve Biko to Abahlali baseMjondolo*.

The Padkos Event

Graham Philpott, Director of the Church Land Programme (CLP), welcomed everyone present to this opportunity to think the relevance for our own struggles of the life and work of Frantz Fanon who died 50 years ago. He noted that the 31st May 2011 also marks the 50th anniversary of South Africa's becoming a republic under Verwoed. With that history, we re-member Fanon in the context of our unfreedom and continuing struggles for emancipation now. Then and now, emancipatory struggle flows from and under the axiom that everyone matters – and that politics should infuse the days proceedings as well.

David Ntseng facilitated the session, introducing the first speaker, **S'bu Zikode**, President of Abahlali baseMjondolo, the South African shack-dwellers' movement. Zikode opened his address: “Viva the spirit of Frantz Fanon, Viva!” He emphasised that “our struggle was whether we count – and so, as AbM, we are honoured to part of this discussion. Too often, these discussions exclude us. As Graham said: 'here, everyone counts'; and as Fanon insists: 'everyone thinks'. Indeed it is true as Nigel Gibson says that AbM re-discovered what Fanon discovered in our struggle. AbM did not start out as a small group of 'clevers' sitting around the table thinking how to create a movement. After we blockaded the roads, we realised that we had unleashed a politics, a 'living politics'. In that living politics, action is necessary. Action is necessary because racism, like neo-liberalism, denies the humanity of blacks, of the working class, of the marginalised. A living politics is therefore the movement out of the places where oppression has assigned those who do not count. Therefore we fight – and we think our fight and maintain the democratic space to continue to fight and to sustain our movement. In this we contribute to fulfilling and continuing Fanon's fight for justice and humanity. AbM is not a single-issue movement. We have always been clear that while we fight for land and housing, our full political demands would not end if you are simply given a house! Justice, equality, and freedom are what we demand. These are not easy to 'deliver', you can't find them in the files or on the shelves of the state bureaucracy.

'Living Learning' has been integral to our struggle. We have had to create our own new terminology to think our own politics, our own 'abahlalism'. We had to distinguish the 'regressive left' from a progressive left. The regressive leftists assume that the poor cannot think for themselves. We have had to distinguish a living politics from 'party politics'. In party politics, democracy becomes just an event that comes and goes in the electoral cycle – but for a living politics, it is ongoing in the lives and minds of the people. And thus we build our own shack-dweller and farm-dweller intellectuals – in fact now, like today, we are not always excluded from other 'intellectual' spaces. Therefore our challenge today to all intellectuals is first to see that **action** is necessary, and second to refuse to allow intellectual spaces to be spaces for creating new elites”.

Thulani Ndlazi (CLP) presented an overview of **Mabogo More's** paper, Prof. More himself having been prevented from coming at the last minute.

Michael Neocosmos drew some general points from his paper on 'Fanon, the nation and its politics'. Opening with his own anti-slogan chant: "Phansi amaSlogans Phansi!", Neocosmos stressed that "the point is to think an emancipatory politics here and now. We can see how Fanon attempts this too. Sometimes he articulates the universal (in the sense of being 'above' history) and sometimes reveals the limits of his place in history (for example his adoption of the language of 'underdeveloped' nations). Reading a recent paper on the Tunisian mass movement, the author points out it was impossible to identify any specific 'interest group' driving the rebellion, only a universal frustration with a lack of human dignity. Therefore what emerges is a politics that is *outside* the places you are meant to be allocated – this is characteristic of emancipatory politics: it is indifferent to interest. Even though the language and the situations are different in different places and times, this same fundamental theme is found in all emancipatory politics. Only in the 20th century does the idea arrive that the form of organisation for emancipation is the political party. This idea was not there before the 20th century – and is actually no longer helpful for the 21st century.

Fanon is located in the colonial context. The main issue then is the coloniser / colonised divide. (Not, as many translations have it, the settler / native.) And the answer is therefore national formation and national liberation because colonialism denies the nation. How? By the people coming together in the struggle for national liberation. That 'people' that comes together is *not* defined in exclusionary terms based on whether you were born here, nor on what your skin colour is. People become 'a people' through affirming it in political activity. Fanon himself was not at all objectively 'Algerian' – not even based on his skin colour! Emancipatory politics then is saying we are constituting ourselves, we are becoming, through political activity. It is purely subjective. For Fanon, 'on the morrow of independence' then, it is that beautiful ideas get destroyed and a new elite replaces them with objective criteria to define what is the 'nation'. The new elite does this so that they can take over and grab what the colonisers had. They argue: 'We are entitled to this because we are indigenous'. When these ideas are taken up among the masses of the poor, they translate into xenophobia. In other words, there is a complete shift in what is meant and understood by 'the nation': the emancipatory idea is an inclusive one; the later version is exclusive and insists on 'indigeneity' which is an invention of the state (i.e., the decision as to who is a citizen and who not).

The problem with Fanon, precisely because he is pushing 20th century thinking to its limits, lies in the thinking about the form of organisation for political emancipation. His answer remains that it is the party. Even though he sees the problems, he nonetheless seeks a way out through the involvement of 'committed intellectuals' with the masses. But this solution remains within the terrains of a state politics where emancipatory thinking is not possible. The party form itself is not a space for emancipatory politics. Abahlalisms is an effort of thinking this issue for the 21st century – and is, therefore, very important."

Itumeleng Mosala began the next session. He wanted to draw on the connections that link Fanonian politics with Steve Biko, Black Theology, the political movements of the 1980s, the UDF (United Democratic Front) – and finally with our present situation. In the post-1994 situation of South Africa, Mosala described the day's event as a "rare opportunity – something one has prayed for and prayed to be part of", to think within the politics of "movements to defend humanity and dignity that are so important – it doesn't matter if they are marginalised, or even small. I spend time with leading members of the ruling party and they express real worry now: 'We didn't know the people were so angry'.

In the late 60s and early 70s, the beginning of the black consciousness movement was in our thinking and trying to theorise our own praxis which is where it began. It was there that we encountered Fanon – and we were excited to find other people speaking like that! And now, in the last 15 years or so, I come back to Fanon again. I am fixated on the chapter, in *Wretched of the Earth*, on the national bourgeoisie. After 1994, I was involved in trying to set up a new higher education system in South Africa. From my experience of agreeing to work in the post-apartheid state, I learned it was not possible to bring the values of the liberation struggle into the state. We had hoped to put into practice, the values and views that had driven us into exile. Everyone in the government wants to achieve this, wants to deliver to the people, wants to achieve this on behalf of the people. Even former-President Mbeki at a certain stage called in senior department heads and asked for it to be done – so why is it not possible?¹

Fanon helps us answer this question. When Julius Nyerere was interviewed as a guest in South Africa at the celebratory time of our new democracy, he was asked “what do you think about our achievement?; Are you excited about it?” He answered: “I really wish South Africa well. I hope it will mature. But I need to advise you – you have taken office; you have not taken power. This you will find out”.

Fanon talks about that in the 3rd chapter of *The Wretched* discussing the problems of the national bourgeoisie and national consciousness – this process of identifying what is done for the national bourgeoisie with doing it for the people – but the national bourgeoisie's preoccupation is to replace the coloniser and take what the coloniser had – but that means doing the same things as before. In this way, the more things change, the worse they become”.

Richard Pithouse followed, wondering what he could add after so much had already been said. “It is important to recognise those who are on the margins. Theory is usually used against popular struggle – but good theory comes out of struggle. Nonetheless, to think that you can take that truth that emerges from a particular political struggle and impose it on the next struggle can be damaging. Answers are only worked out in spaces like this and in struggle. Abahlali are and have always been important and different because their struggle has always been thought, from the beginning. The ability to think *in crisis*, *in struggle*, is also characteristic of Fanon – who, in the midst of war, was reading Sartre, thinking and writing.

What Fanon witnessed in the newly 'independent' states of West Africa made him conclude that the greatest danger was not colonialism but a 'lack of ideology'. He did not mean a dogmatic doctrine of imposed “isms” but the 'thinking of the people', the ideas for a different future and how to struggle for that. “Struggle is force and reason”. Reading Fanon now in our present situation does feel like prophecy. As Fanon saw in his critique of the post-colonial situation, it is also true of South Africa that, instead of changing the system, we have simply changed the faces who run it; that the party that carried the struggle forward before becomes a place that holds the people down.

So yes, we should draw on wisdom of those who have gone before – but every generation must think its own politics.

1 Mosala was challenged on this during questions. Grassroots activists pointed out that it is wrong to say government is filled with people with good will and intent –“ that is an insult to us in the movements. Those in government do not even recognise us as human beings when we organise for ourselves and speak for ourselves”. Mosala clarified that he really meant to stress that the problems of the post-liberation state are not explained by blaming bad individuals or thinking they are trying to do bad – the system itself tends to make even good people incapable of doing good.

There are some powerful myths that operate in South Africa and these can enter your mind if we are not rigorous. One of these is that we have democracy and that things are (slowly) going forward – it's just a question of speed or pace. That's simply not true. Things are getting worse, and in fact the train is going in the wrong direction .

Another myth is that “this is the democracy we fought for”. Not true – it's not what we fought for! Ideas of what we fought for went much further – think of the conceptualisation of 'people's power', or 'people's education' and so on.

There is also the myth that the systems of laws, courts, civil society and so on are the guarantors of democracy. No, this is just a class of experts doing it for the people.

Fanon ends his writings stating that the struggle will go on. He doesn't give us a script of how this should unfold – so it must be worked out. The lesson might be that, if we want political change, it has to have a political basis, there has to be popular political empowerment i.e., ordinary people increasing their power through organisation– which implies a change of political relations in society. This only comes from increasing your power through organising yourselves, building your own organisations, and so minimising the power imbalance between the people and the elites – not only in government but in civil society too”.

Discussion and questions

Voting / not voting; elections / democracy

Abahlali baseMjondolo is associated with the slogan “No land, No house, No dignity, No Vote”. Some people asked to learn more about this; some asked about those who had 'fought for the right to vote'; some questioned whether not voting had any real effect. Some important responses included the following comments:

S'bu Zikode remarked that the recent local government elections had reduced thinking to the level of “service delivery” - it became the 'open toilet election'. But thinking within the parameters of 'the power of X' reduces the whole to the level of building toilets and 'delivering' them. This takes away the fundamental questions of human freedom and dignity. **Michael Neocosmos** thought that the thinking behind the refusal to vote for political parties was perhaps best put by Abahlali activists from the Western Cape who had said “Our vote is too precious to give away to the politicians”. And the political decision not to vote inherently raises the question of what to do instead – in other words it assumes and requires the need to *think*. In response to the idea that not voting undermined the sacrifice of those who struggled before, **Zikode** pointed out that “those sacrifices were made by us and we say that it is you in the political parties that are undermining the value of people's struggles, it is you in the political parties that are promoting and benefiting from a system that was and is corrupt. It's that system that must be changed – and this is a struggle that is much more and much deeper than the question of voting”.

Itumeleng Mosala commented that that refusal to vote from within popular movements was “fundamentally important for our dignity - that we take the right to choose to vote or not vote. I did not fight for the vote. I fought for freedom.” Later he added that a key weakness of the organisations of national liberation was that, on becoming part of the state, they abandoned the project of creating new human beings – so, when they take over power, they are not new people – and they abandon, even suppress, the politicisation of the people, turning the state project into an apolitical process of experts working out what is needed to be delivered.

The nation / The state

One person argued that we must support the state in its 'nation building'.

Neocosmos responded that what Fanon is telling us is that the nation is *not* the state. So 'building the nation' as a state project did not achieve what was expected from it because the underlying idea was a belief that a state-driven process could emancipate the people. Now in the 21st century, we realise that the state cannot emancipate anyone. It's not that government's didn't achieve anything – of course they did, but they did *not* bring freedom, justice and equality. That's because it is invariably a top-down, policy-framed, technicised delivery mode – and that makes collective politics and self-determination impossible.

Land, tenure, dignity

In response to a couple of queries about Abahlali's thinking on the issues of land and tenure, **Zikode** commented that as a shack-dweller movement that is focused on housing, they long ago recognised that land is necessary for housing which is necessary for everyone. They view land as a gift from God that is to be shared - and no-one should be without. From this view, the idea that land must be 'bought' in order to release it for people's housing needs is fundamentally wrong. The movement encourages land occupation by the landless – after that political action, we can discuss ways of legitimating it.

Empowerment / Disempowerment

In response to Pithouse' advocacy of 'popular political empowerment', some asked what this really meant since the word is so widely and differently used now. **Mosala** pointed out that there is no reason why 'empowerment' should not still mean self-empowerment by the people themselves. Certainly for Fanon what was fundamental was the importance of the people and the assumption that the people do think. So for Fanon, empowerment could not mean a product brought to the people from outside. Like Biko's suggestion to stop talking about white people and look within, what is consistent is the idea that only free people can obtain freedom. Liberation does not wait for the day of liberation, it starts the day a person says "I am free, a child of God, a human being". Freedom begins *in* the movement of struggle.

Pithouse agreed that 'empowerment' now usually means stultification and fitting people into a hostile system. As such it sees the problem as being that the people lack something – i.e., blame the people. So it is often used to justify oppression. But this co-option of terms emerging from struggle is relentless. Obviously what was meant in 'popular political empowerment' is precisely *not* the idea of going to do something *to* the people. It's about people empowering themselves; stepping out of the spaces and roles allocated to them. Those spaces are policed not only by the state and its police, but also by many NGOs, academics and so on.

On xenophobia

Some questions further explored the relevance of Fanon for understanding and combating xenophobia. **Mosala** reiterated the Fanonian insight that this problem is a reflection of the problems of the national bourgeoisie and their version of the national consciousness – that when a new national elite aims to simply replace the foreigner and when that new elites' view of the world gets into ordinary people's consciousness, conditions for xenophobia emerge. **Pithouse** added that when people have a clear idea of who the enemy is and what they are fighting for, they don't turn on each other.

Nigel Gibson, “Living Fanon: A Commemoration”

In the afternoon, Nigel delivered an outstanding, thoughtful paper entitled “*Living Fanon: A commemoration*”. The text of his talk is shared separately on Padkos and our website.

Padkos Reflections on the Fanomenal event

CLP works at being consistently reflective on its work. Padkos is (a relatively small) part of our work – so it too comes under the microscope of critical reflection! An important criterion against which we evaluate our work boils down to the simple question: 'does this help fight emancipatory struggles better or more effectively'? This applies no less for the Padkos initiative in general or the Fanomenal Event in particular. That's why, in the earliest announcements of the planned event, we stressed that:

For us this discussion is a practical matter - a question of praxis and living politics: what are the ways in which Fanon's radical humanism and fighting spirit might still be relevant, helpful and challenging for the praxis of people engaged in, or connected with, grassroots emancipatory struggle here and how?

In the build up to the event itself, we kept checking - 'why are we doing this?' The answer had something to do with testing whether thinking, discussing, reading, debating, and remembering Fanon, offered resources for current and concrete struggles for humanity and freedom. (In slightly modified form, this was the question posed to respondents that prompted their reflections recorded on video in the Fanomenal interviews.)

From our experience of its detrimental effects on praxis, we have become sceptical of the mainstream development discourse that insists on prior naming, and subsequent measurement, of 'impacts'. Nonetheless, if we are to try evaluate the success or failure of the Fanomenal Event, the 'impacts' we would look for and consider relevant would be just as practical: did it help build the forces and the thinking that drive emancipatory struggle forward?

There were some aspects that did not. We have been forced to clarify and distinguish 'progressive' debate from a 'regressive' contestation between opposing positions. The former sharpens the tools of struggle and is integral to a 'living politics' – we would hope that Padkos fits here most of the time. Such progressive debate certainly includes vigorous arguments, an openness to different views – but it proceeds under the general forward movement of a struggle waged and led by those who suffer it. And it is quite distinct from hostile attacks that have no interest in strengthening those struggles or the movements that wage them. There were a few participants at the Fanomenal Event who appeared to be hostile to Abahlali baseMjondolo in particular, with the intention of undermining their struggle. Perhaps this was not wholly negative at the end of the day in the sense that such hostile attacks on Abahlali are often raised and 'debated' outside of the movement's own spaces. This time the questions were directly answered by delegates of the movement themselves. Our frustration however is the simple fact that time spent dealing with regressive attacks, takes away from the time for progressive discussion and debate, from deepening the conversation *within* a commitment to a living politics of freedom. Luckily there was enough of the latter on balance to make this is a relatively minor frustration.

CLP was, is, and will remain, convinced that thought struggle is effective struggle; that militant politics is fundamentally intellectual as well as forceful. For us, it was an extraordinary privilege to listen to, learn from, connect and engage with that roomful of great minds.

Although emancipatory struggle must be led by those who suffer, both Paulo Freire and Antonio Gramsci (in different ways) long ago made the observation that victory is enabled through winning over genuinely supportive solidarity from other classes and social forces. Part of the function of a little initiative like Padkos is precisely to maximise opportunities for this task by building and consolidating networks of solidarity and friendship. The Fanomenal Event made real progress in this task.

The most significant 'indicators of impact' though were sort of under the radar of the event that our middle-class Padkos audience experienced. In the days before, and the evening after, CLP resourced space for delegates from the Rural Network and from Abahlali baseMjondolo to explore and debate connections between their own living politics and the ideas and legacy of Fanon. By all accounts this was powerful, exciting and relevant and the movements expressly thanked CLP for enabling this platform. Indeed delegates changed their existing plans to return home after Gibson's lecture, in order to go back to Emzabalazweni (CLP's flat in town) to continue their collective discussions and make concrete plans for taking this 'living learning' forward more broadly within the movements. By then Fanon had become 'Fanyana', and the political commitment was about celebrating "our own Fanons in the shacks and on the farms". This is cool.

And that stuff, active 'living learning' within movements, remains the overwhelming majority of CLP's work-in-the-world. Padkos is pretty small in relation to our overall work, and the occasional Padkos events are even less frequent. This is not at all to suggest it is unimportant, but rather to highlight its significance. However, if interventions like Padkos are to remain important in any meaningful way, then they must continue to be supplementary to the journey we walk alongside organised formations of the poor, on paths opened by their struggles and illuminated by their thinking and leadership. It is precisely this discipline that enables the kind of criticality that CLP is growing into, to spill over into Padkos and the people, the spaces, the networks and conversations that it excites.

When we launched Padkos last year we said:

CLP has often spoken of its work as a journey, and we are inspired by Paulo Freire's phrase that 'we make the path by walking'. The journey of our work is deeply rewarding, and our main guide and inspiration remains the struggles of the people. But it is also be a long and demanding journey. As we continue together, we all need *padkos* - sustenance and food for thought along the way. CLP makes this *padkos* available because emancipatory action is always thought; because reflection strengthens struggle.

As so many of you have made clear, the Fanomenal Event was indeed welcome and nourishing food along that journey. For CLP as the hosts, the event was itself Padkos for us. All of you who were there and supported it have nourished, challenged and energised us in the ongoing work – thank you!