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Reading Fanon for today's struggles

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“(…) politics is more like algebra than like arithmetic, and still more like higher than elementary mathematics”
– Lenin, *“Left-Wing” Communism: an Infantile Disorder*.

First, I want to thank the “Decolonizing Our Minds Society” and Pluto Press, to offer me the chance to discuss Peter Hudis' book about Frantz Fanon. Frantz Fanon is a key thinker for today's struggles and it is not coincidence that especially in the times we are living this figure became such an important reference. This is one reason among many others why Peter Hudis' book is very important for the present conjuncture.

Another reason, stands in the fact that this book starts by the decision of a New York grand jury's not to indict the murderer of Eric Garner. But, actually, there are plenty other examples of this. This year, in May 2015, the French police officers who were responsible for the death of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, in 2005, in a French working class suburb, were also acquitted. However, this is only the visible part of the iceberg. Postcolonial racism being based on a global system who produces a racial ranking, this system may take various forms: ideological, cultural, social and, of course, economic. Thus, as a contribution in the current conjuncture, this book is a great achievement in giving to Fanon its place as a major revolutionary and theoretician of the XXth. Century and as an inspiration for today's struggles. One cannot separate the revolutionary from the theorist. Fanon was too often, at least in the French speaking field, apprehended only as an “action man”. As Lewis Gordon wrote, black intellectuals like Fanon are frequently treated in pure biographical terms¹. On this point, Peter Hudis' book is a very serious work in not separating the theorist from the revolutionary and by contextualising Fanon's political Theory. My main interest here will be to focus both on Fanon's place in the history of political ideas but also of his relevance for today. I will mainly focus on Fanon's writings on Colonialism, because of the “step” it represents in Fanon's political thought. As you maybe know the articles Fanon wrote in the FLN journal (*El Moudjahid*) were not signed by Fanon and were, thus, anonymous. When Maspero wanted to publish these articles in *Pour la révolution africain*, Rédha Malek (who was responsible for publishing *El Moudjahid* from July 1957 to August 1962) wrote to Maspero in order to explain him that he did not feel comfortable about the idea to publish Fanon's writings as such because they were part of a bigger revolutionary project. Thus, Fanon's experience with the FLN played a crucial especially in its most famous work *The Wretched of the Earth*.

In Peter Hudis' book, the concept of “Humanism” comes back a lot, which seems particularly logic both because of the use that Fanon did of this term and of the influence Raya Dunayevskaya's Marxism-Humanism had on Peter's political analysis. But the adoption of this term

¹Lewis R. Gordon, “*Through the Hellish Zone of Nonbeing: Thinking through Fanon. Disaster, and the Damned of the Earth*”, *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, n°5, Summer 2007, p. 6.

raises a lot of questions. An objection one could make is obviously the use that was made of this concept by the French colonial power. As the historian Francis Arzalier wrote, a myth has developed itself in France, and in a part of the French left:

French colonialism and imperialism are exceptions in the History of European Imperialism. A kind of 'soft and 'humanist' version of colonialism in opposition to Anglo-saxon or German brutal expansionisms².

But, as Peter shows in his book, Frantz Fanon took this concept in order to redefine it in an anticolonial way. Indeed, Fanon did not apprehend the Human as an abstract substance, but as the social relations that defines him. And this is obvious in Fanon's role as a Psychiatrist, who shows the importance of the "lived experience" in Fanon's Humanism. As Peter Hudis highlights it in the Second Chapter Fanon did not apprehend psychiatry as a purely individual aspect of medicine. Indeed, to Fanon, affective disorders are caused by the socio-economic relations and not by some human substance. I think (I hope) today, this seems very obvious to everyone, but we really should remember that the colonial struggle also took place in the medical field. In a psychiatry manual from 1952 (re-published in 1969), the research team of Professor Antoine Porot – the founder of the "Alger Psychiatric School" and well known for his racist theories – wrote that North Africans indigenous had a "murderous potential (...) a poor appetite for work, aboulia, whims and impulsiveness³". But Fanon's answer to such ideas was not to know about whether Porot's racist ideas were true or false, because it would only be reversing the image of the colonized, it would be to put the struggle on the "representation level". Fanon wanted to deal with the reality the colonized were living. The first, very concrete, aspect of that is that doctors, in a colonial context, are also very often land owners and are directly privileged by the colonial situation. The Second aspect is the defence mechanisms, that the Philosopher Matthieu Renault defines as a "political psychology⁴". Indeed, in *A Dying Colonialism*, Fanon wrote:

In all objectivity and in all humanity, it is a good thing that a technically advanced country benefits from its knowledge and the discoveries of its scientists. When the discipline considered concerns man's health, when its very principle is to ease pain, it is clear that no negative reaction can be justified. But the colonial situation is precisely such that it drives the colonized to appraise all the colonizer's contributions in a pejorative and absolute way. The colonized perceives the doctor, the engineer, the schoolteacher, the policeman, the rural constable, through the haze of an almost organic confusion. The compulsory visit by the doctor to the *douar* is preceded by the assembling of the population through the agency of the police authorities. The doctor who arrives in this atmosphere of general constraint is

²George Labica, Francis Arzalier, Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, Pierre Tevanian, Saïd Bouamama, *Une mauvaise décolonisation. La France : de l'Empire aux émeutes des quartiers populaires*, Le Temps des Cerises, Pantin, 2007, p. 15

³Quoted in : Claude Liauzu, *Histoire de l'anticolonialisme en France. Du XVIème siècle à nos jours*, Pluriel, Paris, 2010, p. 474.

⁴Matthieu Renault, Frantz Fanon. *De l'anticolonialisme à la critique postcoloniale*, éditions Amsterdam, Paris, 2011, p. 81.

never a native doctor but always a doctor belonging to the dominant society and very often to the army.⁵

The result of this colonial role of medicine, and especially of psychiatry, is that the body of the colonized develop a kind of defence mechanism. Thus, the laziness of the Algerian at work is analysed as a form of resistance against colonialism. Fanon tried to rethink psychiatric analysis but also the psychiatric institution in the colonial context. This is just one example of how important the lived experience of the colonized was to Fanon. But a lived experience that is not purely individual and that cannot go without an analysis of the colonial system and its structures. Thus, he is extracting Humanism from the French republican framework where it was confined in order to develop his anticolonial view of psychiatry. As Peter Hudis wrote :

Respect for the dignity of man – including that of the madman – had clearly been one of the central motifs in Fanon's work since he began thinking about the intersection between philosophy and psychology.⁶

Fanon's role as a Psychiatrist was very important, as Daniel Guérin wrote in his book about the Algerian revolution – *Quand l'Algérie s'insurgeait*. In 1955, when Guérin was working on a book about the Antilles (*Les Antilles décolonisées*), with the help of Eric Williams, he organized a Conference in Paris, this same year, in order to invite Eric Williams, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon. But, Fanon had to decline the invitation because he had to participate at a Conference, in Algeria, about "Fear in Algeria" and he wrote to Guérin that "this is a very actual problem". Guérin did not see Fanon anymore until 1957, but the situation had changed. At that time, Fanon was literally "hunted" (*traqué*) by the French authorities because he used to hide FLN members both at the Blida hospital and at his home, and was medically helping FLN members. But even if these two revolutionary figures were very close, they disagreed when Fanon was "hoping to see Messali [Hadj] in Hell".

This kind of anticolonial re-appropriation is also very obvious when it came to language as Peter Hudis wrote in his chapter about "The Strategist of Revolution". Indeed, the "*francophonie*" had (and always have) a very important role in the French colonial Project. Here it is interesting to compare Fanon's Analysis of Language in colonial Context to those of Leopold S. Senghor, one of the main figures of the "*négritude* movement" (but who, from a political point of view, had nothing to do with Aimé Césaire). Senghor always says that he thinks in French better than in his own language and that he speaks French, better than the French. He did absolutely not think that French was imposed by imperialism. He was *agrégé* in French Grammar and had a particular love for France. On the other side, Fanon analysed the role played by language mainly through "*Radio-Alger*". The relation from the colonized to the colonizers-voice and language had two phases. First, a phase of reject: because this radio was the colonizer's voice. Secondly, a phase of re-appropriation, when entering the anticolonial struggle. The resistance against colonialism is producing a new language, showing the contradiction of every imperialist language. As the great novelist Kateb Yacine once told: to the Algerians "French is a war-booty". This new way of using the French language participates to the producing of a new kind of subject in a (post)colonial situation. In his book *A Mar-*

⁵Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, Grove Press, New-York, 1967, p.121.

⁶Peter Hudis, *Frantz Fanon Philosopher of the Barricades*, Pluto Press, London, 2015, p. 60.

⁷Daniel Guérin, *Quand l'Algérie s'insurgeait : 1954 – 1962*, La pensée sauvage, Claix, 1979, pp. 106 – 107.

xist Philosophy of Language, the linguist Jean-Jacques Lecercle wrote that every single language is composed by linguistic struggles (national dialects, registers, idioms, etc. ...). Even if Lecercle wrote this especially about the English language, the French colonial situation is a good example of these linguistic struggles and of the transformation of the colonizers language.

These two examples – about psychiatry and about language - show that, even if Fanon was not a Marxist, his analysis of the colonial situation had nothing to do with some abstract analysis of postcolonialism, only focusing of the representation of the colonized. Furthermore, Fanon's framework should help us to work on a Postcolonial Materialism but also to work on some conceptual and strategical blindspots a whole part of the left has. Peters book analyses very well a lot of Fanons references from Hegel and Sartre to Césaire but I think that by analysing Fanon's work one should not only look at his explicit references. As Matthieu Renault⁸ has written in an article published in the *Nottingham French Studies* journal: we can look at his implicit influences in doing a more historical work. Thus, by looking at the Frantz Fanon library in Alger, Renault has pointed out that Fanon was reading the work of Lenin⁹. Thus, one can find in Fanon's library *What is To Be Done?*, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* and *The State and Revolution*. But what is more interesting is the annotation Fanon wrote in Lenin's book *The Collapse of the Second International*, and especially Fanon's interest for the term "social-chauvinism". As Félix Boggio Éwanjée-Épée and Stella Magliani-Belkacem wrote, in a paper presented during the 2013 "Historical Materialism Conference" in London: "Social-chauvinism was not a political category clearly defined by Lenin. It is a blurry word, even a slur¹⁰". Lenin was using this word in order to describe the alliance between major social democratic forces and their own imperialist state. Of course, when Fanon was fighting with the FLN, the term "social-chauvinism" had become very actual to describe the attitude of the French Communist Party. But beside Lenin, Matthieu Renault quote that the Vietnamese Philosopher Tran Duc Thao was an important influence to Fanon. Renault quotes Tran Duc Thao's work on Phenomenology (*Phénoménologie et matérialisme dialectique*) as well as two articles in *Les Temps Modernes* about the Vietnamese Revolution. Here, I will refer to a 1947 paper entitled "On the trotskyst interpretation of the Indochina events" (*Sur l'interprétation trotskyste des événements d'Indochine*). Since time is running I cannot give a complete analysis of this article and the probable influence it had on Fanon, but it has probably played a role in Fanon's idea that Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to deal with the colonial problem. This paper, by Tran Duc Thao, is an answer to an article written by Claude Lefort, a trotskyst philosopher who became member of Cornelius Castoriadis' group "*Socialisme ou barbarie*", who wrote an article against the Viet Minh and qualified it as a "counter-revolutionary force". What is interesting in his paper is not that much that Tran Duc Thao defend the strategy of the "Class Alliance" in Indochina, neither it is the fact that he, a little bit schematically, argue against the trotskyst analysis of Colonialism in Indochina. It is the obvious fact that Marxism has to be adapted to the social reality of a country. But, according to Tran Duc Thao, a lot of European Marxist are just taking a theory in order to extract it from its specific context and to apply it on Indochina. Thus, even in supporting, on a rhetorical way, the Vietnamese Revolution, some Marxist groups are objective allies of Imperialism.

⁸Matthieu Renault, "Fanon and Tran Duc Thao: The Making of French Anticolonialism", *Nottingham French Studies*, Volume 54, Issue 1, page 107 – 108, ISSN 0029-4586, Available Online March 2015.

⁹In Fanons library one can also find books written by Auguste BLANQUI, Benedetto CROCE, Isaac DEUTSCHER, Michel FOUCAULT, Édouard GLISSANT, André GORZ, Daniel GUÉRIN, C.L.R. JAMES, Francis JEANSON, Alexandre KOJÈVE, Henri LEFEBVRE, Claude LÉVI-STRAUSS, Georg LUKACS, John REED, Maxime RODINSON, Oswald SPENGLER, Friedrich ENGELS, Hô Chi MINH, MAO, Karl MARX, Georg PLEKHANOV, L.S.SENGHOR,

¹⁰Félix Boggio Éwanjée-Épée and Stella Magliani-Belkacem, "Social Chauvinism as a Political Category in the French Metropolis", *Lenin's Tomb*, <http://www.leninology.co.uk/2013/11/social-chauvinism-as-political-category.html>

In the same way, Fanon is very critical concerning the idea that there is a spontaneous solidarity between the proletariat from the colonized countries and the proletariat from the imperialist countries. He wrote that “Today we can measure the lack of realism of the well known doctrine according to which it exist an organic solidarity between the proletariat of the colonizing country and the proletariat of those from the colonized people. The colonized people who fight for their independence can only count on their colonized brothers¹¹”. But after that he explains very well that it would also be a mistake to think that it exist an instinctive and spontaneous solidarity between colonized-subjects.

We could discuss a long time about the Marxist influences on Fanon, but my point here – and I think that it is really well highlighted by Peter in his book – is that Marxism is not antonymous to a “postcolonial framework”.

Despite the high quality of this book, let me however point out one minor problem that comes out from Peters political analysis. While I think that the strength of Peter’s book is to put Fanon in his context, I think that maybe the use that is made of Fanon – or by atheist anticolonial revolutionaries – by some Leftists could be more stressed. Of course, it is great that the Left has this kind of anticolonial influence, but one should also think about the ideal-type it represents. Indeed, certain leftist movements love to build an “ideal” of a non-white atheist who support anticolonial struggles in order to de-legitimize every other political force who is fighting against colonialism from another point of view. I am saying this because today, a whole part of the Left is waiting to have a “perfect” resistance on every single point before supporting it. This was also the case during the Algerian Revolution, when some anarchists or some members of the French CP, did not supported nationalist movements, or movements with a religious background. I think, at this point, we should make the difference between a political support and an ideological support. In a review of a book written by Amar Ouzegane, who was excluded, in 1948, from the Algerian Communist Party because of “nationalist deviances”, the French Marxist Maxime Rodinson wrote that one should be careful when dealing with Arab Atheist because it is often a perfect image of the enlightened atheist anti-imperialist activist but who is, very often, unable to understand the role played by religion in a Society such as Algeria. Amar Ouzegane did not use a single theological argument to explain the importance of religion but stressed the social role played by religion. In his article, Rodinson quote Robespierre who apprehended Atheism as Aristocratic during the French Revolution, in the same way, Ouzegane see in Atheism the “sign of the French labour aristocracy¹²”. A whole part of the Left did not support the Algerian nationalist movement because it did not enter into their “political framework”. This problem stills exist today: some leftists refuse to support certain Palestinian resistance groups because they disagree with them on an ideological level and did not grasp their importance in the evolution of the balance of forces. I’m not saying that we should support every single organisation that is defining itself as anti-imperialist, but I’m saying that we should analysis the importance of an organisation in the balance of power. Since Peter’s book is producing a dialogue between Fanon and the radical Left, I think that some political mistakes of the Left could be a little bit more underlined. It is true that there are various important “conceptual blindspots”, as Peter wrote, but there is also a kind of political attitude that creates serious issues between the Left and the racialized outsiders.

¹¹Frantz FANON, “Le conflit algérien et l’anticolonialisme africain”, In : Frantz FANON, *Écrits sur l’aliénation et la liberté*, éditions La Découverte, Paris, 2015, pp. 461 – 475.

¹² Maxime Rodinson, « Du Communisme au F.L.N », *Le Monde Diplomatique*, December 1962, page 7.

To conclude on this book, Peter wrote that “a movement is ‘Fanonian’ insofar and only insofar, as it ‘re-examines the question of humanity’ rejuvenates it, and actualize it” (p. 139). I cannot express myself of the importance of “re-examining humanity” as this notion is very blurred today.

To me a “Fanonian movement” is a decolonial movement that is not “slave of the slavery that unhumanised our Fathers and Mothers” or “perpetual prisoner of dead people” nor does decolonizing means a come-back to a pre-colonial situation or an abstract critic of various prejudices or ideas that came from the colonial era. It means to have an analysis of the post-colonial roots of today’s racism, a concrete analysis of a concrete situation, which means to historicise racism in order to fight against it. In this, Fanon is a key decolonial thinker and I think Peter Hudis’ book is a major book about this key thinker.

Frantz Fanon: Philosopher of the Barricades

Event’s presentation – Friday, 6th November 2015 SOAS, University of London

Decolonising Our Minds and Pluto Press are delighted to welcome Peter Hudis, Selim Nadi and Tithi Bhattacharya for a discussion on Professor Hudis's crucial new book on Frantz Fanon's philosophical and psychological thought, and political activism - "Frantz Fanon: Philosopher of the Barricades".

Scholarship on Fanon is vast, and he is regarded as a singular figure in postcolonialism, critical theory and revolutionary political thought. His works have inspired movements in Palestine, South Africa, Sri Lanka, the US and many other contexts, and in addition to the practical force of his philosophies, his writings have been the subject of intense intellectual study for decades.

"Frantz Fanon: Philosopher of the Barricades" is a critical biography of Fanon's extraordinary life. Peter Hudis draws on the expanse of his life and work - from his upbringing in Martinique and early intellectual influences to his efforts to fuse psychoanalysis and philosophy and contributions to the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria - to counter the common assumption that Fanon's contribution to modern thought is defined by the advocacy of violence.

In Hudis' biography, Fanon emerges as neither armchair intellectual nor intransigent militant. He was a political activist who brought his interests in psychology and philosophy directly to bear on such issues as mutual recognition, democratic participation and political sovereignty. The book gives new force to Fanon's ideas, his life, and his example for people engaged in radical political theory, and speaks to all those engaged in the ongoing search for alternatives to oppressive social relations in the 21st century.

Join us for a conversation on Professor Hudis's book and the crucial themes it raises in regards to Fanon's life and works, and their significance for political thought and contemporary social justice struggles. Copies of the book will be sold on the day.

Peter Hudis is author of "Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism" (Brill, 2012). He edited "The Rosa Luxemburg Reader" (MRP, 2004) and "The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg" (Verso, 2013). He is Professor of Philosophy and Humanities at Oakton Community College in Illinois, United States.

Tithi Bhattacharya is a professor of South Asian History at Purdue University in Indiana. She is the author of "The Sentinels of Culture: Class, Education, and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal" (Oxford University Press, 2005) and a long-time activist for Palestinian justice. She writes extensively on Marxist theory, gender, and the politics of Islamophobia. Her work has been published in the Journal of Asian Studies, South Asia Research, Electronic Intifada, Jacobin, Salon and the New Left Review. She is on the editorial board of the International Socialist Review.

Selim Nadi is a PhD student at the Centre for History at Sciences Po (Paris). He is also part of the French Marxist theoretical journal "Période" (<http://revueperiode.net/>) and a regular contributor at "ContreTemps" (<http://contretemps.eu/>).

The event is open to everybody. Please note that at the moment, registration is not required to attend, however this may change subject to anticipated attendance numbers.