



Discovery, Fulfillment, and/or Betrayal **Frantz Fanon and the Role of the Intellectual in the Struggle for Freedom**

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Abstract: And so welcome to the year 2007, 46 years after Fanon's demise. And welcome to the confusion, I would say a rich and positive confusion, that remains about the expectations of us from those who have given us so much in knowledge of all kinds. And this rich confusion flows largely from a certain fuzziness about "what time it is" historically. A world very different from that of Fanon's post-World War II globe of cold war, mutually assured atomic destruction, and all sorts of national liberation and anti colonial struggles. But let me hastily add, also a world which we suspect—and much of the discussion of these past two days may have deepened our suspicions—that is similar not only to the years in which Fanon lived, but indeed similar to the past 500 years. But whether in 2007 or in the past, recent or remote, many of the questions and expectations posed to us remain similar.

Those of you who have heard me give presentations in past years will have to bear with me once again as I open a presentation with the words of Eastern European writer Milan Kundera: "the struggle for people's power is the struggle for memory and against forgetting."

These words have so much adhesion to so many topics. And so have they also here at this conference. We who have been here for these past two days have been introduced to many discourses, polemics, and theories that would certainly seem to uphold Kundera's words, to say nothing of Fanon's paradigms. And if we surmise that in these past two days a certain struggle—or at least a dialogue—between memory

and forgetfulness has been taking place, it's probably because we know that when we walk outside these academic walls, we're back into a world chock-full of social, spiritual, religious, and politico-economic dynamics and upheavals. And it is this reality, to which we'll be returning after 6:00 p.m. this evening, that has made necessary these past two days of the resurrection of Frantz Fanon.

Just to remind ourselves—just a little -- of what this reality consists:

ITEM: There are 30 articles contained in the Charter of Human Rights of the United Nations of which, in this country, a critical mass (if not a majority) of people's social statuses are probably in direct violation.

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Yet, we have the arrogance to tell other countries how to be democratic and mindful of human rights. And the peoples of these countries look at us askance, as though we were from Mars, point their fingers at us and whisper "Ohio," "Florida."

ITEM: In 1970, there were 500,000 people in this country behind bars. Today, there are over two million people in this nation of prison houses. They are mostly people of color. They are mostly imprisoned for crimes of nonviolence, where drugs were involved. We have thousands of people on death row and remain the only fully industrialized country on earth that allows capital punishment. And this does not include the thousands of prisoners of war—arbitrarily deprived of that international status in the name of a never-ending war upon terror, such as the prisoners held at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib and other more secret detention locales. It does not include the nearly 200 political prisoners and prisoners of war who have been such long before the events of September 11, 2001, for struggling on behalf of their African, Latin@, Asian, and Native peoples.

ITEM: We still have slum housing. I had to be reminded of this a few years back when I saw this first hand in Memphis, Tennessee. I saw housing which in Boston had disappeared. Don't get me wrong; in Boston, we still have substandard housing but nothing like in Memphis, in the state that had the nerve to run Al Gore for President. And yes, I cried. We have this in Memphis. We have substandard housing in Boston. We have less than adequate housing all over the land that is alleged to be the richest nation on earth.

ITEM: Our schools have become dens of miseducation and holding pens for our children, pending construction of jails—this country's only persistent program of affordable housing construction.

I could go on with a very long litany of specific ills but I think that the picture is clear. We live in a social order that will not

feed, clothe, school, house, or medically care for those for whom it no longer has any use.

This is a social order that is based upon a *racial order* that goes back to our country's colonial period. A racial hierarchy based upon white-skinned people's domination over others, and woven into law, custom, and psyche. We live in *racialized state dictatorship based upon a chosen white-skinned people's democracy*. A social order constantly able to create and recreate social disparities where, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., noted, black people [and poor people overall] have "one half of the good things in life--- and twice the bad."

This social order is based upon *militarism: the assumption, in this country, that might makes right and that God takes sides with his "chosen people."* It assumes that the strong are justified in subjugating the weak. It assumes that a nation's superiority is measured by the size and strength of its armed forces. This militarism has routinized violence and bullying behavior, and encouraged time and again the rapid, unending technologies of death and destruction.

Finally, this social order is rooted in *economic exploitation*, where our existence is based on individual property ownership and the *commodification of an individual's ability to work*. The system of economic exploitation—popularly called capitalism—also features uneven access to resources resulting in scarcity, poverty, class, sex, race, and other divisions.

Racism. Militarism. Economic exploitation [capitalism]. These are the inseparable triple evils which Dr. King was beginning to address in the last year of his life by trying to put together a Poor People's Campaign. It was to be a campaign that recognized that in order for the people of this country to live the good life, to realize the beloved community—then this social order must be replaced. It was to be a campaign which showed people that these good things, this

beloved community could only be achieved by dismantling those institutions, this system, that is based upon racism, militarism, and economic exploitation. Only then could human and material resources be re-channeled to projects likely to lead to the realization of our own human needs.

So what is expected of us, a collection of people like us sitting in a room like this, and knowing that outside of this academic setting lies a world of terrorism, extraordinary renditions, high rates of homicides for journalists who learn too much, thousands of men, women and children murdered a day. I ask this because in this struggle of memory against forgetting, I cannot forget those who asked these questions very clearly but cannot be here today because they are dead. I especially mean the Fanons, Anzaldúas, Saïds and other intellectual giants who have informed much of what we know, especially what many of us know who have attended the forums here of these past three years. But I also mean the Sundiata Acolis and the David Gilberts of this world who are in jail for the rest of their natural lives because their conclusions about the institutions we live under was that one has to go underground and engage in armed struggle. What Marx in another time and another place called the criticism of the weapon. Acoli and Gilbert, one black one white, are North American prisoners of war—two of over one hundred and sixty who were doing long years to life before September 11, for engaging in what the powers that be deem illegal in their struggle for the liberation of African, Puerto Rican, Chicano and other oppressed people—and their North American allies such as Marilyn Buck and David Gilbert and Walpole Prison's Jan Laaman.

Or what of Mumia Abu-Jamal, on death row for over a quarter century for a crime not only not committed, but because a just settlement of his case would expose the goings-on of the Philadelphia Police and the District Attorney—and by exten-

sion, the police forces and district attorneys of this entire land. What of Assata Shakur, in exile in Cuba because her comrades concluded—I think accurately—that she might have been assassinated for the crime of being Commander in Chief of the Black Liberation Army. What of Amiri Baraka, whose most recent run-ins with the authorities and the Zionist establishment have to do with writing a poem, one month after 9/11, that asked too many who-what-why-and how come questions. What of Ward Churchill. No one said anything about academic standards or accurate footnoting in his excellent work about the original peoples of this land before he wrote his essay about 9/11, suggesting that Malcolm X's chickens have come home to roost.

By comparison most of our activities have been easy. Or have they? Many of us are the survivors of paradigms, weltanschauungs, isms all—and the clashes of these. And those of us who haven't fallen into the trap of consigning intellectual struggle to a place inferior to other struggles realize that this intellectual work has been anything but easy. We can look back from whence we've come and view both the wreckage and the corpses. The wreckage itself is enough to make us want to quit. So many assumptions so many brilliant theories, so many reinventions of the wheel—all mixed in with our intention to re-create this planet. All that wreckage. And in its place, comfortable lulling paradigms of today's academy: postmodernism, globalism, neo- this, that, the other. Maggie Thatcher's TINA: there is no alternative. And the overwork, the underpayment, the denial of tenure and attendant wrecked careers, the suicides, the broken families and other forms of personal and collective/social immiseration caused by the pressures of that battlefield called academia.

But then looking back, there are the bones of the corpses. And they seem to be calling to us with another message, another

language. A different message altogether. One that tells us we don't have to live like this. We can and should, and our children must, live better. We have an obligation to bring this obligation into reality. This was the message of those who came before us. From the palenques of Cuba to the Riff Rebellions of North Africa, from the League Against Imperialism formed in Brussels to Bandung to the Non Aligned Movement to the Comintern to the Tricontinental to the Pan African congresses, this was the message, the cry for resistance, for self-determination. The message that we could—and still can—build another world. The message that we don't have to seek the permission of Euro-America to do these things, since the powers that be of that part of the world have only been a power of negative example of how not to construct a civilized world.

So, a different message of the bones from the wreckage. Or maybe telling us the same thing. That is, those who have come before us—indeed some of us who are in this room—fought with what we had at hand. And we lost a battle. We didn't necessarily lose because our theories were bad or insufficient. Maybe it was just the case that we didn't understand them as well as those who will come after us. It wasn't necessarily for lack of organizing, though some of us who have lived over these past 40 years would have some hairy tales about that.

We know that our people resisted in different and creative ways these past decades, these past centuries. We know this because many of us sitting in this room have come from conditions where—had our parents and our people not found some way to surmount the hunger, the lack of health care, the want of clothing, the many temptations to deal with these things in ways we'd rather not discuss ... had our parents and others not shown us a better way—we would not be sitting here discussing Fanon.

We lost a battle. We didn't lose a war.

And we have nothing to be grateful for to those who have made it necessary that we meet like this and for what we've met. We lost a battle. And the very fact that we're sitting in this room today means that we can try again. Indeed those who have taken to the streets and roads of Mumbai, Durham, Sao Paulo, Chiapas, Los Angeles, Mexico City and Oaxaca, Johannesburg and the Nigerian Delta, Lebanon and Palestine...and the urban tracts of the North American beast itself...those people outside the windows of this building. Watching us. Wondering what we've learned these past two days and what are we going to do with that learning.

And we've got to do something, many things. We still live under capitalist European oppression. I know, there are some who would argue that much of our misery is of our doing. But I ask in the spirit of Ho Chi Minh: if you are having a nail hammered into your palm, where do you assign the blame? To the nail? To the hammer? Or to the hand of the person who is wielding the hammer while holding the nail with the other hand? We may live in different places and have different experiences, but somehow when we exchange stories of where we've been, there are lots of similarities. We are exploited and oppressed peoples whether of African descent, Asian descent or Latino descent. We are oppressed when blacks are paid less than whites, when South Asians in India are paid less than whites for their computer skills. We are oppressed wherever migrant workers show up in numbers in Europe and North America from our ancient and honorable cultures because our people must eat, the earth belongs to all of us, and no human being is illegal.

The gang-banging, the fetishism—the love—of bling-bling of our youth are a direct descent of five centuries ago when the slave traders set one African people against another to catch and enslave each other for rum, muskets and trinkets. The child sol-

diers and remains of slavery, wherever they are found, are possible only because they serve someone's capitalistic need to become rich. The drugs that run through our communities are a direct descent of the colonial rum and tobacco, the opium of the conquest of China by European powers, and the cultivation of heroin, opium, cocaine that takes place today, often accompanied by war. We have a lot of struggle to undo this mess. And if we don't do it, we'll not have a planet.

And so welcome to the year 2007, 46 years after Fanon's demise. And welcome to the confusion, I would say a rich and positive confusion, that remains about the expectations of us from those who have given us so much in knowledge of all kinds. And this rich confusion flows largely from a certain fuzziness about "what time it is" historically. A world very different from that of Fanon's post-World War II globe of cold war, mutually assured atomic destruction, and all sorts of national liberation and anti colonial struggles. But let me hastily add, also a world which we suspect—and much of the discussion of these past two days may have deepened our suspicions—that is similar not only to the years in which Fanon lived, but indeed similar to the past 500 years. But whether in 2007 or in the past, recent or remote, many of the questions and expectations posed to us remain similar.

Once more: the struggle for people's power is the struggle between memory and forgetting. If we don't forget that in the intellectual endeavors that we would like to contribute to the current and next generations of comrades, then we'll be doing alright. And if the opportunity should arise to jump into the mix in addition to writing about it, make every effort not to pass it up. It was a nineteenth century German participant observer of the Revolution of 1848 who advised us that the philosophers have only interpreted the world in so many ways. The point is to change it.

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