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Below Even the Other: Colonialism's Violent Legacy and Challenge, with Respects to Fanon

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Frantz Fanon died little more than 50 years ago right after completing his final work, *Les Damnés de la terre*, in which he raised the question of struggling for freedom and dignity in a world premised upon the ongoing violent maintenance of dehumanizing institutions—in effect, the paradoxical relation of being placed outside of relations. This paper, which was a talk in honor of Fanon held in Belgrade in early December 2011, will examine this problem in terms of (1) its theodicean elements, (2) its philosophical anthropology of dehumanization, (3) its derailment of ethico-political relations, and (4) the problematic of a world whose future rests upon unleashing what is now illicit forms of subjectivity from what Enrique Dussel, in *The Underside of Modernity*, calls the underside of modern life.

I begin with this consideration: If an intellectual has made a genuine contribution, it is the extent to which her or his *ideas* enable the rest of us to build on them and do our work more effectively. When it comes to black thinkers, however, the tendency is for critics to be more concerned with their biographies than their thought. It would be weird to write about Kant or Hegel exclusively in terms of their biographies. It is in light of that that this paper will focus on Fanon's ideas, especially in light of the anniversary both of his death and the publication of his famous work.

Some of what I will be discussing could be contextualized by an experience from my graduate school days. Studying philosophy, I found myself encountering some of the most virulent antiblack racism in much of the modern European canon. Raising this observation with my peers often led to their dismissal of the legitimacy of the concern. They would either deny the existence of such passages in writings by Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche, to mention some of the best of the best, as it were, or they would claim the marginality of those points or their irrelevance. In some cases, they would simply respond with disbelief, with the reflection, "Why didn't I see that?" But mostly, they would argue against the significance of the racist, and I would add anti-Semitic and misogynous, passages.

Now, one mistake of my colleagues was that they thought I was pointing to those offending passages for the sake of textual dismissal. They missed my point entirely. My concern wasn't actually about those works in themselves but about the ways in which they are engaged. It would have been naïve of me, a black man first from Jamaica and then growing up in the United States, to presume that modern European reflections on black people would have been one of solidarity and sagacity. What I was asking my fellow students, and also my instructors, to do was *really to read these texts*, to

paraphrase Kierkegaard, not simply to see but also to see what we see and attempt to see what stands before us. Their failure to read them, to have developed a practice of *reading-past* the offending passages was peculiarly similar in form to a phenomenon in theology—namely, *theodicy*. This form of argument emerged from the effort to account for the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent god in the face of evil and injustice. Why would a good god tolerate—or even worse, hold some responsibility for—evil? Although Leibniz has explored the metaphysical implications of these issues in his *Theodicy*, the classic responses emerge as early as in the thought of St. Augustine, who offered two enduring responses: (1) the deity's will is beyond human comprehension and (2) the deity acted benevolently by endowing humanity with free will, which could be exercised righteously or viciously. In sum, both formulations place the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of human beings.

Theodicy literally means *gods' justice*, which collapses reflexively into a just god and, even more, the metaphysical conception of such a god as anathematic to injustice. Secularized, this form of argumentation leads to certain subjects becoming anathematic with iniquity and injustice. Returning to my experience with my peers, the error at work was the endowing of godlike qualities to the authors of canonical philosophical texts.

As gods, they cannot be wrong, so there must be something wrong with us, the readers, and the proper approach, presumably, is to rationalize away the contradictions and infelicities. If we consider my remark about not presuming perfection or godlike qualities of the texts, we see the theodicean problematic thus: The author and the text are perfect; therefore, its faults must rest in us, the readers. I call this *theodicy of the text*. It is where we forget that books are human artifacts, products of human beings, and have of the imperfections of the human world.

This problem of philosophy also takes the form of rendering certain phenomena invisible. It will be a leitmotif of what I will be saying about violence: The notion of illicit, illegal, or impermissible appearance. That relates to the problem of existence. If one thinks about it, the word 'existence', from *ex sistere*, means to stand out, to appear. So, to say, "It doesn't exist," is also a way of eradicating or at least disavowing the existence of a phenomenon. Things that appear in spite of our rejection of their appearance, of their *right to appear*, or better, our conviction that they *should not appear*, we could call *problems*. In effect, there is a double movement in problems, and this is the problem *of being a problem*. To illustrate this in human terms, consider the story of Jean-Paul Sartre's first visit to the United States. He met up with the famed African American novelist Richard Wright, who took him to Harlem. While walking through the streets of what was then known as "the black Mecca," Sartre asked Wright to tell him about "the black problem."

"Black problem?" asked Wright. "There is no black problem. There is a white problem."

As the story goes, Sartre was inspired by this exchange to write not of the Jewish problem in Europe but of the Anti-Semite's problem.

This problem of being a problem is examined often in African Diasporic philosophy or Africana philosophy. It was theorized well by W.E.B. Du Bois as well at the end of the 19th century. When it came to studying people of color, Du Bois observed, the tendency was to treat them *as problems* instead of interrogating the problems they faced. This problem has the same form of theodicy. It makes the society into an

internally perfect god, which makes the contradictions of the society, its injustices and other maledictions, external to it. By making these supposedly external beings into problems, the society is redeemed of its role in the production of problems they face.

Now, one of the things about Fanon is that he makes many people anxious and nervous. After all, a black man unapologetically talking about violence would scare a lot of people. In addition to that, he said many things about which he hoped he was wrong, and in fact much of his writing was a profound desire to be such. There is tragedy in his writings and that of many black intellectuals: They offer their prognosis, are mortified, and pray for the unfolding of history to dispute them.

One of the things Fanon observed in his first book, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, was that "Reason" had a habit of taking flight whenever he entered a room. Reaching to her with his outstretched arms, she rejected him. He faced the problem of illicit or illegal appearance. In effect, reason, in relation to him, was being unreasonable; he encountered the contradiction of *unreasonable reason*. If we think about the gender metaphor of reason in French—*la raison*—then we see the added dimension of violence, for how is he to force *her* to acknowledge and relate to him without the structure of rape? Fanon, then, had to be persuasive without force; he needed to reason with unreasonable reason *reasonably*.

This raises the question of philosophical anthropology of dehumanization and the problem of relationality. There is a metaphysical assumption about the human being in discussion of violence. Much modern philosophical anthropology is premised on old-style Aristotelian metaphysics of substance, where one seeks to find the essence of a thing *inside* of it, what intrinsic element makes a thing what it is. But this model requires imagining a thing outside of its relation to any other thing, as being what it is independent of every other thing. It, in effect, requires taking a thing out of relations with other things and determines its reality *nonrelationally.* The problem, of course, is that even to think about it places one in a relation with that thing. In effect, one commits a performative contradiction of attempting to be in a nonrelation to a relation about a nonrelation. This raises the fundamental philosophical anthropological problem: The human being has to be understood fundamentally in terms of relations, which means that at the heart of violence is an effort to "*de-relationalize*," take outside of relations, the human being or transform such a being into non-relationality. In fact, an examination of all instances of violence reveals an effort to push human beings into the body as if the human being were an Aristotelian substance.

Now Fanon and many other thinkers have seen violence, of forced inwardness or implosivity, as also a problem of philosophical anthropology. One of the ways racism, sexism, ethnic hatred, class massacre manifest themselves is as challenges to the humanity of human beings. If, however, one attempts to defend one's humanity through an assertion of equality to one's challenger, one would have lost the contest by, in effect, affirming the challenger's status as a standard or norm of one's humanity. What if the challenger is a low standard? Yet even making oneself the standard leads to the same critical, interrogative problem—what justifies oneself as such a standard? This leads to the interrogations of standards, of whether it even makes sense to speak in such terms about human worth, which is, in effect, the question of philosophical anthropology. We face the interrogation of norms and their normativity, and this becomes a critique of practices of justification.

Now the critique of practices of justification leads to one of Fanon's observations. What many critics of Fanon, such as Hannah Arendt and Paul Nisbett (among many others), did not realize is that he detested violence, as Alice Cherki pointed out in her book on his life and thought. He held no romantic notion of violence as a justificatory practice. The chapter on colonial disorders in *Les damnés de la terre* offered case studies of behavior—the killing of mothers, relatives, childhood best friends—that would, and was meant to, make readers shudder at the thought of what could be no less than traumatic foundations of a postrevolutionary, postcolonial future. The passages echo a reflection from his first book, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, in which he wrote about his experience of dissecting a human cadaver in his anatomy class from medical school. His professor's advice: "Pretend it's a cat." The insight here is about what is at stake when the human being is pushed outside of human relations. It points to the category of replaceable beings.

Think of how human beings live in war times. In the midst of daily violence, they often attempt to affirm their value through a variety of social resources, most striking of which is play: the party or seek the joys of aesthetic objects. Play suspends seriousness sufficiently to enable the possibility of everyday life, of the ordinary, which leads to one of the striking dimensions of life during wartimes—namely, the cultivation of mundane existence. I have seen this phenomenon in West Asia, South America, and Southern Africa. That what people in these situations have lost, however, are their spouses, parents, children, cousins, best friends—people who, in the scheme of their lives, are irreplaceable, beings beyond digits or any other model of accounting—raises the question of the preciousness of mundane life with the uniqueness of the relationships that make them meaningful. The moment of tragic loss of a loved-one includes also the memories of ordinary existence with that person now saturated by the realization of precariousness.

So we've come to Fanon's complex argument. The tendency to examine violence in terms of Self-Other relations is limited, the relation of ethical life—what is ethical obligation but a relationship with The Other? Fanon showed, however, that modern colonialism, wedded to a philosophical anthropology of dehumanization, leads to the effort to eradicate the Self-Other dialectic when it comes to certain groups of people. As with "pretend it's a cat," there is a scheme of production, as with theodicy, in which some groups are pushed outside of the framework of ethical relations. There thus emerges the *self*, the *Other*, the *non-self*, and the *non-Other*. He called the latter two *the zone of nonbeing.* Outside of the Self-Other dialectic, it means there is no *ethical* relation to such groups, which opens the door not only to violence but also *unlimited violence* or *extreme violence*, as also Etienne Balibar has argued in his essay "Violence and Civility." This outside status, which includes also being outside of the realm of legitimacy, means that the effort to reach *in* to the realm of Self-Other relations becomes an invasion of legitimacy instead of its establishment. The situation becomes moribund: people in the zone of nonbeing reach to the ethical *as a violation of the ethical*. They become, in effect, *violation*.

Oddly enough, this observation makes anti-colonial and antiracist struggles not those against but instead efforts to enter Self-Other relations. What, however, is the status of activities toward such ends? As those efforts are outside of the ethical relation, their proponents face the paradox of what could be called the supervenience of politics

in colonial life, where ethics is violated for the sake of ethics. Modern colonialism, in other words, is the derailment of ethical life, where ethics, as the supervening category, has unethical outcomes. Its possibility, then, depends on activities outside of itself, which, in the case of overturning colonialism, means political action. But tragically for colonized subjects, this also means the struggle for ethical life emerges *as violence* tout court. Since the system of colonialism and racism depends on certain groups in effect not appearing, not emerging, which means, in the end, *not existing*, then their appearance would be read as a violation of the legitimate sphere.

This is an unusual situation: Colonized and racially subordinated subjects enter the realm of ethics *as violence*, and that phenomenon becomes their *appearance*. They are obligated, in other words, not to appear. Colonialism, understood in these terms, is tragic in the Hegelian sense of a conflict between two conceptions of right. The settlers see themselves as having a right to the land; however it was originally obtained, the transactions by which the generation of settlers facing the indigenous or anti-colonial fighters acquired their possessions was part of a legal and as far as they are concerned *just* system. They thus have a *right* to their possessions in the colony. The indigenous or prior inhabitants argue, however, that the land was *stolen* from them through acts of conquest or trickery. They therefore have a *right* to its repossession. Even if the settlers decide to give the land back, there is a deeper ethical argument that even that act of good will isn't their *right*. It's their obligation. And there is another form of reasoning that says giving up that for which you have a right, although charitable, is unjust. The stage is thus set for the conflict of right, where there is no outcome without violation.

I recall conversations with colleagues who refer to the Civil Rights struggle in the United States and the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa as "nonviolent." A closer examination of those struggles reveal, however, that black people were being tortured and killed throughout. Violence, in other words, only emerged as a national discussion where whites were harmed and black people asserted having a right to public realm. In effect, it was futile for activists in these struggles to demonstrate their nonviolent commitments, since, ultimately, they were charged with the violent act of trying to change the system. The best case they could have offered for nonviolence to appear as such was to have abandoned the project of social transformation.

Today, we face the erosion of the forms of political relations that enable most people to appear as political agents. In effect, what is happening is the radicalization of what Aimé Césaire pointed out in his *Discours sur le colonialisme* as the value system of the colonial era, what he called the value of "Hitlerism," by which he meant what was considered legitimate treatment of colonized subjects was brought back to Europe. We are now witnessing attacks on the idea of political relations themselves; if political activity and relations are outlawed, people will become more locked into their bodies, and the structural relations are eroded into processes of ongoing violence, dynamics of implosivity outlined by Fanon. So, in effect, then, the question of the expansion of political rights, responding in the ways the underside of modernity have, becomes a problematic of global conditions to come.

In *Disciplinary Decadence* and, with Jane Anna Gordon, *Of Divine Warning: Reading Disaster in the Modern age*, I have talked about these as a conflict that has taken the form of a false dilemma—namely, between the global and the local. The struggle against neoliberalism, which has become metonymic for globalism, supposedly requires localism

as an antidote. It is not only neoliberalism that we face, however, but also neoconservatism. Both seek a form of freezing and end of history.The first prefers the 19th century, with John Stuart Mill as its father figure and the British Empire as its model. The second prefers the 17th into the 18th century, with Thomas Hobbes's and John Locke's thought as its inspiration and the presumption that the only good revolution in history occurred in North America in 1776. Both are afraid of the 20th century since it was an age of revolutions, and one in which those at the bottom had risen up. As both look to the 21st century, they have ironically joined some of the 20th century revolutionaries with the false problem of which past to reassert.

The 21st century, however, has its own problematics. It's an age of a radical transformation of many relations by which the human being is made manifest. First, there is the reality of there now being seven billion people on the planet, which has not only had an impact on our understanding of space but also on the dynamics of movement; people spill over into each other in their ordinary projects of simply trying to live. Second, our technological achievements have placed no part of the planet out of reach, and they have sped up the time by which space is traversed, which leads to shrinking of temporality and geo-spatiality. Human beings live, in other words, in a significantly smaller world than our predecessors, even though we continue to look to the stars as ways out of our terrestrial claustrophobia. Third, the new set of relations for the facilitation and movement of capital has also made such flow a necessary condition for much employment, which means that living, working, thinking, and consuming are all now conducted in ways that spill over borders and other mechanisms and processes of containment.

That the world is smaller and time is accelerated. This means that dealing with the philosophical anthropology of the future—the question of what are we and what are we to become—requires understanding the global through the construction of new political relations. Why do I say the global? It is because it is naïve to think we could articulate any localism any longer, because the notion of the local *as the local* is a global notion. The question becomes one of articulating a conception of global life beyond the three models raised from the 18th to the 20th centuries. This understanding brings to the fore the closing remark from Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre*. He said it was not only the question of the material conditions—which we see today in technological developments such as the internet, the micro-chip, the development of nanotechnologies; the necessities of employment; the conditions even of movement or travel—but also the problem of the responsibility we all share for the concepts by which humanity is able to appear. If he is correct, there is much to do in the face of our limited good fortune of possibly still having enough time.

Notes