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“Corps à corps”

Frantz Fanon’s Erotics of Liberation

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In this short paper, I will endeavour to show that Frantz Fanon’s well-known conception of struggles for national liberation is intimately linked to an *erotics of liberation*. This one takes its roots in a shift, or better a reversal, of *theories of racism*. As Etienne Balibar argues, “racism,” as a category, appears at mid 19th century, especially under the aegis of the UNESCO, as a break with the conceptions of “race,” considered to be a pure “myth” or “prejudice.”¹ A better example of such an epistemological rupture is probably Sartre’s *Antisemite and Jew* and its motto: “the Jew is a man whom other men consider a Jew...it is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew.”² In other words, race is nothing but the product of racism. The biological arguments that underlie the theories of race are “false” arguments inasmuch as they depend on ideological and/or psychological premises.

Fanon no doubt takes part in this reversal: “what is called the black soul is often a construction by white folk”³; or again: “it is the colonist who *fabricated* and *continues to fabricate* the colonized subject.”⁴ However, some of Fanon’s assumptions (especially in *Black Skin, White Masks*) reveal that he has suspicions about such a paradigm of racism, which is grounded, as Balibar reminds us, on the anthropological postulate of the indivisibility of the human species. Now, for Fanon, defending the idea of the “human dignity” of Black people, by asserting that “the Black man is a man like ourselves,” is certainly necessary, but it is definitely not enough. What is to be thought is the *actual* splitting of the “human community” between men and *undermen*, the human and the inhuman, a division that is the pure effect of colonization. Fanon produces a *reversal of the reversal* by strategically coming back to the concept of race. He gives rise to a *performative use* of race names in order to undo them, to deconstruct the *grammar of races* and, in his last writings, to subvert biological racism by developing a conception of the struggle for national liberation as *struggle for life*, a struggle that opposes two antagonist colonial “species.”

This will be the end of Fanon’s intellectual journey, but I would like to stress here that Fanon’s *return to race* begins as a *return to the body*. Indeed, what Fanon unveils in the theories of racism is a certain denial of the *body experience*. To be sure, for Sartre and others, racism is not a pure mental/ideal phenomenon. It is an affective/passionate one. And Sartre recognizes that it can involve “bodily modifications” – for example disgust⁵. The problem for Fanon is precisely in this relation of “implication” insofar as it means that the body’s living experience is at the very most a mere *effect*, a by-product of racism, which is by definition non-corporeal. It is as if talking about the body while dealing with racism always threatened to reintroduce the banished concept of race. Now, consider Fanon’s audacious move. It consists in arguing that racism is *immediately* experienced at the level of the body, both for the racist and for the racialized man/woman. This is a dangerous move because it means occupying the enemy’s territory, taking the place of the theories of race. But this move must be done in order to understand the *effects* that racism makes on its victims; and the limits of Sartre’s conceptualization, according to Fanon, is precisely that it prevents us from understanding that the “Negro suffers in his body quite differently from the white man.”⁶ Fanon’s still “scandalous” argument is that there is a fundamental “physical *duellum*” between the white man and the black man... but this conflict is the *conflict of racism* itself, not that of races.

This return to the body can also be analyzed from the point of view of psychopathology. In the psychiatric and psychoanalytical literature of his time, Fanon encounters the figure of the Black man (next to the Jew, the Communist, the Freemason, etc.) as an object of fantasy/delirium and, especially, rape fantasies. The Black man is considered as a pure *symbol* of the white man/woman’s unconscious. And unlike the traditional psychoanalytical figures (the mother, the father, the maid, etc.) such an imaginary being does not refer to any being “in the flesh” in the sense that no concrete contact with a black man is needed for these fantasies to develop. Certainly, such a thesis is salutary inasmuch as it proves the black man innocent of all the accusations (especially of sexual aggression) he is charged with. Nonetheless, for Fanon, it is problematic precisely because it prevents us from understanding what it means to the black man *to be a symbol* for the white-other. It prevents from understanding that this process of *symbolisation* is followed by another process of *incorporation* insofar as the black man internalizes/introjects the racial symbolic, even while he struggles against it. The black body is a *symbolic body*, a body that at the same time *is* and *overcomes* the symbol. Fanon’s theoretical strategy comes under what I would like to call a *revenge of the symbol*. He gives rise to a *sensual discourse* and locates the body at the very core of the writing process.

Fanon’s attention to the body goes back to his PhD dissertation in psychiatry in which he embraces the conception (promoted by Henry Ey, Kurt Goldstein, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, etc.) of psychic life as *bodily*

*integration*⁷. According to him, such a conception puts an end to any *dualism of body and soul*, inasmuch as the latter is nothing but the higher level of organization of the former. Now, for the Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks*, thinking of the *body of the (black) slave* means thinking of the black man as *slave of his body*. Identifying with the white man, striving for building a white self, the (West Indian) black man splits himself from his (irreparably) black body and experiences it as a perpetual obstacle. The duality of body and soul is now understood as an *effect* of the politics of race – not anymore as a timeless truth. Moreover, such a splitting takes its roots in what Fanon, following Freud and Jung, considers to be the crucial law of the process of (European) *civilization*: the law of *dissociation* of the white man *psyche*, between intelligence and drives, morality and instincts. Repressing his “lower part,” the white man *projects* it on the black man and charges him for being what he refuses to be. And the body is the very symbol of this damned part. As in Judith Butler’s reading of the Hegelian dialectic, the white master demands the black slave to *be his body*, the very body he is frightened of.⁸ In that sense, anti-corporeality (as splitting) is, at least initially, the position of the master, not that of the slave. What Fanon demonstrates in a kind of Foucauldian manner is that the body is always-already integrated in a political field, that it is always a *body politic*.

Going further in Fanon’s conception of the body means discovering that it is fundamentally a conception of the “*corps à corps*,” a notion that he uses many times (and that is not really translatable in English). Actually, Fanon does not thematize the body, but *the bodies*; for him, the body only exists in relation with another body, in confrontation with other bodies. Therefore, what is to be thought at first is the “*corps à corps*” that opposes the black slave to the white master. That is what he will demonstrate magnificently in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Indeed, his theory of violence can be interpreted as a recentering of the (violent) “bodies struggle” in the master/slave dialectic, a stage that is almost always presupposed in theories of emancipation, but that is very rarely described as such. And the struggle for national liberation will be a process of *re-embodiment* putting an end to the colonial splitting as body dismemberment.

Fanon’s “*corps à corps*” has a crucial double meaning. To be sure, it means *violence* and suffering, but it also means *love* and pleasure. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he comes back to the early *romantic* Hegel and gives rise to a *dialectic of love* that equates the figures of master and slave with those of the lovers – hence the crucial role played by the two chapters dedicated to “*interracial love*” in the colonial situation. And there is undeniably an *erotic* dimension in this sentence of the last chapter of the book: “I can already see a white man and a black man hand in hand.”⁹ Apparently inspired by the personalist philosopher Jean Lacroix, Fanon conceives of the *reciprocal recognition* of the white and black men as love gift and counter-gift (“*don*” et “*contre-don*”).¹⁰ However, in the colonial situation, such dialectic is rendered

impossible; “true love” cannot be attained, first and foremost because of the sexual pathologies that undermine any encounter between the white and black men/women, or colonizer and colonized. Again, for Fanon, these pathologies take their roots in the (European) civilization process. Indeed, in projecting his damned sexual part on the black other, the white man makes of him a pure biological being. By metonymy, the black man *is* a penis.¹¹ And in all his writings, Fanon reveals the replacement of the dialectical process by the *antidialectical circle of sadism and masochism*, which testifies of an unflagging entanglement of sexuality and violence. In the colonial situation, sexual perversions are the perpetual negation of human recognition.

But Fanon’s theoretical innovation does not rely so much on these arguments as such as on the answer he gives to the *oversexualization* of racialized people. Indeed, contrary to many others intellectuals, he refuses to simply use a method of negation or banishment that would consist in proving the non-objectivity or the irrationality of such sexual arguments/stereotypes, because such a strategy of *desexualisation* would threaten to establish the sick European sexuality as a *norm* and a goal to achieve. What is needed is not a desexualization but much more a *decolonization of sexuality*. In that sense, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon gives rise to a *strategic romantic primitivism*, which aims first and foremost to silence the European discourse on the non-European, especially by taking the sexual difference of the so-called “civilized” and “primitive” to (irreconcilable) extremes, in other words, by opposing in a sort of parodic Rousseauian way the “sexual sanity” of the African to the “pathological sexuality” of the European. However the danger of such arguments is that they remain embedded in a European matrix and threaten to merely repeat a form of Western nostalgia for the primitive.

I would like to argue now that Fanon’s actual move towards a theory of sexual decolonization, or better *erotic decolonization*, is made in *The Wretched of the Earth*. This assertion could seem strange. In fact, compared to the psychoanalytical language used in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the political/revolutionary language that prevails in Fanon’s last work seems “indifferent” to sexual matters. However, such a division between the “first” and the “last” Fanon must be challenged and I would like to show that Fanon’s theory of violence is at the same time an *erotics of liberation*. The Martinican psychiatrist adopts an *economic point of view* on violence, not in the sense of Marx and Engels, but rather in the sense of Freud. Violence is conceived by Fanon as an energy that circulates between the bodies politic that inhabit the colonial field, following some laws of accumulation, distribution, displacement, etc. The colonial violence is retained or charged in the body of the colonized, provoking a muscular tension that, beyond a certain threshold, must be discharged. In the colonial situation, it is unloaded through unproductive or even destructive endogenous violence,

return of myths and ecstatic dances. Conversely, the struggle for national liberation begins with the redirection of violence against its origin, against the colonizer. In this confrontation of violence and counter-violence, the energies should cancel each other out, giving rise to the vanishing of any violence. In that sense, Hardt and Negri are right in their last book, *Commonwealth*, when they speak of Fanon's *thermodynamic system* of violence.¹² We could even argue that Fanon's theory of violence is a subversive repetition of Hobbes mechanics of (violent) bodies displayed in the *Leviathan* and that especially characterizes the state of nature – subversive because Fanon conceives of the *state of nature* not as a “prehistory” of politics, but *inversely as the very effect of the colonial politics*.

Let us recall now that for the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, whose writings Fanon knew quite well, *sexual excitation* is the archetype of a “good” muscular tension as concentration of energies and prelude to action – opposed to the “bad” tension which is nothing but a blocking of energies by the character/muscular armor.¹³ And Freud had thematized the intimate relation in childhood between “bodies struggle” and the birth of sexual excitation.¹⁴ Yet, for Fanon, the muscular tension is also an erotic tension, the colonized's hypersensitivity is also a form *sensuality*. Fanon speaks of *libido works*, of an *overexcited affectivity* (in French *erection*) that “takes an erotic delight in the muscular deflation of the crisis.”¹⁵ What is discharged is not only aggressive energies but also *accumulated libido*. Counter-violence is also a *counter-libido*. The violent bodies' struggle is also an erotic struggle that recalls the colonial conquest stage which was, Fanon argues, a “freedom given to the sadism of the conqueror, to his eroticism.”¹⁶ As the Algerian writer Assia Djebar argues, there is “love of and in war.”¹⁷ In the anticolonial struggle, Fanon unveils a totally new and now productive entanglement of aggressive and sexual drives.

And he proceeds with his reflections on the dialectic of liberation as a dialectic of love. But now, the final goal is no longer the reconciliation of the colonizer and the colonized. On the contrary, *re-making love* means withdrawing any love for the colonizer. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon definitely abandons any Hegelian theory of mutual recognition. Love energies must be retained in the (de)colonized community and Fanon provides the better example of such a new love in *A Dying Colonialism* by thematizing the new *revolutionary couple* formed in the very struggle. This couple challenges the romantic/domestic European couple by being a struggle couple, by “becoming a link in the revolutionary organization,” but without sacrificing true love.

I would like to conclude with two related remarks. Firstly, it is crucial to recognize that both Fanon's theories violence and love are embedded in what I would like to call a *political philosophy of life* that takes its roots both in a critique of the Hegelian and existential philosophies of death and in the tradition of *medical vitalism*. Let us recall that the two notions of “*vie*” (*life*)

and violence refers to the same Latin radical *vis*. As regards libido, its relation with “vital forces” does not have to be reminded. Such a *political vitalism* could be considered as a very subtle subversion or displacement of biological racial conception of struggle for life. Finally, one can wonder what would be, in Fanon’s view, the future of love after independence. How to disentangle violence and love? Fanon knows that the anticolonial counter-violence is at the same time detoxifying/purifying and traumatic/destructive. He knows that the end of the war does not mean the end of violence. If decolonized *forces of life* emerged only through killing the enemy, is not the postcolonial biopolitic condemned to be, in Achille Mbembe’s words, a *necropolitics*?¹⁸ Is not love condemned to be still corrupted by hate and resentment? How to invent “true love” in the postcolonial moment?

¹ See Étienne Balibar, “La construction du racisme”, *Actuel Marx* vol. 2, n°38 (2005): 11-28.

² “Le Juif est un homme que les autres hommes tiennent pour Juif [...] : c’est l’antisémite qui *fait* le Juif” (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Réflexions sur la question juive*. [Paris: Gallimard, 2004], 83-84).

³ “Souvent ce qu’on appelle l’âme noire est une construction du Blanc” (Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*. [Paris: Seuil, 1971]).

⁴ “C’est le colon qui a *fait* et qui continue à *faire* le colonisé” (Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre*. [Paris: Gallimard, 1991], 66).

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Réflexions sur la question juive*, 11.

⁶ “Sartre a oublié que le nègre souffre dans son corps autrement que le Blanc” (Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, 112).

⁷ See Frantz Fanon, *Altérations mentales, modifications caractérielles, troubles psychiques et déficit intellectuel dans l’hérédodégénération spino-cérébelleuse, À propos d’un cas de maladie de Friedreich avec délire de possession*, Thèse présentée à la Faculté Mixte de Médecine et de Pharmacie de Lyon pour obtenir le grade de Docteur en Médecine, 1951.

⁸ See Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire, Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*. (New-York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 53 ; Judith Butler and Catherine Malabou, *Sois mon corps, Une lecture contemporaine de la domination et de la servitude chez Hegel*. (Montrouge: Bayard, 2010).

⁹ “J’aperçois déjà un Blanc et un Nègre *qui se donnent la main*” (Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, 180).

¹⁰ Jean Lacroix, *Force et faiblesse de la famille*. (Paris: Seuil, 1948), 58.

¹¹ Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, 137.

¹² Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 29.

¹³ See Wilhelm Reich, *L'analyse caractérielle*. (Paris: Payot, 1971).

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Trois essais sur la théorie sexuelle*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 135.

¹⁵ “Une affectivité en érection [qui] se [complait] avec érotisme dans les dissolutions motrices de la crise” (Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre*, 86-87).

¹⁶ “Liberté donnée au sadisme du conquérant, à son érotisme” (Frantz Fanon, *L'an V de la révolution algérienne*. [Paris: La Découverte & Syros, 2001], 28).

¹⁷ “Amour de et dans la guerre” (A. Djébar, *L'amour, la fantasia*. [Paris: Le livre de poche, 2008], 82).

¹⁸ Achille Mbembe, “Nécropolitique,” *Raisons politiques*, n° 21 (1/2006): 29-60.