

Review - Alienation and Freedom

Written by Karthick Ram Manoharan

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KARTHICK RAM MANOHARAN, DEC 5 2018

Alienation and Freedom
Edited by Jean Khalfa and Robert J.C. Young
London: Bloomsbury, 2018

For academics working on Frantz Fanon *Alienation and Freedom* is no less than a gift. With the publication of this book we finally have the complete available works of Fanon in English. Aptly divided into neat sections – Theatre, Psychiatric Writings, Political Writings, Publishing Fanon, Frantz Fanon’s Library and Life – *Alienation and Freedom* provides a complete picture of the multifaceted personality of Fanon and is indispensable for scholars, intellectuals, and activists interested in the life and works of one of the greatest theorists of humanism and decolonization. Young’s introduction to the first section and Khalfa’s introduction to the next three place these texts in their social and historical context, providing deep insights into the development of Fanon’s thought.

Fanon was already exposed to the works of Aime Cesaire, a poet and a key thinker in the Negritude movement, when he was a teenager in Martinique. After his participation in WWII on the French side, and being disillusioned after several encounters of racism from the very people he was fighting for, he moved to Lyon as a student of psychiatry. There, he attended lectures of thinkers like Alexandre Kojève and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and intensely read Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud and Lacan. However, the intellectual who would influence Fanon the most would be Sartre, whose works Fanon consumed with a special passion.

As a young student, Fanon actively interacted with left and anti-racist groups and was influenced by the existentialist movement. He wrote three plays, two of which survive and have been reproduced in this book as ‘The Drowning Eye’ and ‘Parallel Hands’. As Young notes, the ideas behind the plays were not socialist, but existentialist; freedom was seen as an end in itself (p.65). These plays also indicate the young Fanon’s rejection of the black-particularist politics of Negritude; Fanon elaborates on his theoretical and ethical disagreements with Negritude in his works like *Black Skin, White Masks* and *Towards the African Revolution*. His (Lacanian) reading was that not only was the black skin wearing a white mask pathological; the black skin wearing a black mask was equally so. Fanon saw authenticity in political commitments and solidarities. Not in race and culture.

Fanon argues that the colonialist system is responsible for “[b]ringing forth a ferocious beast from humanity” (p.541). It dehumanizes the colonized and makes unsympathetic brutes out of its own soldiers and policemen. “The colonial regime is a regime instituted by violence [...] such a system established by violence can logically only be faithful to itself, and its duration in time depends on the continuation of violence” (p.654). Violence is a part of the daily behavior of the colonizer and the occupation commits violence against the past, present and the future of the colonized. Fanon says that in ideal conditions, the political party of the colonized must curtail outbursts of violence and provide a “peaceful platform” for its representatives and that colonialist violence “must first be fought with the language of truth and of reason” (p.655). However, since the colonized has been reduced to an *animal existence* “the violence of the colonized is the last gesture of the hunted man” (p.655).

He thus dismisses French liberal attempts to reform colonial rule as a doomed attempt and he condemns the left for failing to support Algerian independence unconditionally. He accuses them of promoting “illusory solutions” while for the Algerian people “[t]he system is condemned en bloc and the advent of independence alone can really

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consummate its fall” (p.550). The Algerian struggle sustained “by a revolutionary pedagogy” (p.552) was essentially “an enemy of half-measures, compromises and backward steps” and its victory was “irreversible and inexorable” (p.553). Yet, he stood opposed to any “future hatred of the white man” and instead urged the Algerians to “banish all racism from our land, all forms of oppression and let us work for man, for the flourishing of man and for the enrichment of humanity” (p.657). Reading the inflammatory first chapter on violence in *Wretched of the Earth* might lead the reader to have a reductionist view of Fanon as an apostle of anti-white violence. But to Fanon, the violence the anti-colonialism conjures was not to reinforce boundaries of racial difference, but to break the barriers of difference that the colonial regime had instituted between peoples. This was ‘divine violence’ in the Benjaminian sense.

Fanon’s library is testimonial to his avid interest in Marxism, psychoanalysis, existentialism and (largely Western) literature. Khalfa and Young have not only provided the list of books in Fanon’s possession but have also, very valuably, printed the text Fanon highlighted in these books along with his own comments. His letter to the Iranian thinker Ali Shariati counters the posthumous distortion of Fanon as an apologist for Islamism; though Fanon appreciated the role that Islam played in resisting European aggression, he also emphatically says that “reviving sectarian and religious mindsets” could impede the prospects of humanism and the unity of the oppressed people (p.669). Likewise, where some (rather identitarian) Fanon scholars seek to downplay or deny the influence of Sartre on Fanon, the Martinican’s letter to his publisher Maspero speaks for itself. Reading *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Fanon wrote “[i]f you see Jean-Paul Sartre, tell him that I’ve had the chance to obtain his latest book and that the ideological elements he develops in it find in me an exceptional echo. I thank him for having brought me such great intellectual satisfaction and a better understanding of things” (p.685).

Alienation and Freedom does not disclose anything radically new about Fanon which would significantly alter the way he should be read, but it provides a certain dialectical unity to the thought of Fanon. Indeed, studying and seeking to apply Fanonism as a theory would be incomplete without this book. As a playwright, as a psychiatrist and as a political propagandist for the Algerian anticolonial struggle, Fanon was concerned with certain themes that informed his entire corpus. While unconditionally supporting anti-colonialism, he was nevertheless critical of narrow nationalisms or an identity politics based purely on resentment and hatred. He opposed the colonized elites mimicking the European colonizer, but he was equally skeptical of the search for authenticity or the validation of identity based on race or religion. He saw the use of violence instrumentally, not glorifying it as a simple cathartic process, but as a pragmatic option for the colonized. The philosopher Richard Bernstein rightly argues that to Fanon “the aim of liberation is to *destroy the cycle of violence and counter-violence*” (2013, 124). Fanon firmly believes in a new humanism emerging from the anti-colonial struggle, which would challenge not just the structures of colonialism but also pre-colonial feudal remnants. His commitment to these ideas, explicit in his works from *Black Skin, White Masks* to *Wretched of the Earth*, is reiterated in *Alienation and Freedom*. In hindsight, given the empirical realities of postcolonial Algeria that was torn apart by sectarian warfare, they may seem naïve. But seen as the core of a Fanonist theoretical system, these ideas are still relevant and revelatory to those working for and with the Wretched of the Earth.

Reference:

Bernstein, Richard J. (2013) *Violence: Thinking Without Banisters*. Cambridge: Polity.

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