

Manichean Delirium (In the Time of Jacob Zuma)

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In 1961 Frantz Fanon, seriously weakened by leukaemia, and aware that his life was rapidly coming to an end, dictated his last thoughts in a flat in Tunis. *The Damned of the Earth* was published at the end of that year, shortly after his death. It was immediately banned by the French state. Often read as heresy or prophecy rather than analysis the book was, simultaneously, a brilliant and electric critique of the colony and a driving and frequently scathing critique of the gangrenous degeneration of what has since come to be called the postcolony. It offered compelling legitimation to the anti-colonial forces in Algeria, across Southern Africa, in Vietnam, and elsewhere, as well as a forceful warning to these struggles. Its vision is both stereoscopic and, given its strong sense of movement and change, and the articulation of ideas to experience, fundamentally dialectical.

To many readers in South Africa Fanon's critique of the colony remains all too urgent. At the same time his critique of the postcolony, ruthless and sweeping as it is, has come to seem increasingly prescient in the time of Jacob Zuma. In Fanon's narrative popular aspirations for "bread, land, and the restoration of the country to the sacred hands of the people" are spurned after independence. As the drama of the new nation unfolds The Leader, once a heroic figure, "will reveal his inner purpose: to become the general president of . . . [a] company of profiteers". Fanon goes on to describe that 'company of profiteers' as a "greedy little caste, avid and voracious, with the mind of a huckster", noted for "their mediocrity, and their fundamental immorality" and committed to nothing more than the struggle "to be part of the racket". For this caste nationalisation is not understood in terms of fundamentally "new social relations" but simply as "the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period". The party of liberation is turned "into a trade union of individual interests", "a means of private advancement".

In this desolate vision the continuities with the colonial order are not solely economic. Judgments are passed on other Africans that "are reminiscent of the racist doctrines of the former representatives of the colonial power". There is an "inability to rationalise popular

action". Organised, in parts of the country, "like a gang" the party "proclaims that the vocation of the people is to obey, to go on obeying, and to be obedient till the end of time". It "helps the government to hold the people down" and ensures that "the people are hemmed in and immobilized". Over time the party becomes "more clearly anti-democratic, an instrument of coercion". To sustain great wealth amidst general immiseration – wealth extracted, consumed and performed in the name of the people and their struggles – it enforces "a police dictatorship". In the end it "chooses a dictatorship of the national-socialist type . . . fascism."

Fanon does not present this descent into looting, repression, and then systemic authoritarianism, as inevitable. It is a matter of politics, not fate. He shows the anti-colonial struggle to be an internally contested project in which leaders may shy away from embracing popular resistance, especially in its more militant forms, distrust the most oppressed among the colonised and, instead of putting "their theoretical knowledge to the service of the people", seek to enforce dogmatic and top down modes of organisation. At the same time some participants in the struggle begin to exploit their position to "strengthen their material situation and their growing power".

Fanon asserts the necessity for a struggle within the struggle. He offers a counter vision of a much more democratic project, one that resonates with C.L.R. James' famous assertion that, in a phrase borrowed from Vladimir Lenin, 'every cook can govern'. In place of the imposition of "formulas which are sterile in the extreme" onto "the common paths of real life" typical of various kinds of authoritarian leftism and nationalism, he affirms open and mutually transformative discussion and learning, rooted in the lived experience of oppression and resistance, and a movement of authority from the base to the summit. There is a clear resonance with Cedric J. Robinson's conclusion, in *Black Marxism*, that, in order to "cement pain to purpose, experience to expectation, consciousness to collective action", it is necessary to ensure that "the practice of theory is informed by struggle".

Fanon offers a similar vision as the basis for a return to struggle in the postcolony. In both the colony and the postcolony the work of constituting counter-power from below is a matter of praxis, what Antonio Gramsci called a "philosophy of practice". Fanon's ideas

about this question, which have often been elided when his thought has been reduced to his support for armed struggle against colonialism, remain tremendously valuable. But he also offers valuable insight into how ideology works in the postcolony – how a corrupt, rapacious and repressive elite undertakes the work of “mystifying and bewildering the masses”. Some of the means through which this is undertaken today – like the paid troll, the twitterbot and the circulation of brazen dishonesty masquerading as credible news and opinion through social media – are new. But more than half a century on Fanon speaks, with clinical lucidity, to the primary logic through which Zuma, and his public acolytes present their mendacity.

Manichaeism

Manichaeism is a central concept in Fanon’s thought and it sits at the heart of his conception of how ideology functions in the postcolony. The term comes to us from a religion founded by Mani, known by his followers as the ‘Apostle of Light’, in Babylonia in the third century. Mani wove a set of diverse religions into a single new faith that proposed an absolute dualism between good and evil marked out, in symbolic terms, by light and dark. Brought into contemporary discourse as metaphor Manichaeism speaks to an absolute split between all things light and good (and true, beautiful, clean, healthy, prosperous, etc.) and all things dark and evil (and false, ugly, dirty, diseased, impoverished etc.). It is an inherently paranoid orientation to the world.

As a personal disposition Manichaeism is often taken to be consequent to splitting and projection, to the inability to confront one’s own shadow and the collapse into the temptation, the narcissistic temptation, to ascribe it to the other. It is a wretched mode of being in which life is squandered and sociality poisoned. As a collective disposition it is often associated with authoritarian social and political projects. When the political is reduced, in George Orwell’s famous phrase, to a version of “Four legs good, two legs bad” there is no room for nuance, principle, or dissent – there are just two sides.

The reduction of political complexity into a constitutive, fundamental and fixed dualism has been central to the ideology of colonial states, and contemporary forms of imperialism, as

well as authoritarian states in the postcolony. Consider, for instance, George W. Bush's infamous assertion that: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" or François Duvalier's declaration that "My only enemies are those of the nation".

As a reactionary popular political subjectivity Manichaeism is, as in Jean-Paul Sartre's diagnosis of the social pathology under-girding anti-Semitism, often understood as a collective passion, "impervious to reason and to experience". It divides people along a single axis by offering an immediate sense of superiority, or what Frederick Nietzsche called *ressentiment*, the projection of blame for feelings of inadequacy onto a scapegoat, at the expense of the possibility of justice. It is an essential part of the symbolic logic of fascism. In his account of Idi Amin's regime in Uganda Mahmood Mamdani shows that: "Fascist attempts to divide the people included utilizing every historically ingrained prejudice among them."

But as an insurgent political subjectivity Manichaeism can incite, unite and mobilise powerful energies against external sources of oppression. It is, after all, the ultimate logic via which the call to war wins and sustains popular assent. On 14 August 1792 Dutty Boukman, an enslaved African, is said to have spoken a prayer – "Their god commandeth crimes, ours giveth blessings upon us" – at a ceremony at Bois Caïman in the mountains of Northern Haiti. This is often taken as the inaugural moment of the Haitian Revolution. It is a well-known instance of a revolutionary and emancipatory mobilisation of Manichean logic.

Fanon may have first encountered the concept of Manichaeism in Simone de Beauvoir's sprawling, ground breaking and brilliant book, *The Second Sex*, published in 1949. De Beauvoir wrote that "To posit the Other is to define Manichaeism". Importantly she also observed that "The essence of Manichaeism is not only to recognize two principles, one good and one evil: it is also to posit that good is attained by the abolition of evil and not by a positive movement."

The first intervention

Fanon's first published essay, 'The Lived Experience of the Black', appeared in *Esprit*, an anti-Stalinist left wing journal, in Paris in December 1951. It was dictated to Josie Duple, his lover and comrade, while he was a medical student in Lyon. Fanon is sometimes reported to have paced back and forth as he dictated the work in their home, a former brothel, and it carries a strong sense of embodiment and motion. Parts of the essay are marked by a potent poeticism.

Fanon's elder brother Joby, together with Edouard Glissant, had the extraordinary good fortune to be taught by Aimé Césaire, one of the great poets of the twentieth century, in their high school in Martinique, the Lycée Schoelcher in Fort-de-France. Césaire was a charismatic, gifted and unorthodox teacher. Standing on a chair, in a green checked suit, he might begin a class with a dramatic declaration such as: "Rimbaud: the power of revolt". The brothers were close, and Fanon, known as 'Bergson' by his friends due to his intense interest in philosophy, was at the same school. Césaire must have been a powerful presence in the latter part of his teenage years. In 1945, after Fanon returned from the Second World War, in which he had fought with the Free French Forces, he worked in support of Césaire's successful campaign, as a Communist, to become the mayor of Fort-de-France and a deputy to the French National Assembly for Martinique.

By his mid-twenties Fanon was simultaneously moved by, and critical of, Césaire's Négritude, a cosmopolitan and often extraordinarily creative affirmation of African identity, a poetic international within the broader surrealist movement. The term Négritude was first coined by Césaire in the pages of *L'Étudiant Noir*, founded in the Latin Quarter of Paris in 1936 by Césaire, together with Léon-Gontran Damas and Léopold Senghor. Surrealism, also a strikingly cosmopolitan project, was a revolutionary movement in the arts that sought to undo a certain kind of dualism – the distinction between waking life and the dream, rationality and the unconscious. Robin D. G. Kelley describes it as "a most marvellous weapon . . . imaginative, expansive . . . a living, mutable, creative vision of a world where love, play, human dignity, an end to poverty and want, and imagination are the pillars of freedom." The editorial in the first issue of *L'Étudiant Noir* declares a desire to "contribute to universal life, to the humanization of humanity" and a vision of emancipation as "action

and creation". These kinds of ideas, as well as elements of the prose style in which they are presented, are evident in some of Fanon's early work.

The term Manichaeism does not appear in 'The Lived Experience of the Black' which, in the summer of the following year, would appear as the pivotal chapter of Fanon's first book, *Black Skin, White Masks* – a study of the lived experience of anti-black racism in Martinique and France, and an anti-racist critique of dominant ideas in the field of psychology. But in this essay we begin to see that for Fanon racism, as an ideology, is organised around the idea, whether explicitly asserted or implicitly assumed, that humanity is riven by a fundamental split that, while marked on the body, is ultimately ontological, a constitutive feature of being. Virtue, reason, beauty, maturity, civilisation and hygiene are projected onto one side of this split, and their opposites, real or imagined, on to the other.

The essay begins with the look, the racist look, that fixes a human being, in all of her dynamism and complexity, into a static image imposed from without. "I came into the world", Fanon wrote, "imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects". En route to its conclusion – "I began to weep" – the essay charts the failure of a set of attempts by its protagonist to find a way to win the recognition required to live freely against the crushing weight of racism: "Every hand was a losing hand for me."

One of those losing hands was reason. The fanaticism with which reason was coded as white in the racist imagination was such that it was impossible to be recognised as simultaneously reasonable and black: "[W]hen I was present, it was not; when it was there, I was no longer."

Another of the losing hands described by Fanon was Négritude, which sometimes took the form of offering positive affirmation, usually in a literary context, to the stereotypes projected onto Africans by colonial racism. He writes that: "Since no agreement was possible on the level of reason, I threw myself back toward unreason". To illustrate the point he quotes Senghor: "Emotion is completely Negro as reason is Greek".

Unsurprisingly Négritude, in this form, has often been understood as a counter-Manichaeism. Its intent was emancipatory, it enabled marvellous creativity and it often came to be entwined with movement towards greater freedom. But Négritude has frequently been subject to critique, some sympathetic and some more stringent. In 1976 Wole Soyinka argued that it “adopted the Manichean tradition of European thought”. More recently Achille Mbembe has argued, in *Critique of Black Reason*, just published in English, that, on occasion, anti-colonial critique, including many of the poets in the Négritude movement, “drew on the very colonial myths and stereotypes that it sought to invert”.

Sartre’s *Anti-Semite and Jew*, first published in 1946, had significantly influenced Fanon’s understanding of racism as an ideology. “Certain pages of *Anti-Semite and Jew*,” he wrote, “are the finest that I have ever read”. Sartre’s key idea is that “The anti-Semite creates the Jew” – and that by projecting a set of fantasies on to Jewish people the anti-Semite simultaneously projects another set of fantasies onto him or herself. To put it plainly the idea here is that racist ideas are just bullshit – just fantastical projection. The “white man”, Fanon wrote, “had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories’ - “the black soul is a white man’s artefact.” The fabrication of the black was, simultaneously, the fabrication of the white.

But Fanon was well aware that resistance structured within the Manichean logic of what it opposed could enable zeal. There are moments, he wrote, in which, in order to attain awareness of self, “consciousness has to lose itself in the night of the absolute” even when that absolute would, in time, have to be transcended. Nonetheless, writing in a dialectical mode, he simultaneously affirmed this, noted that Négritude had, at one point, been important to him, and took a clear position against Négritude as a final point in an unfolding political imagination and practice.

Fanon would continue to develop this critique of Négritude in a third essay, ‘West Indians and Africans’, published in *Esprit* in February 1955. There he concludes, with reference to a line from Césaire – “I have become a Congo humming with forests and rivers” – that “the West Indian, after the great white error, is now living in the great black mirage”. In *The Damned of the Earth* Négritude – “this rush . . . against the white man’s contempt” – came

in for more strenuous and more political critique: “If in the world of poetry this movement reaches unaccustomed heights, the fact remains that in the real world the intellectual often follows up a blind alley.” Fanon recommended serious political work, democratic and democratising political work, rather than “a banal search for exoticism”. Lewis Gordon writes that for Fanon legitimacy is not a matter of offering proof of racial or cultural authenticity but, rather, emerges “from active engagement in struggles for social transformation and building institutions and ideas that nourish and liberate the formerly colonized”.

Science, racism and the ‘*a priori*’

There is also no mention of the term Manichaeism in Fanon’s second essay, ‘The North African Syndrome’, published in *Esprit* in February 1952. However, the concept is implicit in the work. Fanon shows that in the consciousness of the racist, and in the general intellect of racist social formations, the imagined ontological split on which racist ideology depends is part of what Immanuel Kant called the *a priori*, the categories through which sense is made of experience. This deception of reason – what Gordon calls ‘racist rationality’ – results in racist societies producing forms of knowledge that, while authorised as the most fully formed instances of reason at work, are fundamentally irrational. Consequently, their insistence on their right to, in Kant’s words, “lay claim to sincere respect, which reason accords only to that which has stood the test of a free and public examination” is an instance of ideology. It is a form of ideology that, while claiming to be an affirmation of enlightenment with a universal purchase, functions to legitimate modes of oppression justified by the exclusion of most of humanity from a full and equal presence in the category of the human.

Fanon’s essay is specifically concerned with the manner in which the French medical establishment relates to migrant workers from North Africa. He writes that “(T)he attitude of medical personnel is very often an *a priori* attitude. The North African does not come with a substratum common to his race, but on a foundation built by the European. In other words, the North African, spontaneously, by the very fact of appearing in the scene, enters into a pre-existing framework.”

Medical science in colonial France allowed *a priori* ontological assumptions to prevent it from making rational sense of experience.

A single destiny

The term Manichaeism first appears in *Black Skin, White Masks* – a book that has been brilliantly read by Gordon in *What Fanon Said*, published last year in New York, along with a number of other cities, including Johannesburg. The term first appears in the sixth chapter which deals with racism and psychopathology: “Good-Evil, Beauty-Ugliness, White-Black: such are the characteristic pairings of the phenomenon that . . . we shall call Manichean delirium.” The understanding of racism as a Manichean ideology is present throughout the book. Racist ideology is shown to assume that one is more human as one is more white and that this is marked out in language, on the body, in what part of town one lives, if one has or has not been sanctified by a visit to Paris and who offers and receives the gifts of love and sex. Racist ideology is shown to saturate films, novels, curricula, advertising, science and the unconscious. It is overwhelmingly present: “All round me the white man, above the sky tears at its navel, the earth rasps under my feet, and there is a white song, a white song. All this whiteness that burns me . . .”

At times *Black Skin, White Masks* has a Césairean sense of the marvellous. Alain Badiou asserts that the poem, in the right hands, can become “the diction of being” and “enable a coming into presence that was previously impossible”. If this is generally true, and if so it can only be more intensely so with surrealist poeticism, then it carries real potential as a form of revolt against what Césaire described in *Discourse on Colonialism*, first published in Paris in 1950, as the essential logic of the colonial project: “colonization = thingification”.

At the same time Fanon offers a strong sense of the human as dynamic – as “motion towards the world”. Life is understood as a permanent process of self-creation in which we become part of being to the extent that we surpass it with the result that “the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence”. While he dismisses fervour as “the weapon of choice of the impotent” he does see heat, political heat – fire – as transformative. He

stresses, though, that he does not intend to strike the iron but, rather, to set the fire that will enable 'self-combustion', self-directed movement and change.

There is an equally strong sense that the understanding of human being as motion is movement towards the universal. There are, Fanon insists, people who search everywhere. His political commitments have an explicit universal dimension: "Anti-Semitism hits me head-on: I am enraged, I am bled white by an appalling battle, I am deprived of the possibility of being a man." He affirms that: "Every time a man has contributed to the victory of the dignity of the spirit, every time a man has said no to an attempt to subjugate his fellows, I have felt solidarity with his act."

But racism blocks, encases and splits human being – "You'd better keep your place." It seals the human – inherently open and dynamic – into a "crushing objecthood". The "corporal schema", the fact of embodiment, the universal material condition for human being – for sociality, reason, love and desire – is transformed into the particular condition of "a racial epidermal schema" with the result that some people suffer, in their bodies, in a manner that is particular. For Fanon the destiny of the human is freedom. But in a racist world the very idea of destiny itself is raced: "[T]here is only one destiny. And it is white".

Mutation

Mutation is a philosophical metaphor – an entirely modern metaphor – that speaks to the openness and plasticity of being. It first appears in Nietzsche's thought and enters French philosophy via Sartre. It sustains its vitality as a metaphor and is frequently present in contemporary French philosophy, particularly in the work of Alaim Badiou where it is often related to the Event – an encounter in the realm of art, science, love or the political that changes the rules of the situation and, when there is fidelity to the Event, carries the potential for transformation at the level of being.

On both of the occasions on which Fanon introduces the term mutation in *Black Skin, White Masks* it is clear that the possibility of change, of motion, is always already simultaneously

over determined and ultimately unattainable: “From black to white is the course of the mutation. One is white as one is rich as one is beautiful, as one is intelligent”.

When every hand is a losing hand, when mutation is only possible within the framework of oppression, the only viable solution is to exit that framework – to abandon the search for recognition and commit to “a restructuring of the world”. Fanon concludes that: “To educate man to be actional, preserving in all his relations his respect for the basic values that constitute a human world, is the prime task of him who, having taken thought, prepares to act.” The last line of the book, offered as a prayer, is among its most famous: “O my body make of me always a man who questions.” But the second last line, offered as an ethical axiom, is at least as important. “I want”, Fanon writes, “the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness.”

From Algiers to Tunis

In 1952 Fanon married Josie Duple. The following year he took a position as the head of a psychiatric hospital outside Algiers. Alice Cherki, his intern at the hospital, and later his most sensitive biographer, recalls that his aim, as a clinician, was “not to muzzle madness but to listen to it”, and to do so mindful of the lines of force carried by history. In November the following year the armed struggle against colonialism began in Algiers and in December 1956 Fanon submitted his resignation. His resignation letter repeats the idea that there are circumstances in which certain kinds of progress are impossible: “The social structure in place in Algeria stood against any attempt to return the individual to his rightful place.” He adds that in the colonial situation: “[T]here comes a time when tenacity becomes morbid perseverance . . . Hope is no longer a door open unto the future but the irrational preservation of a subjective outlook in organized rupture with the real.” In other words there had to be a profound restructuring of the world before tenacity could be generative and hope rational.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon had insisted that: “We should not lose sight of the real”. He was consistent. He left Algiers to join the Algerian liberation movement in exile in Tunis and to contribute to making a revolution – a project that he would come to describe as the

struggle to “impose reason on . . . unreason”. By May 1957 he was a public spokesperson for the movement.

The end of that year brought bitter news. The militarists in the movement, authoritarian nationalists who aimed to subordinate the struggle to military authority, murdered Abane Ramdane, Fanon’s closest comrade, on 27 December 1957. Fanon’s name was placed on a list of people to be watched, and subject to a similar fate should there be open defiance within the movement in response to the assassination. He would also have been aware that during 1956 and 1957 a decisive shift towards dictatorship was unfolding in Haiti. In April and December 1958, Fanon visited Accra to speak at pan-African conferences. He, directly confronting Kwame Nkrumah at the first conference, made a strong argument for armed resistance against colonialism. As a result of these encounters he was well aware of what was at stake in the contestations between and within anti-colonial movements across Africa. Under these circumstances a naïve investment in a simple Manichaeism, with the anti-colonial forces conceived as entirely virtuous, and the struggle as merely a contestation between two pre-given absolutes, would have been irrational and irresponsible.

Inside the Algerian Revolution

In 1959 Fanon published *Year Five of the Algerian Revolution*, translated in English as *A Dying Colonialism*. It is, as Cherki observes, very deliberately a book about “the common men and women”, women and men in a society in motion, rather than the personalities and actions of revolutionary elites. In contrast to elitist forms of anti-colonialism that aim to direct ‘the masses’ from above the imperative to recognise the ‘open door of every consciousness’ is extended to the common people and, thereby, affirmed as an immediate and universal ethical axiom – one that is not mediated, as elite anti-colonial nationalism has often assumed, by class.

Fanon makes his position clear at the outset: “The power of the Algerian Revolution . . . resides in the radical mutation that the Algerian has undergone.” In the context of revolutionary struggle mutation has escaped the stranglehold of racist ideology and is now an autonomous and self-directed process. The book offers five case studies of the kind of

radical mutation – change in consciousness – that can take place in the vortex of struggle, of collective motion. In each case Fanon offers an account of how the Manichaeism introduced by colonialism breaks down in struggle.

Critical attention has tended to congregate around the opening chapter, which deals with the veil – a matter that sustains considerable political intensity in contemporary France and, increasingly, elsewhere too. Tracy Sharpley-Whiting offers a useful elucidation and assessment of these debates, and the broader question of gender in Fanon's work, in *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts & Feminisms*, published in 1998.

But the rest of Fanon's book also rewards attention. The chapter on medicine and colonialism speaks to our recent history with striking perspicuity. Fanon begins by showing that in the colonial situation the doctor appears, along with the police officer and the soldier, as part of the apparatus of colonial domination, an apparatus that presents itself "in the name of truth and reason". Doctors conduct themselves towards patients from among the colonised as if they are engaged in veterinary work rather than medicine. They are complicit with torture. Even when the colonial medical system offers an objective capacity for diagnosis and treatment the "harsh, undifferentiated, categorical" manner of the response to colonial domination can extend to a refusal to subject oneself to "the hospital of the whites, of the strangers, of the conqueror". The result of this situation is that: "The truth objectively expressed is constantly vitiated by the lie of the colonial situation".

But Fanon goes on to show that the Manichaeism introduced by colonialism, and mirrored in initial responses to colonialism, is transcended in struggle. When the doctor joins the guerrillas in the mountains, "Sleeping on the ground with the men and women of the mechtas, living the drama of the people", there is a mutation – the doctor "was no longer 'the' doctor, but 'our' doctor. The people henceforth demanded and practiced a technique stripped of its foreign characteristics . . . The Revolution and medicine manifested their presence simultaneously."

If we think back to the catastrophic period of denialism around the etiology and treatment of the HI virus it is clear that that disaster was consequent to an inability to escape the

Manichean logic imposed on society by colonialism. On the one side science – and its reception via the media, non-governmental organisations and the academy – was often enmeshed with explanations for the origins and spread of the AIDS pandemic, and its prevalence in certain parts of the world, that were saturated with racism. On the other side a rejection of that racism, an urgent imperative, extended to a denial of crucially important facts around the cause, transmission and treatment of the disease. If anti-racism and medicine had ‘manifested their presence simultaneously’ in the ruling party and the state we could have charted a very different course in response to the pandemic. It was their synthesis in struggle that won access to medication.

The great danger

In March 1960 Fanon was sent to Accra to become a roving ambassador for the Provisional Government of the Algerian national liberation movement. His encounters with newly independent states were frequently dispiriting. In the summer of that year he travelled to Mali, looking at the possibility of opening a new supply line into Algeria from the south. In his logbook he recorded his concern with the limits of forms of politics that are not able to reach beyond the Manichaeism introduced by colonialism: “Colonialism and its derivatives do not, as a matter of fact, constitute the present enemies of Africa. In a short time this continent will be liberated. For my part, the deeper I enter into the cultures and the political circles the surer I am that the great danger that threatens Africa is the absence of ideology.”

Fanon was well aware that resistance understood within the Manichean logic of what it opposed could enable unity and commitment. But his sense of ‘the great danger’ was such that the political imperative to move beyond Manichaeism and, at the level of ideas and practice, to develop what De Beauvoir had called ‘a positive movement’, would be a central concern of his last book.

In December 1960 Fanon returned to Tunis for a holiday with this family. Feeling unwell he took a blood test and diagnosed himself with leukaemia. That evening he announced his resolve to write a new book. Before beginning work on the book, he spent some time giving lectures to Algerian soldiers on Sartre’s new book, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

Written after the Soviet repression of the uprising in Budapest in 1956, the *Critique* is fundamentally concerned with the question of praxis, with how, in particular, a group in struggle can sustain collective organisation and purpose in the form of an open, critical project while avoiding ossification, and a collapse into authoritarianism. The army posts where Fanon gave his lectures were marked with slogans that declared that the land belonged to the peasants, factories to the workers, schools to children and hospitals to the sick. While the national liberation movement remained a bitterly contested project, and while Fanon was acutely aware of the limits of the newly independent states elsewhere in Africa, there was still some sense of the possibility of a future that exceeded the standard transition from colony to postcolony.

The Damned of the Earth

Fanon was gravely ill, and on medication with debilitating side effects. There had been a period of two or three weeks during which he had lost his sight. But *The Damned of the Earth* – unfortunately translated as *The Wretched of the Earth* – was put together over a period of ten weeks. In his, at times problematic, biography of Fanon David Macey notes that the title of the book may well derive from *Sales nègres*, a poem by the Jacques Roumain, founder of the Haitian Communist Party, rather than, as is usually assumed, directly from *L'Internationale*, first composed by Eugène Pottier in the wake of the massacre of the communards in Paris in 1871. Fanon had cited the poem in an essay in 1958, and he cited another poem by Roumain in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

The Damned includes a re-worked version of speech that Fanon had given in Rome in 1959, case notes from his clinical practice in Algeria and new material dictated in his flat in Tunis. Sartre, in an act of significant personal courage, agreed to write the preface. But when Fanon read the preface on his deathbed in Washington he put it down without saying a word. Sometime after his death his widow, Josie Fanon, sought to have it removed from the book. Cherki writes that Sartre's preface "distorted Fanon's tone and intention" and that Sartre, though wanting to please his friend, had inadvertently "betrayed Fanon".

From the beginning, Sartre's preface, with its sense of the anti-colonial struggle as simply a violent clash between two absolutes, set the tone for much of the reception of the book. It has been argued that Hannah Arendt's influential early critique of Fanon is best understood as a response to Sartre rather than to Fanon. Sartre had found his first great reader of the *Critique* in Fanon but Sartre had not read Fanon with the same care.

In the opening pages of *The Damned* we are presented with a view of the settler colony in which the Manichean ideology of racism has been concretised in the material structure of the city. It is, Fanon explains, "a world divided into compartments", "a world cut into two" – "a motionless Manichean world" – in which the colonised "is a being hemmed in", policed with brute force rather than ideology. One side of town is bright, clean, well maintained and prosperous because services and investment keep it this way. The other, lacking lighting, refuse removal and investment is dark, dirty, run down and impoverished. Racist ideology, always presenting itself as truth and reason, reads these material distinctions in ontological rather than political terms. Consequently, the settlers imagine that they are uniquely reasonable and virtuous – that only they make history. The part of town where the colonised live is understood as "a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute". Fanon famously observed that in the settler colony: "The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. This is why Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem."

In Fanon's narrative the initial response to this oppression is fundamentally shaped by what it opposes: "[T]he Manichaeism of the coloniser produces a Manichaeism of the colonised. To the theory of the 'absolute evil of the colonised' the theory of the 'absolute evil of the coloniser' replies." In this situation truth becomes "the property of the national cause". It is "all that protects the natives, and ruins the foreigners". Fanon could not be clearer: "To the lie of the colonial situation the colonized replies with an equal lie." He writes that "decolonization is quite simply the replacing of a certain 'species' of men by another 'species' of men". This is an apt description of Sartre's misreading of Fanon, and that of generations of critics to come.

But what comes next has not always been read with sufficient care – or, in some cases, read at all. Paulo Freire was perhaps the first significant figure to grasp the philosophical and political significance of Fanon’s commitment to ‘the open door of every consciousness’, and, consequently, to praxis grounded in mutuality – the attainment of “a mutual current of enlightenment and enrichment”. In 1987 he recalled that when he was writing *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in 1968, “I was helped by reading Frantz Fanon. That is great writing. When I read Fanon I was in exile in Chile. A young man who was in Santiago on a political task gave me the book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. I was writing *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and the book was almost finished when I read Fanon. I had to rewrite the book.” Freire became a key thinker in South Africa in the 1970s, in both the Black Consciousness and trade union movements, and his influence was sustained into the 1980s in parts of the United Democratic Front.

But the first great reader of *The Damned*, Ato Sekyi-Otu, would only arrive in 1996. In the academy *Black Skin, White Masks* had often been read, sometimes brilliantly, from the perspective of the lived experience of racism in the metropole. In Fanon’s *Dialectic of Experience* Sekyi-Otu sought to read Fanon from an African perspective and, more precisely, from within an acute awareness of the “economic, political, and utter moral bankruptcy of postcolonial regimes”. His reading is meticulously attuned to the nuances of the texts, including the inadequacies of the English translations. He finds “an irrepressible presence in Fanon’s critical vision of an openness to the universal: its demand for the resumption by the colonized subject of [what Fanon described as] ‘the universality inherent in the human condition’”.

The weary road to rational knowledge

By the time Sekyi-Otu’s long labours were coming to fruition Algeria had collapsed into acute crisis. The roots of that crisis are often traced back to October 1988 when thousands of young people, many unemployed, took to the streets in protest against their economic situation, as well as the corruption and authoritarianism of the ruling party – the same national liberation movement that had won independence from France. The response was brutal: in five days, hundreds of young men were killed.

On the first day of the riots, Josie Fanon had watched teenage boys set fire to police cars from the balcony of her flat in Algiers. In the days to come, she saw soldiers shooting young men. She put her affairs in order and, in June the following year, visited her husband's grave near the Tunisian border. She returned to Algiers and threw herself off the balcony from which she had witnessed the massacre.

Two years later the country descended into a war between the military, and the Islamist forces that had come to the fore and won electoral support after the massacre. In 1993 the novelist Tahar Djaout, a critic of religious authoritarianism, was murdered in Algiers. The manuscript for a novel, *The Last Summer of Reason*, was found among his papers and published in Paris. In the decade after Djaout's assassination the state brutally suppressed the Islamist forces, which, in turn, waged a campaign of assassinations against academics, journalists, doctors, lawyers, feminists and left-wing activists. More than 100 000 lives were lost. As Yousef Khalil has recently noted in *Africa is a Country* for the Islamist project "the concepts of socialism and secularism were foreign, specifically French, imports, grafted onto Algerian society by a leadership that had internalized the contempt and hatred of the colonial masters, and opposed to an 'authentic' identity centered on Islam." A new Manichaeism, a deeply reactionary anti-colonialism, had become the most significant rival to the corruption and repression of the national liberation movement. This bleak reality was a world apart from Fanon's vision of "an Algeria open to all, in which every kind of genius can grow", a society that had overcome various forms of oppression, including the "feudal tradition that holds sacred the superiority of the masculine element over the feminine".

From Algeria to Zimbabwe, not to mention Sekyi-Otu's own Ghana, the 'great danger' that Fanon had foreseen was all too present. Reading Fanon from within an acute awareness of the crisis of the postcolony Sekyi-Otu demonstrated that Fanon does not only show that "the primary Manichaeism which governed colonial society is preserved intact during the period of decolonization." Fanon also shows, as he had done in his previous book, that in the lived experience of struggle Manichean precepts breakdown.

[E]verything seemed to be so simple before: the bad people were on one side, and the good on the other. The clear, unreal, idyllic light of the beginning is followed by a semi-darkness that bewilders the senses. The people find out that the iniquitous fact of exploitation can wear a black face, or an Arab one; and they raise the cry of "Treason!" But the cry is mistaken; and the mistake must be corrected. The treason is not national, it is social.

The people begin "to pass from total, indiscriminating nationalism to social and economic awareness". As the 'unreal, idyllic light of the beginning' fades "[c]onsciousness slowly dawns upon truths that are only partial, limited, and unstable." This happens spontaneously, as a result of lived experience on the terrain of the real. But Fanon insists that serious and organised intellectual work – work against the "brutality of thought and a mistrust of subtlety which are typical of revolutions", work that may have to be undertaken in "defiance of those inside the movement who tend to think that shades of meaning constitute dangers" and leaders who insist that "the only worthwhile dogma . . . is the unity of the nation against colonialism" – is required to set the rebellion on a rational foundation. He is clear that "[o]n their weary road toward rational knowledge the people must also give up their too-simple conception of their overlords". This is a fundamentally dialectical understanding of struggle; one that stresses mutation in struggle and the necessity of undertaking the intellectual labour to make organised and common sense of the lessons of struggle. It is strikingly at odds with the view that Fanon simply poses one fixed category of people against another. Sekyi-Otu concludes that Fanon is profoundly committed to struggle as "the upsurge of richer modes of reasoning, judging, and acting"; to the "reprieve of prodigal reason" to, in other words, the transcendence of the Manichean cast of thought introduced by colonialism.

Fanon insists that national consciousness – "that magnificent song that made the people rise against their oppressors"- must be supplemented with political and social consciousness. He is clear that there are forms of nationalist militancy that hold "the same unfavourable judgments" about the most oppressed among the colonised that are held by the colonisers. He scorns the radical intellectuals who try "to erect a framework around the people which follows an *a priori* schedule". Against this he affirms the practice of mutuality rooted in an immediate commitment to radical equality, something like Karl Marx's youthful vision "of an association of free human beings who educate one another". His consistent

commitment to 'the open door of every consciousness' brings him to a radically democratic understanding of struggle, rooted in local practices in which dignity is affirmed, discussion carried out and decisions taken. He offers a clear measure for an emancipatory politics: to "create a prospect that is human because conscious and sovereign persons dwell therein". There is a considerable distance between this position and the Manichaeism, and its associated mistrust of subtlety that, in Fanon's narrative, marks the initial moment of rebellion and reduces the political question to the replacement of the colonizers.

A moment of possibility and danger

In Fanon's schema national consciousness does not sustain an indefinite authority after independence. It starts to become clear that national consciousness, on its own, will be "an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty". There is "a decisive awakening on the part of the people", an awakening that "that promises stormy days to come". This moment, which of course contains positive possibilities, also appears as a time of real danger. It will, Fanon warns, "lead to the reaffirmation of authority and the appearance of dictatorship." The leader "acts as a braking-power on the awakening consciousness of the people" and becomes "the most eager worker in the task of mystifying and bewildering the masses". At the heart of that work is the attempt to reinstate a Manichean logic onto society. The leader "asks the people to become drunk" on the recollection of the anti-colonial struggle and positions himself as the sole and authentic representative of that struggle.

Fanon warns that "an unceasing battle must be waged, a battle to prevent the party from ever becoming a willing tool in the hands of a leader." He takes the view that political education is essential to avoid a collapse into authoritarianism. For Fanon the primary task of political education is to show that "there is no famous man who will take the responsibility for everything, but that the demiurge is the people themselves and the magic hands are finally only the hands of the people". He affirms the "living party, which ought to make possible the free exchange of ideas which have been elaborated according to the real needs of the mass of the people".

South Africa, unlike the newly independent countries that Fanon visited as the roving ambassador for the Algerian national liberation movement, sustains directly colonial features as well as postcolonial features. It is, consequently, simultaneously marked by the pathologies of the colony and the postcolony. Both of these pathologies have been thrown into increasingly clear relief as liberal hegemony declines. Liberal hegemony was never extended to all parts of society after apartheid but it did, for a long time, exercise considerable authority over much of society, and in particular in elite spaces and institutions. Today liberal hegemony confronts significant challenges. An increasingly predatory and authoritarian faction in the ruling party and the state has challenged it from above. At the same time people that continue to inhabit what Fanon called “a non-viable society, a society to be replaced”, have also challenged it from below. There has also been a significant generational challenge. The challenge from above has been entirely oppressive in character. The challenge from below, and from the youth, has had a mixed character and includes emancipatory dimensions and possibilities as well as reactionary currents, with some articulated to the project driven from above.

We have entered our own version of what Gramsci, writing about another time and place, described as crisis – crisis that “consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear”. Any attempt to contain the crisis, and the effects of its symptoms, which does not offer a significant degree of resolution will only lead to stasis and decline. There has to be ‘a restructuring’.

Inciting a new Manichaeian delirium could mobilise political energies with sufficient power to enable a further reckoning with the colonial dimensions of the society. But if the only choice is imagined to be between the coloniser and the colonised – or, more precisely, between white monopoly capital and Zuma, the Guptas, and their allies and sycophants – then there are just two sides and no possibilities for developing the ideas and practices that, as means and end, can place ‘conscious and sovereign persons’ at the centre of both struggle and aspirations for the future.

Discourse will be assessed by the sole metric of which camp it issues from, or is perceived to issue from, rather than on the basis of the quality of its reason, its honesty and its political and social commitments. Under these conditions consent for a rapacious and authoritarian form of rule will be sustained, and that form of rule will be entrenched and extended in time and into more spheres of government, the state, the economy and society. The crisis will, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot observed with regard to ascension of Duvalier to power in Haiti in 1957, be formalised. As a result, forms of conduct — like brazen looting, dishonesty and repression — that may have appeared to be temporary anomalies will be, to stay with Trouillot, “entered into the structural long term”. If Zuma does actually translate his new rhetoric into practice the price for, say, undoing the colonial dimensions of the land question will be to exacerbate the pathologies of the postcolony and to embed them in the deep structure of our future. It will be an authoritarian and exclusionary resolution of the crisis rather than, in economic and political terms, a democratic resolution.

Fanon, committed to the last to the emancipation of reason, to its emancipation in and via struggle, ended his last book with the imperative to “work out new concepts”. Against this the acolytes of the Zuma project, a rogues’ gallery of opportunists, hucksters and professional liars, seek to restore the ‘idyllic and unreal clarity of the beginning’, to enforce a ‘brutality of thought and a mistrust of subtlety’ and offer ‘an equal lie’ to that of the colonial dimensions of our situation. This work is aimed at rendering not just the party but as much of society as is possible ‘a willing tool in the hands of a leader’. It is simultaneously aimed at the expulsion of the social and political dimensions from the national question. It seeks to incite Manichean delirium as a mask for the preservation and extension of a predatory and repressive order.

But Fanon, not to mention the often grim history of the postcolony, teaches us that social and political questions are urgent, profoundly urgent. Will land ownership be democratised or turned over to traditional authority and an alliance between ‘the rapacious bourgeoisie’ and global mining capital that leaves most people impoverished, waters poisoned and the land itself ruined? Will the economy be restructured in the interests of developing ‘new social relations’ or will that restructuring be solely organised around the transfer of ‘unfair advantage’ from one small group of people to another? Will our universities and our media

become deracialised and decolonised sites of free critical inquiry, or will they be subordinated to authoritarian toadies representing predatory and repressive interests? Will the parastatals be vehicles for private accumulation, accumulation always articulated to a faction in the ruling party, or will they be run in the national interest, an interest conceived in social terms? Will public schools, housing, and the grant system, be orientated around private accumulation or an emancipatory social project? Will power be dispersed to democratic organisation in the places where people live, work, play and study or centralised in the hands of a leader who claims to represent the party, the nation and the state? Does Zuma's record, and that of the people with whom he has forged his primary alliances, allow us to trust him with the posing and resolution of social, economic and political questions, with our future?

Fanon's position was clear. He insisted that the pathologies of both the colony and the postcolony should be confronted with a radically democratic project, the constitution of popular counter-power, and the "objective necessity of a social program which will appeal to the nation as a whole". We should do the same.

– KI Coffee House, Hamra, Beirut, 23 March 2017