

# **Fanon, between the Caribbean and Africa**

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# Our «reading» of Fanon

- **Primary focus:** Careful reading of Fanon's texts - a non-predatory reading where we try to avoid our own appropriation of Fanon's thoughts and work
- **Our vantage point:** the relevance of his ideas in contemporaneity. «Why Fanon? Why Now? « Fanonian discourses seen as what Stuart Hall describes as «Fanon's afterlife» (1996) – referring to different readings and lenses (Lacan 1977, Lanata 2019, Rabaka, 2010)
- Shed light on some often less visible connections:
  - Fanon's life trajectory and how his thoughts evolved and show his vast readings of
    - Caribbean intellectuals & activists (Anténor Firmin, Aimé Césaire)
    - Afro-American theorists (W.E.B. Du Bois)
    - North and Sub-Saharan African African intellectuals and «freedom fighters» (co-editors of *El Moudjahid*)
    - Euro-centred or European theorists



# Categorizing Fanon's discourses

- Maybe, the promising way forward to get insight into Fanon's multiple perceptions today would be the distinction made by Lacan (the real order / the symbolic order / the imaginary order) (Lacan 1977)
- **The real Fanon:** French thinker born in Martinique who became Algerian. *Martinique*: the first experience of the colonial order. Field of exploration of colonial societies. Fanon also worked as a *praticien* in Martinique (observations).
- **The symbolic Fanon:** connection between politics and psychiatry to understand the concrete conditions of alienation.
- **The imaginary Fanon:** the legacy of Fanon in anticolonial thinking. Radical Caribbean thinking- important body of **Fanon's afterlife**.
- Fanon was born in 1925 in **Fort-de-France** and was buried in Algeria in 1961 (Ibrahim Omar Fanon)



# Fanon and the Caribbean

- Fanon wanted to work in Martinique as a doctor but there were no positions nor in Martinique neither in Guadeloupe.
- The Caribbean: elaboration of the **ideological matrix** for Fanon. Fanon never forgot the Caribbean and the Martinique.
- He saw in the Martinique the same colonial alienation as in Africa. Martinique is a department after the *loi de la départementalisation* of 1946 (France has two dependencies and two territories).
  - Nonetheless, the Lived experience of Blackness (Ch 5, 1952) and the disruption of the bodily schema or - the historico-racial bodily schema – erupts in (his) the meeting with colonial France, this experience provides a potential “path to a phenomenology dedicated to disalienation or, we might say today, decolonization” (Bernasconi 2020)
  - There is therefore an inseparable interconnection between the “real” and the “symbolic” Fanon





Moving away from essentialist thinking,  
natural order based on biology – moving  
towards a social turn

- Henry Sylvester Williams, Anténor Firmin, others
- The idea of Pan-Africanism
- Pan- Caribbeanism
- Fanon and Pan-African thoughts in post second (world) war conferences
- Brought forward by Stuart Hall (1997) – *Race the Floating Signifier*





# The Caribbean and the experience of tropical capitalism

- Xavier Ricard Lanata wrote about the tropicalization of global capitalism. Transnational corporations treat nation-states as servants, colonies (Lanata 2019). Tropicalization: experience of the capitalist domination but at the same time there are learnings from resistances to this tropicalization.
- Notion of **perspectivism** borrowed from Lanata and that could help us to think about the nexus between the Caribbean and Africa. **Perspectivism** introduces a positive narrative on emancipation.
- Perspectivism, resonates with Fanon 's own promotion of "cultivating the ability to see the same thing under a plurality of aspects" which is believed to have been inspired by Merleau-Ponty and phenomenology- the latter notion seen in a "broad" sense of the word



# The Caribbean and the experience of tropical capitalism

- Fanon **heals** the consequences of an oppressive system (collaboration between **psychiatry** and **geopolitics**)
- Fanon did not only generalize anticolonial thinking, he also followed up what was going on in West India
- Strong connections between the movements of insubordination between the Caribbean and Algeria.
- The example of the anticolonial rebellion of December **1959** in Martinique





# The elaboration of the anticolonial matrix

- Sociological observation of European racism and colonialism in West India and in Africa
- The events of rebellion in West India echo the struggle for liberation in Africa
- Fanon denounced the colonial discourses. In his style, many quotes or reported speeches. Focus on three articles of *El Moudjahid* for the situation in Martinique and the article “West Indians and Africans” which was first published in the review *Esprit* in 1955
- 1) The necessity to break the racial prejudices
- 2) The question of rebellions and riots in Martinique



# The “problem of the colored man in the white world” (Fanon 1967: 17)

- The notion of alienation explains the “affective complexes that could oppose West Indians and Africans” (Fanon 1967: 17). “The enemy of the Negro is often not the white man but a man of his own color” (Fanon 1967: 17).
- Difficulty for Fanon to analyze the cruel reality of racism with the expression “**Negro people**”.
- “There is as great a difference between a West Indian and a Dakarian as between a Brazilian and a Spaniard” (Fanon 1967: 17)
- Questioning the racist prejudices that created a universal figure of rejection



# The construction of a therapy

- Necessity to break the colonial thinking
- Questions. “Is it not obvious that there can only be a white race? What would the ‘white people’ correspond to? Do I have to explain the difference that exists between nation, people, fatherland, community?” (Fanon 1967: 17-18).  
Therapy: clarifying what is meant in the prejudices
- “That there is an African people, that there is a West Indian people, this I do believe. But when someone talks to me about that ‘**Negro people**’, I understand that there is in this a source of conflicts. Then I try to **destroy this source**” (Fanon 1967: 18). **Therapeutical shock**



# The relation between West Indians and Africans

- Reciprocal misunderstanding
- Text characterized by the ideology of Negritude (references to Césaire)
- From the West Indians: fear of Blackness. The economic reality hides the problem. Legacy of the slavery in the French West Indies with the *békés*, the mulattos and the black people. Ordinary racism. “In Martinique, when it is remarked that this or that person is in fact very black, this is said without contempt, without hatred” (Fanon 1967: 18).



# The relation between West Indians and Africans

- The use of irony in Martinique
- Mechanism against neurosis. With irony, people try to avoid the violence of the reality (see the different levels of Lacan).
- “A West Indian, in particular an intellectual who is no longer on the level of irony, discovers his **Negritude**. Thus, while in Europe irony protects against the existential anguish, in Martinique it protects against the awareness of Negritude” (Fanon 1967: 19). Irony: cultural production (carnival...)
- The relation is not only **psychological**, it has a **geopolitical** base.



# The relation between West Indians and Africans

- The Second World War is the important event as France was defeated. Traumatism for the nation. France presented the illusion to be with the winners.
- Paris was the city of reference for many West Indians before the war.
- Many prejudices travelled from Africa to West India.
- The role of the French system of cooperation with civil servants importing these prejudices.
- Construction of a common stereotype on African people.
- “The **metropolitan civil servant**, returning from Africa, has accustomed us to stereotypes: **sorcerers, makers of fetishes, tom-toms, guilelessness, faithfulness, respect for the white man, backwardness**” (*Ibid.* 19)



# The relation between West Indians and Africans

- The stereotype travels with the help of West Indians.
- “The trouble is that the West Indian speaks of Africa in exactly the same way and, as the **civil servant** is not only the colonial administrator but the **constable**, the **customs officer**, the **registrar**, the **soldier**, at every level of West Indian society an inescapable feeling of superiority over the African develops, becomes systematic, **hardens**” (*Ibid.* 19-20). Radiography of the diplomatic corpse, the administrative apparatus of cooperation but also the Army, the teachers...
- The stereotype before the War: “**The African was a Negro and the West Indian a European**” (*Ibid.* 20)





# The relation between West Indians and Africans

- Analysis of the mechanism of self-protection. By fearing the assimilation to the Negro, the West Indians elaborated a differentiation.
- “But inasmuch as externally the West Indian was just a little bit African, since, say what you will, he was black, he was obliged – as a **normal reaction in psychological economy** – to harden his frontiers in order to be protected against any misapprehension” (*Ibid.*: 20).
- The West Indian had to despise the African to protect a feeling of superiority.



# The relation between West Indians and Africans

- He deals also with the problem between Martinique and Guadeloupe. "From Martinique": "Even today, in 1952, we hear Martiniquans insist that they (the natives of Guadeloupe) are more savage than we are" (Fanon 1967: 21).
- The African = the negro = the slave.
- "The West Indian was a black man, but the Negro was in Africa" (*Ibid.* 1967: 21).
- Use of words and expressions from psychoanalysis
- "delirium" (*Ibid.* 1967: 22). Césaire is a prominent figure in this article as he was one of the first ones who claimed his blackness.



# The relation between West Indians and Africans

- “The downfall of France, for the West Indian, was in a sense the murder of the **father**. This national defeat might have been endured as it was in the **metropolis**, but a good part of the French fleet remained blockaded in the West Indies during the four years of the German occupation” (*Ibid.* 22). Migrations of the sailors *Béarn* and *Emile-Bertin*
- New discourse of free France. “And where were these traitors, if not camouflaged in the West Indies?” (*Ibid.* 22)
- The admiral Georges Robert was loyal to Vichy but played an ambiguous role (Fanon 1967: 24; Baptiste 1978: 2). In the Caribbean, the Third Republic had created the system of governors to administrate these territories in case of crisis. The general and local councils of Martinique supported free France.



# The relation between West Indians and Africans

- The consequences of these ambiguous relations.
- How can the West Indian welcome a new discourse distinguishing between the fake White and the good White?  
*Alienation and delirium*
- “In 1943, weary of an ostracism to which they were not accustomed, irritated, famished, the West Indians, who had formerly been separated into close sociological groups, **broke all barriers**, came to an agreement on certain things, among others that those Germans had gone too far and, supported by the local army, fought for and won the rallying of the colony to the Free French” (Fanon 1967: 24)



# The relation between West Indians and Africans

- The close reading reveals that the West Indians defended the Whites from themselves (more racist tendencies). Political consciousness of the Martinique during the Second World War. The West Indians fought against the most racist Whites, they rejected the collusion of the Vichy government. At the end of the war, the political consciousness created a distance with France. The West Indian was seen as a potential rebel.
- “The West Indian in France was continually recalling that he was not a Negro: from 1945 on, the West Indian in France was continually to recall that he *was* a **Negro**” (Fanon 1967: 25)



# The relation between West Indians and Africans

- Fanonian argument:
- Before the war, the West Indians rejected the Africans with a dream of equalizing the European consciousness
- After the war, the Europeans assimilated the West Indians to Africans
- The Africans did not recognize the West Indians that had despised them in earlier periods
- “The West Indians, **civil servants and military, lawyers and doctors**, landing in Dakar, were distressed at not being sufficiently black” (Fanon 1967: 25)



# The relation between West Indians and Africans

- Fanon proposed a form of discourse analysis
- “Fifteen years before, they said to the Europeans, **‘Don’t pay attention to my black skin, it’s the sun that has burned me, my soul is as white as yours’**. After 1945 they changed their tune. They said to the Africans, **‘Don’t pay attention to my white skin, my soul is as black as yours, and that is what matters’**” (Fanon 1967: 25).
- Skin/soul (exteriority/interiority). The problem of the relation between West Indians and Africans: the problem of West Indians. Betrayal.





# The relation between West Indians and Africans

- The “**ironic spice**, so characteristic of the Martinique mentality” (Fanon 1967: 26).
- The Africans reminded the West Indians that they took part in structural racism. “Before Césaire, West Indian literature was a literature of Europeans” (*Ibid.* 1967: 26)
- “The West Indian of 1945 is a Negro” (*Ibid.* 1967: 26)
- The West Indian rediscovered himself after 1945, “the great White error”. Cultural explanation that links geopolitical considerations to psychological and maybe autobiographical reflections. What is left for West Indians if they recognized their blackness too late?



# The question of Martinique

- The relation between West Indians and Africans is essential for Fanon as it is how the world was dominated and presented by the Whites. From Africa, Fanon followed up and wrote about the Caribbean and especially about Martinique.
- Fanon wrote several articles for *El Moudjahid* (January 1958) about the future of Martinique
- West Indies Federation (1958-1962). Fanon was hoping that Martinique would join this creation



# The question of Martinique

- “In the last 1950s, we had witnessed a time of epic transformation, the beginning of the end of colonialism, a **failed West Indian federation** in 1958, ending the decade with the Cuban Revolution of 1959” (Boyce 2013: 34)
- Fanon was worried about the role of national *bourgeoisies* that could block the emancipation and restore a more spicy alienation.
- He never ceased to think about Martinique and the Caribbean identity, the “West Indian consciousness” (Macey 2012: 412).



# The question of Martinique

- The articles of *El Moudjahid* (Official periodical for the National Liberation Front)
- 15 January 1958: "Aux Antilles, naissance d'une nation"
- 18 October 1958: "Lendemain d'un plébiscite en Afrique"
- **5 January 1960: "Le Sang coule aux Antilles sous domination française" (*Blood Flows in the Antilles Under French Domination*)**



# The question of Martinique

- The article of 15 January 1958: “*Aux Antilles, naissance d’une nation*” was not translated into the book *Toward the African Revolution*
- Article that deals with the idea of the West Indies Federation
- Sugar royalty, the Caribbean history is presented.
- Fanon insists on the cruelty of racism in West India with a manipulation of the different social strata (mulattos / black / white). The Caribbean: juxtaposition of **colonies**
- “**island ghetto**” (*ghetto insulaire*) + analysis of Jamaica (the access of Manley to power)
- “**vers une confédération caraïbe**” (Fanon 2001: 109)



# The question of Martinique

- The revolution is a question of territorialization to break the so-called French (white) **assimilation**. The risk for all these revolutions: restore a reformism and the conditions of a political alienation.
- Martinique voted in 1958 for being a part of the French Community
- Question of Martinican independence. Riots of December 1959
- The incipit of the article is typical for Fanon: "So now the old colonies, too, are taking the road to '**rebellion**'. Those ornaments of the empire, those **castrated countries** that gave such good and **loyal servants** are beginning to stir" (Fanon 1967: 167). Psychogeopolitical style ("castrated countries"). He writes from Africa, having in mind the French discourse on the war in Algeria (security, upheavals, *maintien de l'ordre*).



# The question of Martinique

- Similarities between what happened in Martinique and in Algeria
- Upheavals, riots. “Fifteen dead, **we are told**, several dozen wounded, and hundreds of arrests” (Fanon 1967: 168).
- “Reinforcements have been sent to the Antilles and in order to halt a movement which must appear fairly imminent Guadeloupe is being flooded with marines, members of the CRS and soldiers”
- “The French information services **claim** that the origin of the riot was a commonplace traffic accident” (Fanon 1967: 168)
- Situation of ordinary racism and humiliation





# The question of Martinique

- Why such a rebellion and why such a quick and massive repression?
- Discovery of a “rebellious spirit”, “national spirit” (Fanon 1967: 168)
- The **West Indian Federation**, the “**Caribbean federation**” has geopolitical consequences. “The ex-Dutch and ex-British Guianas, which are today independent, exert an attraction on Guiana under French domination. The West Indies under British domination obtain their independence. Castro in Cuba has given the Caribbean a **new look**. Yes, the question is raised” (Fanon 1967: 169)



# The question of Martinique

- The article is about the “manifestation of the national spirit of Martinique” (Fanon 1967: 169)
- Possibility of independence for people of Guadeloupe, Martinique and Guiana
- Fanon interpreted what happened in Martinique from the situation in Algeria. Similarities in both situations.
- Zones of structural racism. “We know that there are links between the **Algerian war** and the recent events that have caused **blood** to be shed in Martinique. It is former French **civil servants** of North Africa, those who were expelled from Morocco, from Tunisia, and those who were too compromised in Algeria, who have provoked the retaliation of the Martinique masses” (Fanon 1967: 169). The French civil servants export the **colonial pattern** of the French power.



# Conclusions

- People contract diseases when the perspective of freedom is taken from them. **Psychiatry**: individual consequences of a social order (colonization). The mental diseases reflect a **fundamental oppression**. Internalization of **structural racism** with different degrees (**alienation** of West Indians and problem of recognition). **Otherization** of discourses
- Fanon never disconnected Africa from West India. He published several articles on the situation of Martinique
- Fanon saw the problems of the Caribbean and Africa with the **internalization** of the European white culture.



# Conclusions

- Need to rediscover an own path of **socialization**
- The individual is not an abstraction, the individual is seized in different mediations. In these mediations, the individual is perceived through cultural and racial categorizations.
- Structural racism: imposing a universal culture by **denying** these mediations / or imposing the **oblivion** of these paths of socialization
- Lucidity of the individual that could refind liberty in the enlightenment of these processes. **Emancipatory** vision.
- Necessity to reread Fanon with the way otherization discourses emerge when it comes to **suburban upheavals** (juvenile delinquency...)



# Epilogue

- The analysis presents what constitute parts of Fanon's afterlives.
- Secondary literature, based on original texts and/or translations into different languages, have for long lived seemingly quite distinct afterlives.
- The reception of Fanon's different texts has changed over time. In the early years- reception was centred on **Les Damnés de la Terre**, nurturing what has been described as pan-humanist, pan-caribbean, pan-african, Third Worldism, and the emancipatory revolutionary perspectives – and it was called *The handbook for the black revolution*. In the «English» spheres of reception and particularly from the 1980s – within cultural studies and postcolonial studies, the earlier published text *Black Skin, White Masks* became much more predominant.



# Epilogue

- We reiterate that we believe that the understanding of Fanon can only be achieved through a reading of his entire oeuvre and how it is intertwined with his life trajectory – lived experience- and the political, economic , social context at the time.
- In our present research we are currently exploring different afterlives.



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