

Fanon's Pantheons

Lewis R. Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2015. 216 pp., £14.99 pb., 978 1 84904 550 6.

Peter Hudis, *Frantz Fanon, Philosopher of the Barricades*, Pluto Press, London, 2015. 176 pp., £50.00 hb., £12.99 pb., 978 0 74533 630 5 hb., 978 0 74533 625 1 pb.

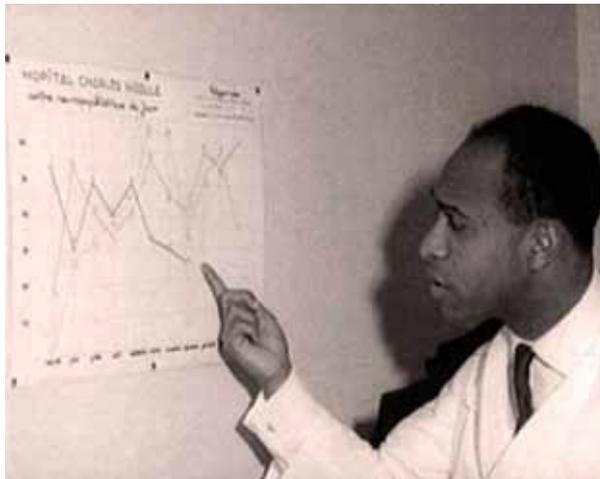
The literature on Frantz Fanon is mortgaged to cyclical emergences, and the rhythm of his putative rediscovery becomes shorter and shorter. Under the appearance of democratizing Fanon, 'introductions' succeed one another at an uncontrollable pace. As with Walter Benjamin, every disciplinary field has its own private relationship with Fanon: Fanon qua psychiatrist, Fanon qua revolutionary, Fanon qua postcolonial intellectual, Fanon qua Third World Marxist. Once the labels are put in place a great deal of effort is invested in removing them, and reconstituting the 'whole person' and the 'whole thinker' that Fanon was, with all his contradictions. But neither categorization nor reactive de-categorization can avoid instrumentalization in the tightly woven net of the knowledge economy. Whilst articles must be ultra-specific in their theoretical alignments, books have to entice large audiences; hence the prevalence of the short and catchy 'introduction'. Going by their title and their format (both are under 200 pages), Peter Hudis's and Lewis Gordon's new books seem to fall into this category. However, whereas Hudis's is truly introductory and will find a natural readership among undergraduate students, Gordon's oscillates between the monograph and the introduction. Despite the book's claim to address Fanon on its own terms, *What Fanon Said* comprises multiple levels of analysis, which might confuse those who are only looking for Fanon's fundamental ideas.

Gordon has been focusing on three aspects of Fanon's works since his first book, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, published in 1995: Fanon's existential-phenomenological account of race, his metacritique of European Reason, and his humanism. For Gordon, these three aspects are intrinsically linked: Fanon's critique of European reason and science would lead him to reject 'ontology' in favour of a renewed humanist existentialism. At the same time, Gordon also interprets Fanon's metacritical register as a critique of philosophy. As he writes in the

introduction, Fanon's focus on human possibilities contains an implicit critique of philosophy as 'the ultimate critical theory and arbiter'. More importantly, Gordon argues for the study of Fanon's ideas in their own right, defining his own strategy as the refusal to reduce the 'intellectuals of African descent' to either their 'white' theoretical references (typically the canonical figures of the European tradition) or to their biographies. Gordon is interested in understanding and correcting the systematic delegitimation of black intellectuals, both in philosophy and within the broader scope of theory. Black thinkers, he claims, are supposed to provide 'experience' in a theoretical world overwhelmingly dominated by white scholars and European philosophers. This is how Gordon pertinently introduces considerations of race and racism within the epistemological field, engaging his readers to be more perceptive with regard to what could be called a 'colour line in theory'.

Gordon's interest in metatheory is evident from the outset and runs through the whole book. However, the manner in which Gordon implements such a 'non-reductive' method is perplexing. Gordon cannot avoid both remarking on Fanon's relationship to the European canon, and stressing numerous biographical details. One of Gordon's methods is to consider that existentialism is what simultaneously *distances* Fanon from traditional philosophical modes of analyses and *warrants* him a place in the philosophical pantheon. But there is something almost patronizing in Gordon's repetition of Fanon's heroic virtues. The matter seems to be one of retroactive recognition within the realm of 'professional philosophy'. The parochialism of Gordon's methodological gaze is especially striking towards the end of the book, where Gordon bluntly confronts Fanon's decision to appeal to a 'white-centered and Eurocentric Sartre' to write the preface for *The Wretched of the Earth*. Why did Fanon look for 'authorization' and 'legitimacy' from Sartre, a 'white' philosopher? Here Gordon seemingly transfers his own preoccupations onto Fanon.

The five chapters that comprise *What Fanon Said* are unevenly pitched. The second half of the book, which tackles Fanon's practice of psychiatry and political involvement, often veers into 'biography', the genre Gordon claims to be weary of. However, the sections dedicated to *Black Skin, White Masks* contain a number of interesting insights, owing to Gordon's long-lasting engagement with Fanon's first work. Especially interesting is Gordon's focus on the motif of 'failure' as its theoretical fulcrum. Besides the infamous chapter devoted to recognition ('The Black and Recognition'), he considers each chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* as a different portrait of the black as a failing to be recognized as 'human subject'. He reminds us that Fanon deemed it necessary to leave the philosophical realm for psychoanalysis, which he precisely described as the study of man at the level of its 'failures' (*ratés*). Moreover, Gordon shows that the motif of failure permeates Fanon's analysis of the 'sociogenesis' of the black



individual. A large part of Fanon's analysis of the lived experience of the black is indeed an account of the black man's necessary, or structural, failure to conform to the social and symbolic realm in which he finds himself. Failure is, for instance, determinant in the black's relation to French language. Seeking social recognition by mastering French language, his mastery is ironically turned back against himself, for regardless of how well he speaks French language, he will be considered a masquerade, a 'comedy of errors'. Moving between different forms of relational, social, sexual inscriptions of the subject, the motif of failure enables Gordon to read the Fanonian trope of failure beyond psychoanalysis and to establish a common ground between psychoanalysis and existential philosophy. As Gordon makes clear, this is probably among Fanon's most significant (and still only partially explored) contributions, moving between

the psychoanalytical and the cultural fields, between the individual unconscious and the racial (collective) imaginary, and thereby providing us with a unique conception of subjectivation. This also raises interesting questions regarding the uncanny relationship Fanon draws between psychoanalysis and political action: as Gordon notes, the end point of Fanon's collective psychoanalytical diagnosis and analytical work is externally directed action: 'his counsel is, in short, actional.'

Additionally, Gordon articulates the motif of failure at the level of Fanon's method, pondering his singular form of narration: where the 'black subject', the voice of the text, fails, the theorist and the critic succeed, 'by identification of each failure'. *Black Skin, White Masks*, Gordon claims, proceeds by 'performative contradiction of pessimism'. Reflecting on what he calls a 'metatheory of failure', Gordon shows how Fanon moves between registers in order to create a new framework of intelligibility for his thinking. For Gordon, '[t]he work challenges the viability of any single science of the study of human beings and presents a radical critique premised on the examination of human failure.' This would characterize the specificity of Fanon's unruly philosophy: drawing an existential portrait of the 'Black' in the negative of Western Reason, by playing the various sciences of Man (*sciences de l'homme*) against one another.

By contrast the aim of Hudis's book is at once clear and unequivocal: to place Fanon back within the Marxist pantheon (Hegel–Marx–Sartre) so as to save him from postcolonial drift. Some readers will appreciate the remarkable conciseness and textual fluidity of his account, which covers, in less than 200 pages, the life and the principal works of Fanon, with particular emphasis on his anticolonial and Third-Worldist political involvement. Yet this is realized at the price of any engagement with other theoretical resources. A good indicator of its methodological naivety is provided in the introduction, in which Hudis explains that the spirit of the forgotten revolutionary was suddenly resurrected in December 2014 by *Black Lives Matter*. In short, the pedagogical format of the book is supposed to legitimize an *ex nihilo* approach to Fanon. Hudis's book is a perfect example of the current anti-postcolonial backlash, which is nowhere near as strong as in the discipline of philosophy itself. Once the issues of 'postcolonialism, difference and alterity' have been swiftly dismissed in the introduction, Hudis feels entitled to explicate Fanon from the quasi-exclusive standpoint of his return to, and variations upon, Hegel.

More precisely, this return to Hegel is focused on a rather crude simplification of 'Hegel' to the logic of individual-particular-universal, which according to him constitutes the structural framework of both *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*. Hudis overlooks the fact that Fanon's reading of Hegel, like Sartre's and Lacan's, was importantly mediated by Kojève and his emphasis on intersubjective recognition. Disregarding this crucial detail, Hudis provides us with a particularly poignant example of what Gordon's criticism focuses upon, explaining that Fanon reinterpreted Hegel and Sartre 'in terms of his lived experience'. Fanon's phenomenology of race would amount to integrating a new variable within the pre-established scenario of human emancipation. It is not incidental, then, that Hudis insistently goes back to the infamous (and equally poor) Sartrian 1948 indictment of Négritude as the 'weak stage' of the dialectic. Characterizing Fanon's philosophical view on race through the prism of his response to Sartre, Hudis is bound to assess the role of race from the exclusive scope of this disembodied dialectic: what is the role of race as *mediation* between the particular and the universal? Thus race, or what Hudis rather uncomfortably refers to as the 'additive of colour', has to be necessarily characterized as *means* or *end* of the dialectic of emancipation; the idea that race or blackness might simply not fit into this totalizing dialectic is not even posed as possibility. If Fanon was, indeed, a Hegelian (*pace* Gordon), why cannot we think of other ways of inhabiting and subverting Hegel's logical and historical architecture? Why couldn't Fanon's reference to Hegel mean neither identification nor subservient subordination but something else, perhaps something akin to what Gayatri Spivak characterizes as 'affirmative sabotage'?

It is no accident that Hudis calls upon the predominantly Parisian theme of the 'barricade' in order to restore Fanon's Marxist-Hegelian lineage. In a rather forceful gesture, Hudis seeks to address Fanon from the undisturbed standpoint of nineteenth-century revolutionary classicism. For Hudis is exclusively interested in the Fanonian dialectic of emancipation and in his orientation towards a humanism-to-come. Contrary to Ato Sekyi-Otu's *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* (1996), which attempted to reactualize Fanon's Hegelian dialectics from the complex perspective of postcolonial 'failed' African states, Hudis's account is impregnated with an unequivocal historicism and a quasi-religious faith in the emancipatory power of the universal. 'History', Hudis argues, 'is replete with

examples of freedom struggles that lost their way because they took their eyes off the universal.'

Nevertheless, Hudis's book is accessible and will seduce those who want to situate the Martiniquan revolutionary within the geopolitical context of his time. His account offers a synthetic analysis of Fanon's role as an anti-colonial and pan-African militant; aspects that tend to be overlooked by the scholars who focus on Fanon's relationship with Negritude and the black diaspora. Whilst the first part of the book is dedicated to Fanon's early years and to *Black Skin, White Masks* (chapters 1-3), the second part (chapters 4-6) foregrounds Fanon's role in Algeria since 1953 and in the broader context of African anti-colonial liberation struggles. Hudis discusses Fanon's involvement with the Algerian FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) as a journalist and as a representative, interestingly pointing out the importance of the 1956 Soummam conference and analysing Fanon's journalistic strategy in *El Moudjahid*. He also proposes to read *The Wretched of the Earth* from the point of view of the specific anti-colonial and 'postcolonial' conjunctures that Fanon was witnessing, reading his account of the pitfalls of the national bourgeoisie as a critique of Nkrumah's rule in Ghana and Sekou Touré's in Guinea. In other words, Hudis helpfully resituates Fanon within the (now remote) problematics confronting Third World Marxists at the time, drawing on the prominent revolutionary role that Fanon ascribed to the peasantry. By doing so, Hudis stays away from any hypnotic obsession with Fanon's advocacy of violence: for him the latter needs first and foremost to be understood as Fanon's way of stressing the role of the masses in forestalling neocolonial mechanisms and should at no price be misconstrued in a metaphysical way.

Reading Gordon's and Hudis's books alongside one another calls attention to profound divergences between a dive into the self-evident narrative of emancipatory politics and the labyrinthine questioning of epistemological reflexivity. The naive enthusiasm of Hudis stands in ironic contrast to Gordon's search for epistemological righteousness. For further philosophical investigations of Fanon's works it would be a relief to leave aside, for a moment, the list of Fanon's theoretical affiliations, the various ways in which Fanon fits or does not fit into the philosophical pantheon, and instead focus on the internal consistency of his thought: in short, to *philosophize with Fanon*.

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