

C.L.R. James November 1978

Fanon and the Caribbean

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Transcribed: by Christian Høgsbjerg.

When I was asked to speak, I was invited to submit a paper. I said that in 60 years of public speaking I had not done that and I was not prepared to start here, because I really did not know who was speaking with me and who would be listening. It is not possible to present a paper under those circumstances. As I look around, I notice that on the platform there are lots of heads of departments or members of Governments. Most of the other speakers are professors from universities. I find this combination a rather unusual one. I would have liked to hear from the platform a Portuguese voice. The voice would have been translated and we would have understood a little more about Fanon. I would have liked to hear from among the audience a man like Wole Soyinka from Africa and another man from the Caribbean called Walter Rodney. I am sure we would have immensely benefitted by what they would have had to say about Fanon. That was the reason why as a habit I do not present papers but I am going to say more or less what I have to say now and I will tell you the outline of it.

Fanon as a political person

First of all I am a Marxist and I am going to deal with Fanon as a political person. He has been dealt with, I presume, as a psychologist and some have obviously taken a lot of trouble to do that. I am going to deal with his political activities, then in general in relation to the political thinking of his particular age. Secondly, I am going to deal with him as a member of the Caribbean, as a West Indian, somebody whom I understand from being a West Indian myself, and certainly I want to deal with Fanon and the Caribbean and world civilization, because I believe we have a particular role to play in it. First of all, let us consider his political ideas.

Fanon made one particular statement that I think ought to be remembered. He said that when a revolution is made in an undeveloped country, the people who make it are some intellectuals and other political leaders but when the revolution is achieved, then for that people to achieve a new nation the struggle has to be waged against those who made the

revolution. Mao Tse Tung had a lot to say about that. He went on to say further in a most precise political analysis that many of those who made the revolution and made it successfully against the imperialists will find that they have to leave the party which won and that the ultimate place where they had to go was to the peasantry, if they wanted to form a new nation. That is a highly political statement and that is a valuable statement. I believe that that statement and the analysis which went with it, in the light of what is being done today in Africa by Julius Nyerere represent two of the most important political analyses that the world has seen since the death of Lenin. You see what Fanon means to me.

When was there no violence?

Secondly, there is a lot of talk about violence. I can not understand how people in the world that we have lived in for so many centuries argue about violence. When was there no violence? Fanon's violence was a profoundly philosophical conception. It came originally from Hegel and Hegel has a wonderful passage where he analyzes the relation between the master and the slave. The master incorporates what the slave produces, but the slave by having to work on the material develops himself and becomes a personality and ultimately the struggle is a struggle to the death between the master and the new slave who has developed himself by working on the material for his master. That is a famous passage in Hegel. Marx took it over and it is one of the most powerful themes in *Das Kapital*. When Fanon develops this theme he is merely elaborating on that profound political conception of Hegel and Marx. So, I do not see any need to argue about violence apart from the fact that the violence is there whether you want it or not. Violence for Fanon was part of the revolutionary struggle between oppressors and oppressed; and if he thought that violence meant some development of the person who was using it against those who were oppressing him, he was merely in the tradition of Hegel and Marx, in my mind the most powerful political tradition in the Modern World.

Fanon as a Caribbean citizen

The next thing I want to speak about is Fanon as a Caribbean member of the Caribbean society. That is a remarkable society with many immense advantages and many negative characteristics. I am not going to speak about them here altogether. But I want to give you my knowledge of one distinguished Caribbean citizen, Aimé Césaire. In 1968 I was in Cuba with him and we got to know one another. He knew my work, I knew his and we used to talk. I asked him one day, the last day he came to see me to say goodbye:

“But Césaire, where have you come from?”

He said: "I was educated at the Victor Schoelcher School."

In every Caribbean island there was always one school where the masters sent their children and those blacks who had some money or had some influence were able to send their children too. In those days it was a small school, about 200 people. I knew this school well because I was educated at one also. I learned Latin, Greek and French, elementary mathematics and advanced Mathematics, Roman history, Greek history, a whole lot of things that were of no use to me in the Caribbean. But when I came to Europe I found I was quite an impressive person. I knew more about Europe than they did.

Anyway, he said: "I was educated at the Victor Schoelcher School" and I said: "What did you do there?"

He said: "Latin, Greek and French literature, and then I went to the Ecole Normale Supérieure in France."

I said: "What did you do there?"

He said: "Latin, Greek and French literature. Then I went on to the Sorbonne."

I said: "What did you do there? I suppose you did Latin, Greek and French literature."

He said: "Yes, but that is not all. I went back to Martinique and I taught at the Victor Schoelcher School, and I taught Latin, Greek and French literature."

Frantz Fanon was one of his pupils. You begin to get to understand the West Indian intellectual when you understand that Frantz Fanon and Léon Damas were taught by Césaire and Césaire made the most savage attack upon bourgeois society that I can think of in verse. He did it because he could attack it, because he knew it inside out. He had spent twenty years of his life studying the history of the ways that society expressed itself. There was this body of intellectuals in the Caribbean, but cut away from the mass of the population, but who understood everything and Fanon not only was educated by Césaire and Césaire's poems and general work, but he read most of the literature that was being published in Europe at the same time. Then he went away and found that all that he had read in this advanced literature was not a reality at all that he understood. He understood this reality as most of us Caribbean people who went away. It was not a reality either in the advanced territories. In these territories they wrote about it in books but they did not practice the things that their great writers wrote about in books. So, Fanon was a man who found himself lost, unable to do anything.

Fanon: a man of action

The same thing happened to George Padmore. The same thing happened to Aimé Césaire. The same thing happened to me. The same thing happened to all of us, so ultimately we went where an attack was being made on this tremendous monster that was pressing upon us and which we could not handle. Most of us went and worked in regard to Africa. In general we did propaganda for Africa but Fanon was lucky enough to find an African State to which he could go – Algeria. He went to Algeria and was a revolutionary of the first water. I want to take note of something. He was not only a propagandist for the revolution, but when they sent him to Accra as a representative of the Algerian movement, Fanon got to work as to the means of getting soldiers and getting guns and the combination of the military means whereby the struggle should be carried on. He was not a man who was only writing and thinking of psychology, not at all. When he went to Accra, he plunged himself into the military organization of the struggle against imperialism. That was Frantz Fanon. One of the best West Indians.

What I have to look at now is, not sitting today looking back at Fanon's work, what he did then. My point to end is what would Fanon have done today with the ideas that he had? What would he be doing in 1978? He told us at the end of his life he heard that Cuba had made the revolution. We misunderstood the fact that the other West Indian islands had gained independence. They had not got it yet, but they were very near and we know that Fanon had said he would go back to the Caribbean to help them to struggle for their independence. But for a number of years he had never gone back there, because he did not feel that there was a possibility of struggling against the imperialist power. I know George Padmore, the father of African emancipation. He never went back either. I never went back for 25 years. I devoted myself to the African struggle, because we felt that there we could hit some blows, but at the end, the moment Fanon heard that in the Caribbean Cuba was free and the other countries were gaining independence, he said then he would go back to struggle there with them. I feel that today there would be no place for Fanon working elsewhere. He would be in the Caribbean, where he was born, bringing the knowledge that he had had and giving to the people of his own country all that he had in him and all that he had learnt.

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