

the BROTHERWISE DISPATCH vs. LEWIS R. GORDON

Welcome to another one of our **BROTHERWISE FIVE** interview series, during which the **BROTHERWISE DISPATCH** interrogates intellectuals, artists and activists with five probing questions to the delight of our readers.

[this interview was conducted intermittently via email between March through November 2010 by A. Shahid Stover for the **BROTHERWISE DISPATCH**. Lewis R. Gordon is Director of the Institute for the Study of Race and Social Thought and Laura H. Carnell Professor of Philosophy at Temple University.]

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BROTHERWISE DISPATCH-In your book *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* you describe Fanon as the "Locus of many pressing questions in contemporary philosophy." Could you qualify that statement for our readers and maybe share what you consider those "pressing questions" to be?

Lewis R. Gordon - Certainly. First, among the pressing questions in philosophy is the matter of its own justification: how does philosophy justify itself when philosophical reason has been used to rationalize away the humanity of enslaved, colonized, and racialized peoples? Additionally, there are the age-old questions of the relation of theory to practice: How is *thinking* justified when there is so much to do, especially regarding developing viable responses to a world besieged by injustice and an overwhelming set of advantages by which very few get to dominate so many? These questions connect to philosophy's relation to freedom and also to philosophy's relation to itself, to metaphilosophy, to how philosophy assesses philosophy. And more, there is the question of what constitutes primary philosophical questions (a species of the metaphilosophical point). In different ages, these were questions of ontology (questions on and of what there is), questions of ethics (about what we ought to be, what we should strive to become), and questions of knowledge (what we can know). Fanon is among those who understood the significance of philosophical anthropology, of the question of our humanity, of what it means to be human. The immediate connection between that question and the ones I have introduced thus far is that for philosophy to respond to enslavement, colonialism, oppression, philosophy must take seriously how these activities affect human beings, including what it means to be human beings. It also means that philosophers must be aware of themselves in that regard, which means taking seriously the self-critical, the meta-critical tasks through which each of these concerns could be rendered meaningful. For me, that has meant taking seriously the triumvirate of philosophical anthropology, freedom, and metacritiques of reason. For Fanon, it took a similar route since he took seriously the question of the human sciences and the centrality of the meaning of "man" in his work. As well, Fanon never lost sight of the question of freedom, which, without naivety, he understood as fundamentally dialectical and not closed. I add the proviso of not closed since his philosophical anthropology took seriously the human being as, in his formulation at the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*, a question. That means that any serious dialectics of freedom cannot work with an overdetermined anthropology. Fanon also brought the metacritical question to the fore

through his critique of method, where he, in effect, introduced the problem of epistemic colonization (colonization of knowledge) at even the methodological level. Finally, but not exhaustively, Fanon raised these issues at the level of *style*. He wrote, in other words, in a way that reached to the humanity of his readers. He understood, in other words, that the praxis of liberation is also the practice of communication.

BD- In that same work, you mention "current postmodern-poststructural excursions" which deny "the very theoretical assumptions" from which Fanon "may even demand his day in the tribunal of human affairs." Just what are these 'postmodern-poststructural excursions' and how might they undermine the 'theoretical assumptions' which ground a more Fanonist perspective of critique?

LRG - When I wrote that in 1994, there were people upset by that description of postmodern poststructuralism since those approaches were being treated as the Second Coming, as a political advance over the politics of the liberation movements in the late 1950s through 1960s. Among the tenets of postmodern poststructuralism, if I may be permitted the use of that term, are anti-humanism and the rejection of liberation discourses. Since Fanon argued that colonialism and racism, in spite of their talk about "man," were assaults on the human being, and since Fanon was concerned with liberation and the complex philosophical anthropology that lay beneath quests for freedom and their study in the human sciences, his ideas were in a collision course with what was to come. Oddly enough, however, is that postmodern poststructuralism was well suited for an academic conception of politics wherein critique was evaluated more for tenure and professional advancement than the alleviation of social misery of flesh and blood people. Even more, a priority of certain motifs—such as sexuality and gender over race, class more as an abstraction than a reality (wherein it is very much racialized), and a profound insensitivity to the suffering of black people and condescension to our capacity to think and to learn—marked so much postmodern poststructural scholarship, especially those wedded to the designation "postcolonial," that Fanon was inevitably posed as the dark demon (among others) of the moment. A similar development unfortunately happened in relation to Jean-Paul Sartre, who allied himself with thinkers like Fanon, in an academy that prefers didactic Nazis to courageous and intellectually gifted freedom fighters. There was much brilliant work in postmodern archaeological and genealogical readings of intellectual work in the modern age, but they were accompanied by much self-righteousness that elided reflection on concomitant concerns with struggles for freedom. It may be true that notions of freedom are wedded to anthropological presuppositions in a particular age, but we should also remember that such is *our age*, and by "our," I mean people for whom freedom is a meaningful aspiration. Black people are among those people, but the historical circumstance, at least from the kinds of arguments that became hegemonic, has resulted in the treatment of black participation as a lost opportunity. In Fanon's words from *Black Skin, White Masks*, it's the realization of having arrived too late. In concrete form, it's the experience of black mayors commanding cities in which capital has taken flight; it's no doubt the experience of President Obama of achieving office when so much of the infrastructure has been gutted and the situation catastrophic. Returning to the conceptual point, how could the articulation of one's humanity be achieved when those kinds of questions have been rendered illicit?

BD- What is the nature of the fight within the academy over Fanon's theoretical legacy? A legacy which, even today, has implications which extend well beyond the halls of academia itself.

LRG - Fanon's ideas do not comport well with neoliberalism and neoconservatism. The thing is, they do not also work well with postmodernism, or at least how postmodern scholarship has been in opposition to liberatory and revolutionary aspirations. Some critics have argued that Fanon is more a relic of the past, even though much of what he wrote in, for example, *Year V of the Algerian Revolution*, known under the title of *A Dying Colonialism*, and many of his observations in the collection of essays edited by his widow Josèphe Dublé-Fanon, ring true to the current social and political climate of North Africa and West Asia. This applies to depersonalization, torture, suicide-bombing, conflicts over secularization, settlement colonialism, and more. Others try to ignore these issues by prioritizing a single set of problematics—for example, sexual politics—and offer those as the sole bases of assessing Fanon's legacy. What they miss is that Fanon can be criticized for all of these precisely because he took the time to write on all of them. In other words, we may wonder, why did he devote attention to issues ranging from the quest for recognition in a racially hostile environment to the complexity of adornment and its relationship to gender embodiment? Above all, Fanon was concerned with the status, the value, the dignity, the struggles, of the human being, of what it means to be human, and what can be done at the level of intellectual work and engagement in praxis toward developing a better understanding and relationship of human being to human beings. This surely has implications well beyond the academy.

BD - Is there any relationship between this academic struggle over Fanon's theoretical legacy and Richard Philcox's latest translation of *The Wretched of the Earth*? For example how the French "phenomene" is now translated into English as "event" instead of "phenomenon"; doesn't such a change at the very least, undermine the existential phenomenological methodology and implications of Fanon's opus?

LRG - Nigel Gibson offers an excellent analysis of Philcox's translation. The article is entitled, "Relative Opacity: A New Translation of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*—*Mission Betrayed or Fulfilled?*" Grove had consulted me about the translation, but I had no idea then about the Bhabha foreword and a few other elements. Still, a difficulty these days has been the effort to de-fang Fanon, so to speak, reflected in Anthony Appiah's pedestrian foreword to *Peau noire, masques blancs* and Bhabha's foreword. Their purpose, apparently, is to downplay the political significance of Fanon's thought. But I don't worry much about that since, in the end, Fanon's voice comes through the cacophony of disputes. I don't so much search for the "real" Fanon as I try to work out the many relationships I have to his thought. On one hand, as a scholar, I try to understand him. As a philosopher of human study, I try to learn from him. As a political thinker, I try to see what resources he offers for the understanding of political reality. In each instance, I have found his thought fruitful. I have the advantage of reading his work in the original French,

but I found that the revisions I have had to make to the translations are minimal, although, as we know, a misconstrued word could lead to a thousand injustices—especially when poststructuralists would like to degrade the value of phenomenology, so your point about *phenomena* is well taken.

BD - Your first book *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism* is a pioneering work which undertakes an existential phenomenological exploration of antiblack racism as a form of Sartrean “Bad Faith.” Now in *Being and Nothingness*, as Sartre is developing his notion of “Bad Faith,” he engages in a virulent critique of Freudian psychoanalysis, going so far as to state that “psychoanalysis substitutes for the notion of bad faith, the idea of a lie without a liar.” Within the context of this advanced neo-liberal capitalist society in which we live, psychoanalysis, as an interpretive methodology, continues to exert a tremendous influence on our cultural landscape. Has this uncritical reliance on psychoanalysis assisted in furthering and exacerbating a socio-political climate in which we have racism without racists?

LRG - Among the observations Sartre made about bad faith is that it hates to be identified. A form of bad faith is the appeal to an unconscious. This aspect of Sartre’s work is often misunderstood. Sartre was well aware that there are degrees of consciousness. We are not as conscious when we are almost asleep as we are when we are wide awake. But these are psychophysiological phenomena. The philosophical aspect, the theory of consciousness in the phenomenological sense, is far more complicated. Alfred Schutz, among others, pointed out that a philosophical understanding of consciousness involves the theory of intentionality, for instance, which many confuse as a Cartesian notion of cogitating substance. This is technical stuff, but it amounts to this.

The phenomenological insight is that consciousness is always relational, which is the point behind its always being *of* something. The relationality of consciousness means that it cannot stand by itself as a reality—in fact, “it” is a problematic designation here. Consciousness is not, in other words, properly a thing, such ascriptions of substance—premised as it is in *essence*—are mischaracterizations. As a relationship, this means that the problem with an “unconscious,” versus, say, a “subconscious,” is that it introduces a dualism without a relation. The unconscious is in effect a consciousness out of relations since it exists in the psychic life of the consciousness that is in relation. In that inner world, the problems become more acute and its identification, as ultimately in a relation with the series of relations reaching out to the world of others, becomes a heresy because its whole point was to hide itself through denial of relations in the first place. In other words, bad faith wants to be in bad faith through denial of being in bad faith. This awkward formulation brings the political issues to the fore in the plethora of infelicities that which to remain unnamed or at least unidentified: racism would prefer not to be called racist; sexism would prefer the same; colonialism, the same.

At times, the response is downright indignant, so I’ve found it better to move on and not spend much time on that one: yes, advanced, neoliberal capitalism wants at least that form of

psychoanalysis really bad, but I would question whether it is pro-psychoanalysis in general. I said “that form” because I notice, for instance, how Freud was attacked over, say, Jacques Lacan in the neoliberal academy. Lacan, however, as biographies of him reveal, was a terrible therapist. Many of his patients committed suicide, and he himself was part of an extraordinarily anti-humanist conception of human relationships—a view that is perfect for a world bent upon the valorization of cruelty. (Oddly enough, Sartre was one of Lacan’s patients during the former’s years at L’Ecole Normale Superior.) I actually like Freud, in spite of his many shortcomings, because he struck me as, in large, a courageous human being. Freud did something in his epoch that few could dare do: he *actually* analyzed himself, facing many of his frailties and (in his time) depravities. How many men of the nineteenth-century could confront and admit their desire to sleep with their mother? Sartre was also in favor of this aspect of psychoanalysis, not only in his notion of existential psychoanalysis but also in his homage to psychoanalysis as *The Words*, his autobiography of his childhood, and his monumental study of Flaubert, *The Family Idiot*, attest. That Fanon saw fruit in psychoanalytical reflection reveals its added potential. He, too, explored contradictions in the reach of Lacanian psychoanalysis (the preferred form, by the way, in Homi Bhabha’s approach to postcolonial critique). But in Fanon’s thought, as with Sartre’s, the point is to reveal responsibility and the contradictions of positing a subject outside of the framework of a wider system of relations. Fanon showed, for instance, that the colonial context had a bearing on the symbolic categories of patriarchy, sexuality, and projected *imagoes* (including his own). That every struggle must be waged not only on levels that shift material conditions but also on the *meaning* of those conditions offers much credence to psychoanalytical reflection. But the crucial reminder, as I take it from Sartre not only in *Being and Nothingness* and the other works I have mentioned but also from his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, is that necessary conditions are not always sufficient ones, and a properly dialectical critique requires identifying the contradictions of overarching and closed concepts of reason. Fanon, too, argued that conceptual transformation alone is insufficient, but so, too, is material transformation alone. A “both-and” logic is needed, which is the crucial shift between mere behavior and praxis.

In my recent work, I have been pushing these issues further into an understanding of culture, which I regard, drawing upon Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontent* (more properly translated, perhaps, as “Culture and Dissatisfaction”) as, in effect, a prosthetic god. Culture is the human attempt to respond to the dangers of nature, the vulnerability of the human body, and the challenges of living in a world with others. The struggle over these conditions moves from signification to the symbolic, and that transformation brings with it the birth of meaning through which a different dimension rules, a dimension constitutive of a human world of *worlds*. This last formulation is to discern the difference between custom and culture. The latter, as I understand it, is the condition by which the former is possible. It is the condition by which meaning, reality, and the publicity of the world are disclosed and, thus, what we could properly call human reality.

Returning to my initial remarks on bad faith, an aspect of that reality is that it doesn’t always like to see itself, is often ashamed of itself and hates its freedom. A dimension of freedom, for instance, is that really being free requires the ability to reject that freedom. Bad faith is a problem of human reality because without it, freedom would collapse into a necessity that annihilates itself. It is not that we are free *to do* whatever we choose. We are free to choose whatever we choose, which includes also the bad faith choice of evading choice and freedom. That we are not free to do whatever we choose brings back the material dimension of social reality and culture. I have characterized this as the point about options versus choices. The

options available to us have an impact on how meaningful our choices can be. Much political work involves the expansion or contraction of options. When options are contracted, choices collapse inward in an imploding reality I call *oppression*. When options are expanded, choices are expressions of us reaching out to the world, and that intersubjective reach, rich with symbolic power of material consequence, brings to the fore the importance of bridging gaps between conceptual and material conditions of human life.

On behalf of Lewis R. Gordon and the Brotherwise Dispatch,

Peace,

-A. Shahid Stover

by [Brotherwise Dispatch Editorial Committee](#) at 12:53 am

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