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Are We There Yet?

The Tension Between Nativism and Humanism in Fanon's Writings

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Abstract: In this article, the contemporary debate over the tension between “nativist” (nationalist, anti-colonial) and “humanist” (transnational) representations of identity in Fanon’s works is examined. The author argues that such tension, as it appears in the form of contradictory statements and ambivalent enunciations in Fanon’s writings, provide not only a key to our understanding of Fanon, but is also useful in assessing contemporary critiques of nativism. The article concludes that if Fanon is still relevant today, it is because he forces us to ask whether nativist discourses can still be used “not as descriptions of how things are,” but instead as “instrumental” and “strategic” discourses that can serve to oppose neo-colonial relations in the contemporary world.

Is there anything in the writings of Frantz Fanon that can still be considered relevant to our contemporary understanding of the colonial experience? Criticism to Fanon’s view of violence as having a therapeutical value is widespread and well known. His assertion that “violence is a cleansing force... [that] rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, and restores their self-confidence” (Fanon 2004 [1961]: 51) is often seen as being at odds with contemporary sensibilities. More recently, the debate has centered on the tensions, contained in Fanon’s writings, between a

“nativist” (nationalist, anti-colonial) and a “humanist” (transnational) representation of identity.

The root of the tensions, as most scholars immersed in the debate (which includes, among others, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Stuart Hall, Benita Parry, Gayatri Spivak, Louis Gates, Jr., and Alejandro De Oto) openly accept, result from Fanon’s “dialectical” or “ambivalent” mode of writing, and the multiple “contradictory” and “incommensurable” statements that are found in such writings. Gates, for example, goes as far as to label

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Fanon a “Rorschach bolt with legs,” meaning that everything he wrote was written in such a way that its meaning was left “wide open to interpretation” (Gates 1999: 252). In similar manner, De Oto points out that the problem with Fanon is that his writings are “inhabited by a paradoxical situation” insofar as they “rest in a tension between statements that seem to be mutually excluding, or at least opposed, to each other,” and where some statements work to “leave in uncertainty what seemed to have been established two lines earlier” (De Oto 2003: 116, 163, 131). Fanon’s writings, De Oto continues, are crossed by

A kind of rhetorical pact that moves between two distant points, from the acceptance of a strong voice... as found in his extreme arguments in favor of negritude... [i.e., what we have called the nativist dimension] to the universal images contained in his discourse on mankind [i.e., what we have called the humanist dimension], which in order to be sustained requires that all other conditions be practically erased. (De Oto 2003: 162)

Some, like Homi Bhabha, have strongly criticized Fanon’s pro-nativist statements for embracing a fixed, monolithic, and essentialist notion of black identity which, in his view, is “dangerously outdated” (Bhabha 2004: x). The core of Bhabha’s argument is that such discourse about a pristine black essence is nothing other than a “reverse discourse” (i.e., an inverted version of the white’s man discourse, which rests ultimately on the “dream of the inversion of roles” that forms the essence of the black man’s desires) which, in the last instance, must be rejected “on the grounds,” as Parry has put it, “that a simple inversion perpetuates the colonizer/colonized opposition within the terms defined by colonial discourse, remaining complicit

with its assumptions... and failing to contest the conventions of that system of knowledge it supposedly challenges” (1999: 215).

Despite this critique, Bhabha argues that it is still relevant to read Fanon, and bases this assertion on the fact that Fanon showed great ambivalence towards the pro-nativist positions he himself often assumed. It is, Bhabha says, “as if Fanon is fearful of his most radical insight: ...that the politics of race will not be entirely contained within the humanist myth of man” (1999: 190-191). Fanon’s “most radical insight,” then, was that nativism was, in the end, a useless mechanism for true liberation; and this insight was expressed, more clearly than anywhere else, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, when Fanon wrote: “The Negro is not. Any more than the white man is” (1967 [1952]: 231). In reference to this passage, Bhabha says:

The immense, intrusive power with which the awe-full silence of the negative, “The Negro is NOT!”—brutally, ungrammatically, peremptorily endstopped by the caesura, dismembers the dream of a political imaginary based either on revolutionary victimage or nationalistic narcissism. (Bhabha 1996: 196)

In direct opposition to Bhabha, Gates argues against any interpretation of Fanon as a non-nativist, or trans-nationalist thinker. It may still be relevant to read Fanon today, says Gates, but “with an acknowledgement of his own historical particularity, as an actor whose own search for self-transcendence scarcely exempts him from the heterogeneous and conflictual structures that we have taken to be characteristic of colonial discourse,” which “means not to elevate him above his localities of discourse as a transcultural, transhistorical global theorist” (Gates 1999: 266).

And yet others, like Parry and De Oto, interpret Fanon's apparently contradictory or ambivalent statements as no contradiction or ambivalence at all, but instead as part of a pragmatic political strategy. De Oto calls it, following Spivak, "strategic essentialism:" that is, a strategic move that "implies the conscious adoption of an essentialist mode of enunciation in order to precisely reveal the non-essentialist character of the histories of difference" (De Oto 2003: 92). And, in similar manner, Parry states: "The incommensurable enunciations in *Black Skin, White Masks* produce a dissonance that is something other than ambivalence, for the adoption of heuristic procedures in order to establish negritude as a pathology involves the speaking subject voicing opposing stances with an equally passionate intensity" (1999: 237-238).

Now, one key issue to consider when positioning oneself in this debate, as Stuart Hall has argued, is to understand that it is not a debate about "what Fanon really meant" to say. Regarding this issue, Hall says:

We should be clear that what is entailed here is not a matter of restoring the "true meaning" of the text or fixing it once and for all in that fantasmagorical territory known as "what Fanon really meant." (Hall 1996: 25)

Instead, the debate is, as De Oto has put it, about how to read Fanon against the "political and moral urgencies of our time" (2003: 141). The question then arises: To what extent the political and moral urgencies of Fanon's time are different from the political and moral urgencies of our own time? Parry, in a statement that touches directly on this issue (and after acknowledging that Fanon's last writings evidence an endorsement of a transnational humanist identity), asserts:

What is less certain is whether the time for transnational politics had come when Fanon was writing, *whether it has now, and whether the prospect of his post-nativist "whole man" is one that wholly delights.* (Parry 1999: 244; emphasis mine)

This set of uncertainties put forth by Parry is, in our view, central not only to our understanding of Fanon, but also to our assessment of contemporary critiques of nativism. They are central to our understanding of Fanon because the ambivalence which surround his writings are symptomatic of the predicament in which he found himself: that is, a predicament over whether it was practical, correct or useful to promote a humanist identity in a time when anti-colonial struggles were being fought out under the banner of nativist/nationalist ideologies. Moreover, the set of uncertainties put forth by Parry are central to our assessment of contemporary critiques of nativism because no one is ready to declare with absolute certainty that the continued adherence to nativistic identities, despite all the problems that that may entail at a theoretical level, may no longer play a crucial role in contemporary struggles for justice and freedom, at a practical level.

Thus, the argument I would like to advance here is that perhaps (and only perhaps) it is still useful to read Fanon, but not as Hall suggests, independent of what he really meant to say—and not, as De Oto suggests, against the moral urgencies of our own moral imperatives—but instead, to attempt to recover what he did mean to say about the urgencies of his own times, because those urgencies, as Parry implies, are still very much part of our own urgencies today. In saying this, I am not suggesting that the contexts in which the struggles are played out are the same, but rather that the aim of the struggles remain the same: they are still anti-colonial struggles. The

major difference between the moral imperatives of Fanon's times and the moral imperatives of our own is that things indeed have changed, but it is that kind of change of which one is tempted to say: "things have changed in order to remain the same."

THE NATURE OF OUR POSTCOLONIAL CONDITION

Can one legitimately call our contemporary world "postcolonial"? According to Homi Bhabha, and to Gayatri Spivak, one cannot; and their positions on this issue are key to understanding the relevance they attribute to Fanon today. Bhabha, for example, asserts that that which we call "Postcoloniality" today is nothing other than a "a salutary reminder of the persistent 'neo-colonial' relations within the 'new' world order and the multinational division of labor" (Bhabha 1994: 9). Elsewhere, Bhabha explains this position:

There is an immediate argument to be made that suggests that the economic "solutions" to inequality and poverty subscribed to by the IMF and the World Bank, for instance, have "the feeling of the colonial ruler"... what is purportedly the granting of loans turns, at times, into the peremptory enforcement of policy... The landscape of opportunity and "choice" has certainly widen in scope, but the colonial shadow falls across the successes of globalization. (Bhabha 2004: xii)

Spivak (1990) agrees with Bhabha, but goes further than him in proposing that the colonized (in her language, the "subaltern")¹ has lost the ability to discursively challenge his/her colonial/subaltern condition. Thus, when she claims that "the

subaltern cannot speak," what she means to say is that our colonial condition does not allow us to speak, even though we are able to articulate a challenge to the colonial situation. And we cannot speak because speaking, in the true meaning of the word, requires both a speaker and a listener. Thus, as Spivak claims (in relation to female agency), "even when she [the subaltern] makes an attempt to death to speak, she is unable to make herself be listened to, and speaking and listening complete the act of taking" (cited in De Oto 2003: 201).

As can be expected, Spivak has been criticized for not being able to listen to the natives' voice or, what is the same, for her inability to account, under the theoretical framework which she works, for her own discursive practices. That is, if the subaltern, or anyone who wishes to speak on their behalf, cannot speak, how come she can? It is the same criticism that James Baldwin once made against Fanon (see Parry 1999: 240). In any case, Spivak has responded by stating not only that she herself is a native and a subaltern, but also that even while she can talk, she simply "talk[s] like Defoe's Friday, only much better" (cited in Gates 1999: 261). For Spivak, then, Friday, the character in Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe*, emblematically represents the condition of the subaltern in the so-called postcolonial world. As for their similarities, De Oto explains:

Robinson... creates Friday as a replica of himself. He repeats the words of his master to the point where the voice that Robinson lis-

¹ Behind the switch from the term "colonized" to that of "subaltern" lies, among other things, the implication that in the postcolonial world the relation colonizer/colonized cannot be perfectly equated with the relation Western/non-Western. Thus, the term "subaltern" is broader, and attempts to include those peoples of Western origins who are also victims of the new neo-colonial relations of power, and who also "cannot speak."

tens to is his own voice. From this perspective... Friday does not exist. More than a presence, with his own ontology as Fanon would have said, he is a representation of the imagination of the master. Friday will always be incomplete, partial and insubstantial... in the end, nothing but an image. (De Oto 2003: 158)

Now, despite the similarities between Bhabha and Spivak on their assessment of our postcolonial condition, they seem to disagree when it comes to their evaluation of nativism. Spivak's position on this issue, as I have previously explained, is that nativisms and essentialisms can be used "not as descriptions of how things are" (1990: 50-51), but rather as instruments that can play a strategic role in opposing something—in Fanon's case, as instruments to oppose colonial discourses.

Bhabha's position, on the contrary, is that nativisms and essentialisms must be rejected altogether. Arguing against Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined communities" (but also against the liberal multiculturalist ideal of human community), Bhabha attempts to bring to the forefront what he considers to be "overwhelming evidence [of the existence] of a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities"—evidence which indicates, in his view, that the time has come for "a radical revision of the concept of human community" (1994: 7, 8). It is perhaps useful, at this point, to reproduce one of the most unequivocal conclusions reached by Anderson in his 1983 work, *Imagined Communities*:

The reality is quite plain: the "end of the era of nationalism," so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time. (Anderson 1991 [1983]: 3)

Against this idea, Bhabha responds one decade later (in 1994):

The currency of critical comparativism, or aesthetic judgment, is no longer the sovereignty of the national culture conceived as Benedict Anderson proposes, as an "imagined community" rooted in a "homogeneous empty time" of modernity and progress. (Bhabha 1994: 8)

Now, it is the reflections of Spivak regarding the possible strategic role of nativism, and not Bhabha's rejection of it, that immediately reminds, almost inevitably, back to Fanon; for it was Fanon who taught us, through his ambivalence, that perhaps the time of anti-colonial struggles was not a good time to discard nativism altogether. Is it possible to assume that the relevance that Fanon has today, when one reads him against the political and moral urgencies of our time, is perhaps (and only perhaps) that our time is not a good time either for discarding nativism altogether, once and for all?

I agree with Bhabha that nativism, as reverse discourse, is nothing other than "mimicry," a "parody" and a "distortion" of colonial discourse—"an authorized version of otherness." Moreover, I agree with Bhabha's views regarding our own postcolonial condition: that is, that the definition of many contemporary Third World societies as postcolonial is equivocal and misleading, and does a poor job in describing the current situation of these societies. These societies are not, in any meaningful sense of the word, postcolonial. Where I do not fully agree with him is in his assertion that the time for "a radical revision of the concept of human community" (1994: 8) has arrived; and I don't fully agree with him on this issue precisely because (as he himself acknowledges) the anti-colonial struggle has not yet vanished.

At this point, and in order to further clarify what I mean to say, I would like to show an empirical case, as a form of example, in which a powerful colonial discourse is produced and the subaltern is not able to contest it. The case in point is a study of the economy of the island of Puerto Rico carried out by The Brooking Institution (Washington, DC) and the Center for the New Economy (San Juan, Puerto Rico).

COLONIAL DISCOURSES AND THE ECONOMY OF PUERTO RICO

In a 2006 study on the economy of Puerto Rico conducted by The Brooking Institution and the Center for the New Economy (BI/CNE), the conclusion was reached that, among the many things that characterize the economy of the island, some come out as overwhelmingly unusual: namely, the lack of a work ethics among Puerto Rican men and women, but particularly Puerto Rican men. María Enchautegei, a collaborator in the study, stated that “[i]t is men’s labor force participation rate [i.e., the proportion of people of working age in the overall population who are employed] that sets Puerto Rico apart from other countries... The overall employment rate of Puerto Rico is about 36 percent. That... is well below that of Latin America and Caribbean countries and *possibly the lowest in the world*” (see BI/CNE 2006: n.p.; emphasis mine).² Thus, the problem holds especially true for men, but as Steve Davis, another collaborator in the study, argues, “[i]t holds for men and women... and [i]t holds across every educational category” (see BI/CNE 2006: n.p.) and, in fact, it holds across any other sub-group distinctions one wishes to look at. The pattern, the report adds, is also evident at a family level, and it is “not a short-term problem... [because] 65 percent of Puerto Rican men out of the labor force have had no work experience for the last

five years in comparison to 32 percent of U.S. [sic] men” (see BI/CNE 2006: n.p.).

The findings of the BI/CNE report are also consistent with the findings of *The Economist*—that is, the London-based publication of neoliberal inclinations—which published an article on the economy of the island in their May 27, 2006, issue. In the article, the activities taking place at the town center of Aguadilla (a small town in the north-western coast of Puerto Rico) provide a glimpse of the problematic aspects of the economy of Puerto Rico: “there are no busy people... The shops and offices are shabby, with little going on in them... A few men sit in the shade [of a tree], and have apparently been planted there as long as the tree has” (2006: 25). As is the case in the BI/CNE report, *The Economist* article concluded that “[m]uch of the island is like Aguadilla’s town center, full of low incomes and idle hands” (2006: 25). So, the question arises: “What do Puerto Rico’s men do all day?” The answer: “Some get into trouble. But many others hang out in pleasant places that require little money,

² All the quotations from the BI/CNE report contained in this work come, not from the final publication of the report (see Collins, S. *et al* 2006), but instead from a document entitled “Proceedings from The Brooking Institution panel on *The Economy of Puerto Rico: Restoring Growth*,” that is, a transcription of a panel that took place on May 25, 2006, at The Brooking Institution, and that served as the presentation of the final report, even when the final report was not yet available. (The document is available at <http://www.brookings.edu/comm/events/20060525.htm>.) The reason for this is: (a) because at the initial stages of writing this essay, the final report was not yet available to the public, while the “proceedings” were; and (b) because it was my impression, after reading the final report, that the colloquial language used in the “proceedings” reflect in a more crudely and straightforward manner the downfalls of the study that I wish to point out. When making reference to the “proceedings,” and in order to distinguish such document from the final report, I have placed as author of the “proceedings” The Brooking Institution and The Center for New Economy (BI/CNE), instead of the editors of the final report.

such as beaches, shopping malls and the armchairs in Borders bookstore. They also watch plenty of television" (*The Economist* 2006: 26).

The key question, actually put forth by Barry Bosworth, one of the editors of the BI/CNE report, is: "Is low employment... in Puerto Rico because there are no jobs?... Or, is it low... because people don't want to work, to put it crudely?" (see BI/CNE 2006: 12). The answer, they claim, is a combination of both, but it results evident that it is in great measure because of the latter. The problem, thus, is more related to the cultural and behavioral practices of the islanders, than arising from structural conditions of the labor market on the supply side.

As for the causes of the phenomenon, both the BI/CNE report and *The Economist* agrees, they can be reduced to mainly two: an unrealistically high minimum wage, and an oversized welfare state. The report, thus, finally recommends the elimination of both rights or benefits.

When one reads the BI/CNE report, one's first reaction is a feeling of *déjà vu*, as if one had read this somewhere else before. In fact, the absence of laboriousness or industry, of a work ethics, among Puerto Ricans has been an argument that has been repeated since the early Spanish colonial period. It was pointed out by the French botanist Ledrú when he visited the island in the XVIII century, a fact which he attributed to the hot climate of the tropics. This dullness or *taedium vita* so characteristic of the *tristes tropiques*, as Edgardo Rodríguez Julia points out, has also been a preferential subject in the works of "the greatest writers and artists of the Caribbean" (Rodríguez Julia 2000: 3). It is, Rodríguez Julia tells us, central to the social critique made by the revered XIX Century Puerto Rican painter, Francisco Oller, in his 1893 painting "The Wake" (*El Velorio*). In the painting, members of all the ethnic and racial groups that compose Puerto Rican society—the

white Spaniards (*peninsulares*), the black Africans, and the half-Indian-half-white Jibaros—are packed inside a *bohío* (i.e., Jibaro hut) immersed in a festivity of unruly ingestion of alcohols and foods, while the land that can be seen through the windows of the *bohío* remains uncultivated and unproductive. The fact that the festivity is being held over the death of a newborn baby, a festivity known as *baquiné*, only adds, in Oller's view, to the perverse ethical *milieu* of Puerto Rican society.

This absence of predisposition towards industry was also present in Luis Palés Matos's so-called "black" poetry, in this case associated with African or Afro-Caribbean culture. His description of a town supposedly representative of the island, in his 1937 poem "Black Town" (*Pueblo Negro*), is of a town characterized by "[l]aziness and laxness." (Palés Matos 2000: 47)—in a manner that reminds one of *The Economist's* description of the Puerto Rican town of Aguadilla, where there was "little going on."

Moreover, in Antonio Pedreira's canonical 1934 essay *Insularism* (*Insularismo*), this "quenching of the will" (*apagamiento de la voluntad*) so characteristic of Puerto Ricans is attributed to the "effects of geography and climate" (*colaboración ejercida de la geografía y el clima*) (Pedreiras 2004 [1934]: 38). In a passage that is worth quoting, Pedreira states:

The hot climate melts our will and causes a rapid deterioration of our psychology... From its weakening effects comes that national characteristic that we call *aplatanamiento*.³ To be *aplatanado*, in our country, means to suffer from a special kind of inhibition, a mental drowsiness,

³ The word "aplatanamiento" comes from the word "plantain" (*palatano*). The word, turned into an adjective, is used by Puerto Ricans to describe, metaphorically, someone lazy.

a lack of entrepreneurship... It is to acclimatize oneself to the tropical effeminacy... The *musa paradisiaca*, the scientific and ineffable name of the plantain, is a rhetoric symbol of our vegetative spirit. (Pedreira 2004 [1934]: 39)

And further on, in a passage which extrapolates the pathological condition to all the ethnic/racial groups that compose Puerto Rican society, Pedreira tells us:

The Indian invested the least effort possible into earning his living, requesting at the same time very little from life. Accustomed in his nakedness to easy daily chores, he was unable to survive the hard impositions of labor [under colonial rule]. The black, subdued by the whip, was only able to satisfy his most basic needs with forced and Christian conformity. The white would rock his indifference during the common mid-day *siesta*, turning it more gratifying and rhythmic under the swinging movement of the hammock, which he inherited from the Indian. The prodigious nature and the fertile soil would provide with generosity and daintiness for all their subsistence needs... But when the exigencies and demands of the colonial system began to violently impinge upon the productive capabilities of the country, our history was confronted with a swarm of problems that we have been dragging as a heavy burden up until the contemporary epoch. (Pedreira 2004 [1934]: 38)

In René Marqués's also canonical 1960 essay "The Docile Puerto Rican" (*El puerriqueño docil*)—which is, in fact, partly inspired by Pedreira's essay—the subject

comes again to the forefront. In this essay, Marqués attempts to outline the key defining characteristics of the psychology of Puerto Ricans, and ends up, like Pedreira, describing such subjects as *aplatanaos* and a *ñangotaos*,⁴ two defining terms which help to explain, among other things, their "lack of professional initiative" (*falta de iniciativa profesional*) (Marqués 1993 [1960]: 189). It is no coincidence that Marqués begins his essay with a quotation from C. Wright Mills which reads: "One of the most important tasks of the social disciplines today is to explain the economic and political situation [of a group of people] in relation to its meaning for the inner life [of those peoples]" (in Marqués 1993 [1960]: 153).

Finally (not because one is unable to find more examples, but because enough examples have been cited to make the point), it is also this characteristic of islanders which allows Puerto Rican historian Fernando Picó to explain why the white Jíbaros from the Puerto Rican town of Utuado were unable to derive much economic benefit from the plantation of coffee during the coffee boom of the second half of the nineteenth century, despite the high market prices that this product achieved during that period. Picó collects evidence that shows that the lands in Jíbaros's hands during the precoffee boom period were not being cultivated, other than for subsistence needs. Moreover, Picó asserts, the Jíbaros did not benefit from the coffee boom because of their "traditional attitudes to land." For the Jíbaros the land served to provide food under a subsistence economy, and beyond that, mainly to be "gambled off at cockfights, exchanged, parceled off to illegitimate children, sold off

⁴ The word *aplatanao*, as already stated, comes from the word plantain (*platanó*) and, as Pedreira stated, has been used as a metaphor for laziness. The word *angotao*, on the other hand, literally translates to "being on one's knees," and is intended to point to the lack of initiative and docility of Puerto Ricans.

in plots to the stranger who came begging for a piece in which to build a bohío... [etc.]” (Picó 1995: 106).

Adding to the *déjà vu* feeling that provokes the BI/CNE report, one is also struck to learn that the problem is not an exclusively Puerto Rican problem, and that, in fact, seems to be endemic to XXI Century Western capitalism. Uchitelle and Leonhardt (2006), for example, have documented the occurrence of a “significant cultural shift” in the labor forces of Western industrial societies, evidence by the increasing numbers of what they call “missing men.” In the U.S., for example, about thirteen percent of men between 30 and 55 are not working, up from five percent in the late 1960s. The difference represents four million men (Uchitelle and Leonhardt 2006: A1). As for the primary sources of income of these missing men, one is again struck to learn that they are the same that the BI/CNE report for Puerto Ricans: “more than 6.5 million men and women [are] now receiving monthly disability payments, up from three million in 1990. About 25 percent [the same percentage than in Puerto Rico!] of the missing men are collecting this insurance” (Uchitelle and Leonhardt 2006: A14). Finally, regarding the evidence of such phenomenon in other capitalist countries, Uchitelle and Leonhardt add:

The same trend is evident in other industrialized countries. In the European Union, 14 percent of men between 25 and 54 were not working last year, up from 7 percent in 1975... Over the same period in Japan, the proportion of such men rose to 8 percent from 4 percent. (Uchitelle and Leonhardt 2006: A14)

Both the BI/CNE report and the article from *The Economist* have been labeled “colonial” (see, for example, Fernós 2006:

91)—in my view rightly so. By labeling them colonial, I do not wish to claim that they are untrue. (To be sure, there is one major difference between the claims made by the BI/CNE and by *The Economist*, on one side, and the claims made by Puerto Rican canonical artists and writers, on the other: that while the latter based their claims on reflexive speculation, the former base theirs in official statistics.) Instead, I claim it is colonial because it conveniently forgets that the phenomenon of “missing men” is increasingly becoming the problem of metropolitan capitalism, and not an exclusively Puerto Rican phenomenon. Moreover, it is colonial because it assumes as a pre-given that there is only one ethical system that all subjects must adhere to, that is, the work ethics of protestant capitalism. While the BI/CNE reports acknowledges that the roots of the “problem” (if one still wishes to call it that) are partly “cultural” (i.e., the absence of a work ethics among Puerto Ricans), and partly “structural” (i.e., the absence of job opportunities), the recommendations they provide are solely structural: take away the federal minimum wage and the transfer payments from social security, and Puerto Ricans will have no choice but to work. If there are people who wish to live, to use Bhabha’s characterization, “otherwise than modernity” (1994: 26), they just should not be allowed to have that choice.

In challenging the BI/CNS report, as Spivak would put it, “the subaltern cannot speak” because colonial violence, in the form of “epistemic violence,” has already established that native modes of knowledge should be located “low down in the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (1994: 76). Any form of alternative mode of knowledge, or of living, the subaltern wishes to propose will simply fall outside the “ruling” logic of neoliberal capitalism—the ruling logic being that, at the stage we are at, any proposition of an economic project that does not

take into account the “inevitable” fact that the global economy is a neoliberal, capitalist economy, will simply fall into the category of the “unthinkable” and the “absurd.” Under this ruling logic, then, our ability to think alternative options has come to an almost definite closure—economist Francis Fukuyama (1992) calls it “the end of history”—from which there is no turning back. Fukuyama, in my view, was right—at least in relation to the arena of discursive practices. In this arena history has indeed come to an end, and the epistemic closure has been effected. That is why I agree with Spivak’s assertion that the subaltern cannot speak. But one still has to deal with the fact that beyond the discursive arena history seems to continue its course, because the “colonized” and the “subaltern” seem to not be willing to give in so easily, or to be fighting the ruling logic by not joining the labor force. One could try, as the BI/CNE report recommends, to “domesticate” these subjects who resist: take away the minimum wage and the transfer payments from social security, the BI/CNE report recommends, and they will have no other choice but to work. But doing that is, after all, returning to the old colonial recipe.

In saying all this, I do not wish to claim (or at least not necessarily) that living one’s life not in accordance with the capitalist work ethics is “the right thing to do.” What I do mean to say is that the possibility of an alternative ethical system, different from the one prescribed by the BI/CNE report, does exist, and that if somebody wishes to lead his life in accordance with that alternative ethical system, he/she should be allowed to do so. But there is an additional problem, for choosing to live one’s life as one wishes is not necessarily an option for many of these men and women. When Bhabha claims that there are people who live “otherwise than modernity,” he further clarifies: “but not outside of it” (1994: 26)—that is, “not outside” the webs of power

that decide, or at least attempt to decide, how men and women ought to (and must) live their lives. “The landscape of opportunity and ‘choice’ has certainly widen in scope,” as Bhabha asserts, “but the colonial shadow falls across the successes of globalization” (Bhabha 2004: xii). So, when I claim that the discourse of the BI/CNE is colonial, what I mean to say is that it is complicit, willingly or unwillingly, in the attempt to impose a system under which you cannot freely choose to live “otherwise.” And this is something that can be labeled, from any perspective you wish to adopt, colonial.

The BI/CNE report can be labeled as colonial because it positions itself as speaking for rationality and civilization, much in the same manner as the justification used by the British in colonial India to prohibit the native practice of widow sacrifice by immolation (in 1829), and which Spivak summarizes as saying: this is about “White men saving brown women from brown men” (1994: 92). In the same manner, the BI/CNE can be summarized as saying: this is about “White economists saving Puerto Rican economy from Puerto Rican men.”

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Confronted with the persistence of colonialism, and with the fact that “the subaltern cannot speak,” can we not feel ambivalent towards nativist narratives of identity? Simplistically adhering to essentialist, nativist/nationalist discourses entails its problems, to be sure. Fanon seems to have been quite aware of these problems, and on occasions even expressed them openly. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, for example, he says:

A bourgeoisie that has only nationalism to feed the people fails in its mission and *inevitably gets tangled up in a series of trials and tribulations.*

If nationalism is not explained, enriched, and deepened, if it does not very quickly turn into a social and political consciousness, into humanism, then it leads to a dead end. (2004 [1961]: 143-144)

What is interesting about Fanon (what, in our view, makes him relevant today) is that, being aware of these problems, of these “trials and tribulations,” he neither embraced nativism altogether, nor discarded it altogether. He simply remained ambivalent (a position which, by the way, puts him at odds with the widely-accepted contemporary critique of nativism). And he remained ambivalent because, as Stuart Hall has pointed out, in my view correctly, he was not sure whether the time was right for humanist identities of the Sartrean-type. “He’s [Fanon is] arguing with Sartre,” Hall claims, “about whether that notion of an empty international humanism is viable any longer when forms of [anti-colonial] political struggle consistently take the national form” (Hall 1996: 42).

Thus, the key question we should be asking ourselves today, while reading Fanon, is: Are we there yet? That is: Is that “empty international humanism” viable now? Or is it the case that nativistic/nationalist ideologies can still provide a point of reference from which it is possible to build homogeneous identities that can serve to oppose colonialism? That is, can nativist/essentialist narratives still be used “not as descriptions of how things are,” but instead, as Spivak, Parry and De Oto argue, as “instrumental” and “strategic” discourses? To this set of questions, I am not ready to answer “yes.” But I am not ready to answer “no,” either. So I simply follow the teachings of Fanon: to remain ambivalent. And I remain ambivalent for the same reasons that I believe Fanon remained ambivalent, that is, because nativist discourses, even as *mimicry*, even as

imitation, can “adopt a form that resembles more a threat than a copy” (De Oto 2003: 159). And this is true even in the extreme case of Dafoe’s Friday.

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