

Politics of the Voice

(Note on Fanon's Decolonization of Clinics)

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Abstract¹:

It has become indispensable to refer to the work of Franz Fanon when analysing both the colonial making of bodies and, in turn, those material and discursive operations that combine together the racialisation, sexualisation, and pathologisation of such colonised bodies. This entails, too, reflecting upon an issue which Fanon placed at the heart of the militant praxis: that is, the transformation of the forms of corporeality central to the position of a decolonial subject. This article reexamines this topic in the light of a Fanonian text, which introduces an additional element that complicates the dialectical approach which generally governs, both in Fanon's work and in that of his critics, the narrative function that is accorded to the body in analysing the processes of liberation.

In *This is the Voice of Algeria* (1959), Fanon draws attention to the fact that colonised bodies are more than just racialised bodies subjected to extreme colonial violence and then projected as a paroxysmal location where the reversal of a counter-violence against oppression occurs. They are also *speaking* bodies, and Fanon attempts to describe how they claim ownership of what Jacques Lacan called their *parlêtre* dimension. We need them to describe their specific materiality of such a dimension and the constraints of the circumstances which allow (or act as obstacles to) the incorporation of the voice in a subject of political enunciation. I will draw on Franz Fanon's studies of how the radio was used in the Algerian liberation struggle, in which, as a part of undertaking his analysis, Fanon was forced to address the "metapolitical" issue of the incorporation of the object *voice* in the problematic emergence of a political subjectivation in which instinctual and technical dimensions are inextricably linked.

Keywords: Fanon, voice, Lacanian *object a*, decolonization, subjectivation, political psychoanalysis

The French linguist Jean-Claude Milner proposes in a recent book that politics exists wherever there are *parlêtres*, i.e., speaking bodies, silenced rather than eliminated (Milner 2016). Such a sharply axiomatic formulation immediately appears extreme and come to a decision in an undecidable situation. For silence is never certain: how can one be sure that there are no inaudible murmurs, or that those who remain silent do not continue to enjoy the words that they keep to themselves? Indeed, it is extremely difficult to silence speaking bodies except, precisely, by exterminating them. Even so, clinics of melancholia and the political consequences of "*malemort*"

(hideous death) clearly reveal that, rather than eliminating their voices, the extermination of bodies exposes those who survive to the relentless return of bodyless voices. To avoid these two extremes — maintaining the exercise of power at a distance from its thanatological horizon, and keeping the voices at a distance from their spectral return — numerous procedures may dissociate bodies and voices. In this way, *Voiceless bodies* are thus produced. This may occur, for instance, when these bodies annoyingly invade the public space and are perceived as growls rather than as voices, or when these voices can only be heard “off-stage”, by a paranoid ear that only hears the “manipulation” of the assembled bodies by a “foreign party.” *Bodiless voices* are also produced through reported discourse that gives a voice *in absentia* to all sorts of common names (the people, the masses, the population, the French, the English etc.). Equally, they are also produced through the art of ventriloquism, which excels the media’s pairing of a political space reduced to the reproduction of statements of opinion, cut off from the actual conditions of an utterance.

Politics thus needs more than speaking bodies exposed to both suffering and the enjoyment of the effects of their speech. There is politics when there is such an interval between body and voice, and when this gap becomes problematic for the capacity to speak or to have a body. In this sense, politics involves neither the management of mute bodies that work, consume and circulate, nor the administration of opinions or statements abstracted from those subjects who speak up; meaning those who expose in their speech — by showing and thus putting at risk — their bodies. Politics is a space of conflict in which the very disparity between the body and the voice is put back into play, and where this disparity is both challenged and displaced.

Undoubtedly, these propositions are too broad to lead to any unified formulation of the problem of *political enunciation*. They nevertheless provide a space in which to analyse the political production and staging of discourses. This can be done, however, neither simply from the perspective of their ideological “content” nor from that of “generalised rhetoric” (as in the model developed by Ernesto Laclau), but must be done from the perspective of how such productions and stagings use and treat the object *voice* and the material operations that “machinate” voices onto bodies, amplify them, or, on the contrary, disconnect them so as to produce disembodied voices or voiceless bodies. My main objective is to identify the political and subjective ambivalences of these operations. I believe that this can best be achieved by analysing individual cases rather than by attempting to fix in place a general formulation. To this end, I will analyse here just one singular voice, and describe its specific materiality and the constraints of the circumstances which allow (or act as obstacles to) the incorporation of the voice in a subject of political enunciation. I will draw on Franz Fanon’s studies of how the radio was used in the Algerian liberation struggle, in which, as a part of undertaking his analysis, Fanon was forced to address the “metapolitical” issue of the incorporation of the object *voice* in the problematic emergence of a political subjectivation in which instinctual and technical dimensions are inextricably linked.

It has become indispensable to refer to the work of Franz Fanon when analysing both the colonial making of bodies and, in turn, those material and discursive operations that combine

together the racialisation, sexualisation and pathologisation of such colonised bodies. This entails, too, reflecting upon an issue which Fanon placed at the heart of the militant praxis: that is, the transformation of the forms of corporeality central to the position of a decolonial subject. The text to which I shall refer introduces an additional element which complicates the dialectical approach which generally governs, both in Fanon's work and in that of his critics, the narrative function that is accorded to the body in analysing the processes of liberation. In "This is the Voice of Algeria", a chapter of *A Dying Colonialism* (Fanon 1959), Fanon draws attention to the fact that colonised bodies are more than racialised bodies subjected to extreme colonial violence and then projected as a paroxysmal location where the reversal of a counter-violence against oppression occurs. They are also *speaking* bodies, and Fanon attempts to describe how they claim ownership of their *parlêtre* dimension (Lacan 1975; Lacan 1979). In his writing strategy, Fanon must then anticipate this *speaking out* (*prise de parole*) that counters the colonial "taking of land" (*prise de terre*), by using a specific stylistic approach that gives a voice to these bodies on the path to emancipation.

This is also, in some respects, a central issue in the slightly later *The Wretched of the Earth*. In his famous foreword, Sartre wrote that "the Third World discovers itself and speaks to itself through his voice" (Sartre 1961, 433); but prior to that Fanon had already begun to create this voice of the colonised in the nexus of his writing, highlighting its diffraction through a complex, disparate and conflicting polyphony. Hence, the significance in the *Wretched of the Earth* of free indirect discourse which echoes the structure of thought and enunciation introduced by Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, implementing "through writing alone plural 'voices' inherent in the phenomenological movement, or achieving its objective to 'give a voice' to the very subject whose constitution and history is presented" (Balibar 2012, 215). Nothing portrays this better than the addressing of this issue in the name of the Nation, if we underscore the extent to which, in Fanon's text, the signifier "national" is inseparable from its own transformations and is expressed in neither the same form nor content. On the contrary, it is presented through a series of figures that are different on each occasion and are effective in different ways, figures of "conscience" and "being", of subjectivation and of the achievement of the march towards liberation. The progression of the figures of decolonial consciousness thus mobilises a pragmatics that indexes the master-signifier "Nation" in a way that is each time inseparable from the collective contexts which irrevocably attaches it to speech acts whose illocutionary effects have an impact on both those who produce them and those to whom they are destined. For instance, when "acculturated" intellectuals and leaders of urban political parties began to speak the language of the "Algerian nation", "independence" and the "people's sovereignty", Fanon highlights the ruse of the decolonial reason through which these signifiers, immediately reappropriated by the peasant masses, were transmuted from innocent words of honest congresses into intransigent "order words", had new content imposed upon them, and thereby ended up bearing demands uncontrollable by those who had put them forward in the first place.

In the *Wretched of the Earth*, however, it is not the object *voice* that is called into question. It is useful here to call upon the distinction between *incorporation* and *introjection* articulated by the

Budapest School of Psychoanalysis (Abraham and Torok). Indeed, the Fanonian phenomenology of decolonial conscience places itself outside its problematic incorporation or appears to have resolved it from the outset by turning towards introjection or the symbolic internalisation of the signifiers of liberation (if only in order to note its contingent appropriations and undecidable futures). An exception to this may be that, in the clinical vignettes which conclude the book, the figures portraying melancholic conditions reveal auditory hallucinations, suggesting that not all voices are internalised in the same way. Some voices penetrate the body with the traumatic violence of an unsymbolisable Real, which is also the unassimilable “remainder” that escapes the dialectic of the book as a whole, and which thus marks its radical limit.

This remainder is precisely the object of analysis that “This is the Voice of Algeria” focused on two years earlier, and which has, in this sense, a meta-theoretical meaning for Fanon’s writing itself. It is in this text that Fanon analysed for itself the problematic incorporation of *the voice* into the process of decolonial subjectivation by focusing on its excessive and complex materiality — phonic materiality and instinctual materiality that affects the enjoying body, as well as technical and techno-political materiality —, because this text focuses on the transformation in the relationship to the radio and the role of the program *The Voice of Fighting Algeria* in the mass mobilisation against the colonial regime. Several dimensions of this were interwoven into his initial observation: “In Algeria, before 1945, the radio as a technical news instrument became widely distributed in the dominant society. It then [...] became both a means of resistance in the case of isolated Europeans and a means of cultural pressure on the dominated society.” (Fanon 1959, 307) From the colonists’ perspective, Radio-Alger was a paranoid “*machine désirante*” (Deleuze-Guattari 1972) which maintained a discrete core of homogeneity against the constant threat of interbreeding, of “Arabisation” and of dissolution into the hostile and foreign indigenous milieu. “On the farms, the radio reminds the settler of the reality of colonial power and, by its very existence, dispenses safety, serenity.” (Fanon 1959, 307). The statement that Fanon puts into the mouths of the colonisers sums up the fantasy, accentuated at the oral-drive pole, whereby knowing what one eats and drinks, and in which beverages and words are mixed together, also acted as a shield to protect oneself from one’s own incorporation by the native Other: “without plonk and the radio, we should already have become Arabised.” For Algerians, the negative value of the radio is primarily expressed by “a dull absence of interest in that piece of French presence”, a passive resistance summarised in the Algerian humour as “Frenchmen speaking to Frenchmen” (Fanon 1959, 307).

It is the shift to active resistance that makes it possible to interpret and retroactively elucidate the muffled resistances that were already operating during the colonial period. It is initially the global context — “the awakening of the colonial world”, the setting up of broadcasting stations in Syria, Egypt and Lebanon, the “first skirmishes in Tunisia” in 1951-1952 — that made the Algerian people feel that it was “necessary to increase their news network” (Fanon 1959, 309). The modernist tendency of Fanon’s thought is palpable in his insistence on showing the extent to which the struggle for liberation rid the colonised conscience of its magico-religious screens and of the inertia of

traditional social structures previously exploited by colonial domination. Because of the liberation struggle, the colonised face the challenge of regaining the rationalities and technologies shaped by European modernity, while reversing their expected outcomes, or reinventing their emancipatory potentialities. Here is obviously a perfect example of the power of *rationalisation* that Fanon often assigns to struggle for national liberation as such: from the transfer of the almost magical powers that the colonised associate with the radio (much like by the European colonisers themselves, in some sort of mirrored paranoia), to the appropriation of an instrument of information and communication indispensable to the organisation of militants, to the logistical structures of resistance, and the emulation of the masses or People.

Nevertheless, the final pages of the article undermine this largely linear representation. They begin with an observation by Fanon the psychiatrist noting the frequency, before 1954, of radio voices in the formation of delusional and hallucinatory experiences. These aggressive, inquisitive, “metallic” and “insulting” voices revealed the oppressive valence of the radio perceived as the materialisation of the hostile voice of the oppressor². The psychopathological mechanism thus exhibited what the “normal” situation of the colonised hardly showed: the radio voice occupied the airwaves much as the French army occupied the territory. Its “speech is not received, deciphered, understood, but rejected” (Fanon 1959, 322); rejected, or following the Lacanian translation of *Verwerfung*, “foreclosed”. This “voice of the enemy”, impossible to inscribe “within”, can only come from “outside” in the form of external perception: i.e., through auditory hallucination. From 1956, however, rather than the pure and simple disappearance of these hallucinatory symptoms, the strengthening of the liberation movement implied the transformation of these symptoms’ phenomenology and thymic values. The radio increasingly ceased to be perceived as an anxiogenic “evil object”. Receiving stations lost their coefficient of persecutory hostility and were stripped of their “character of extraneousness”. “In hallucinatory psychoses, [...] the radio voices became protective, friendly. Insults and accusations disappeared and gave way to words of encouragement.” (Fanon 1959, 322–3) It would be erroneous to understand this as a simple observation unrelated to the political appropriation of the radio technique for the purposes of information, propaganda and the coordination of Algerian resistance. On the contrary, Fanon suggests that a hallucinatory process was at the heart of this very appropriation by examining how the French army responded to the use of radio by Algerian fighters. Since interference on the airwaves rapidly made the programs of *The Voice of Fighting Algeria* inaudible, “tracts were distributed recommending the Algerians to keep tuned in for a period of two or three hours. In the course of a single broadcast a second station, broadcasting over a different wavelength, would relay the first jammed station.” “A new form of struggle had come into being”, writes Fanon (1959, 319–20).

Three remarks should be made at this point:

First, from the moment *the Voice* is blurred, the scene of the confrontation itself shifts. (Fanon deliberately plays with the abbreviation of the radio channel *The Voice of Fighting Algeria*, which is the pure phonic event of an act of speech — “the voice” of the Revolution, of the Algerian

Nation, of the masses liberating themselves by liberating their voices etc.). It is embodied in the material situation of hand-to-hand combat in which the operator, ear glued to the post, must demonstrate its tactical sense when tracking the changing waves on which the Voice will ultimately be heard. By enabling remote communication, the radio device comes into close physical and muscular contiguity with a listener struggling with the receiver and modulating the channel to foil the enemy's interference with the airwaves and return to the frequency of *the Voice*.

Second, although rendered inaudible, *the Voice* hardly loses its effectiveness. On the contrary, given that its meaning becomes unknown and its signifier indistinct, it increasingly tends to be assimilated with the pure dynamic support of collective speech which, to be heard, has to be rebuilt by filling in the gaps, helping neighbours understand the ambiguities, collectively reflecting on the silences, doing one's best to glue back together the "fragments of sentences" captured, recounting "more and more glorious battles" in which "the collapse of the occupying power is pictured vividly. The enemy lost its density, and at the level of the consciousness of the occupied, experienced a series of essential setbacks. Thus, the *Voice of Algeria*, which for months led the life of a fugitive, which was tracked by the adversary's powerful jamming networks, and whose 'word' was often inaudible, nourished the citizen's faith in the Revolution." (Fanon 1959, 321)

Third, it is all the more important to reconsider the hallucinatory investment of the invocatory drive (*la pulsion invoquante*), even where Fanon refrains from pathologising the revolutionary process, but where his writing itself serves to draw attention to the "*impolitic dimension of the symptom*" to which this process is inevitably linked.

By its phantom-like character, the radio of the *mujahideen*, speaking in the name of Fighting Algeria, recognized as the spokesman for every Algerian, gave to the combat its maximum of reality. [...] This voice, often absent, physically inaudible, which each one felt welling up within himself, founded on an inner perception of the Nation, became materialised in an irrefutable way. Every Algerian, for his part, broadcasted and transmitted the new language. The nature of this voice recalled in more than one way that of the revolution: present in 'the atmosphere' in isolated pieces, but not objectively. (Fanon 1959, 321)

This fragmented sonic body, however inaudible, that "each one felt welling up within himself", and that stemmed from an "inner perception" of some new big Other (*grand Autre*), transformed the radio voice into a metonymic object of the Nation in person. This absent cause of the revolution is made intensively present through the spectral modality of a sizzling sound that reveals the desire to hear the resistance of a collective voice opposing its own obliteration by the occupier. Here, Fanon implicitly speaks to the question of the extent to which politics incorporates a dimension that remains irreducibly *heterogeneous* (in Bataille's sense: intractable, unassimilable, if not sacred). It is, in fact, Fanon's writing itself that stylistically highlights this impolitic dimension, at the threshold of his political analysis made on the basis of manifest significations.

All the voices picked up by the receiver now revealed to the Algerian the tenuous, very relative character, in short, the imposture of the French voice presented until now as the only one. The occupier's voice was stripped of its authority.

The nation's *Speech*, the Nation's *Word* shape the world while at the same time renewing it. (Fanon 1959, 329)

This "*Speech*", this "*Word of the nation*" (*Verbe de la nation*) — which is emphasised as much as the Johannine statement of the absolute beginning — could not signify more clearly that stripping the occupier's voice of its authority corresponds to a powerful movement of *displaced idealisation*, the political operability of which remains in suspense. I am not suggesting that Fanon resolves this problem — anyway it is doubtful that it could find a solution only on the terrain of theoretical writing. He does, however, keep the problem open by puzzling over the materiality of struggles (which requires one to formalise their contradictions and development tendencies) and the instinctual machinery of the voice (partially removed from the field of political calculation and decision). In doing so, Fanon suggests the impolitic vectors that his own narrative strategy conceals. He reveals what reinforces the political reality of his position, *and* the limits these impossible dynamics impose on his ability to code them strategically. Such dynamics are especially impossible to "control" from a political perspective and place the undecidability of the subjective processes that the political struggle must take into account within the actual discursiveness of his text.

Endnotes:

1. This lecture paper was pronounced in the Conference "*Lalangue and the Intersections of Politics, Law, and Desire*", at Birkbeck College, University of London, Tuesday 25th & Wednesday 26th April 2017. I extend my heartfelt thanks to Serene Richards and Leticia Paes for their invitation, and to Lucie Mercier and David Cunningham for revising the translation.
2. "The radio, on the normal level, already apprehended as an instrument of the occupation, as a type of violent invasion on the part of the oppressor, assumes highly alienating meanings in the field of the pathological." (Fanon 1959, 322)

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