

Frantz Fanon in South Africa and Beyond: A Critical Review of Nigel Gibson's *Fanonian Practices in South Africa*

by

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Abstract

Frantz Fanon, the Algerian theorist of revolution and social change, is dead but alive: he continues living through his profoundly luminous work that remains influential to the thinking and actions of many a people across the world even today. In *Fanonian Practices in South Africa* (2011), Nigel C. Gibson grapples with the important question of the relevance of Fanon's thought, fifty years after his death in 1961, to the South African situation especially since the time of Steve Biko to the time of the birth of the shack dwellers' movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo (Abahlali) in Durban in 2005. Though coming from a different geographical space as South Africa, and having physically lived in a particular time frame, Gibson sees the presence and relevance of Fanon's ideas to the new realities of contemporary South Africa and the South African people. That said, this paper is a critical review of Nigel Gibson's book, *Fanonian practices in South Africa – From Steve Biko to Abahlali baseMjondolo*.

Introduction

Gibson's book, *Fanonian practices in South Africa – From Steve Biko to Abahlali baseMjondolo* is divided into six major parts (introduction to chapter 5) that focus on *Fanonian practices* (or values) in post-apartheid South Africa particularly Fanon's dialectic of liberation grounded in his quest "for social transformation towards a radically humanist society" (p. x). Gibson acknowledges that the idea of *Fanonian practices* is not limited to South Africa. Elsewhere outside Africa, Fanon's ideas have been exported to Black theology of liberation by scholars such as James Cone (1970) in the USA and Paulo Freire's (1970) pedagogy of the oppressed in Latin America. On the continent, Fanon's ideas especially from *The wretched of the earth* have been influential to many struggles for independence in countries such as Uganda, Congo and Mozambique. However, the major focus of Gibson in *Fanonian practices* is the idea of Fanonian thought as it relates to the struggles in post-apartheid South Africa.

Discussion

In the preface through to the introduction of his book, Gibson shows how the figure Fanon is contested among theorists of cosmopolitanism, postcoloniality/postcolonialism and cultural studies, among others. In chapter one, to eschew these controversies, Gibson lays bare the general philosophy of Fanon's ideas as "actional and engaged rather than detached and autonomous" before he situates Fanon's ideas of transformation in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. The ideas of transformation that Gibson explores in Fanonian humanising practices as recreated especially by Steve Biko in the 1970s and recently by grassroots social movements (such as Abahlali) range from political, socio-economic and cultural issues in post-apartheid South Africa to after the official abolition of apartheid in 1994 in South Africa. To this end, Gibson rightly point out that for a sustainable transformation to occur, there is a need to consider *Fanonian practices* somehow sequentially. The starting point for *Fanonian practices* is the consciousness and acknowledgement that all humans (regardless of their skin colour) are equal and intelligent. This is what Fanon meant in his *Black skin, white masks* (1967: 222) when he says: "No to scorn of man. No to the butchery of what is most human in man; freedom". Second, there is need to emphasise praxis both as a theory of action and as a philosophy of practice – an idea which Fanon might have adopted from Karl Marx's (1859/1977) critique of civil society and political rights. With praxis, Fanon emphasises political and economic equality in accessing resources such as land or space in general. Third, praxis should be executed dialectically, that is, through dialogues and critiques within liberatory movements and with those in power. As Fanon (1968) himself warns, dialectics should not be practised in such a way that people lose a sense of critical thinking and analysis, but in a way that challenge imperialism while allowing thought and action to yield new dimensions and ideals for human freedom.

In chapter one, Gibson shifts his focus to Biko's re-creation of *Fanonian practises* in South Africa. As Gibson rightly points out, Biko's *Fanonian practices* are a direct result of the influence of Fanon's conclusion in his *The Wretched of the earth*, particularly "that the working out of new concepts comes from a dialogue with common people" (p. 43). Given that in South Africa, the apartheid regime had banned anything that promoted political radicalism especially Marxism, Fanonian ideas came to Biko and the emergent Black Consciousness South African Students Organisation (SASO) "through the writings of emergent American Black theologians, specifically those of James Cones" (p. 44). Unlike other theorists' ideas of Fanon as a philosopher of violence, Black theology emphasis on Fanon's fundamental ideas of self-consciousness, struggle and liberation, has a profound effect on Biko's thought. And as Gibson rightfully mentions, all these ideas which were rooted from Fanon's philosophy "had a direct connection to Blacks' experience in South Africa" and were reflected in Biko's phrase that "the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed". Yet, besides the idea of self-consciousness, struggle and liberation which Biko adopted from Fanon, James Cone's critique of mainstream Christianity also influenced Biko. Gibson points out that Biko, like Cone (1970) "recognised that Christianity was an effective tool for mental enslavement" (p. 45) and was therefore against Christian pacifism. This does not mean that Biko was an atheist or anti-Christian but like Black theology saw in personage of Jesus a positive "fighting God" (1978: 94) for the cause of the poor and the oppressed. What Biko really criticised was not only aimed at the Church and the exploitative and oppressive regime, but also "White liberalism" which Gibson suggests is essential to understand Biko's relevance to contemporary South Africa.

The other Fanonian practice in Biko's philosophy is that of culture. Gibson notes that while the historical contexts of Fanon and Biko were different, Biko agrees with Fanon that African cultures were "battered out of shape by settler colonialism" (p. 51) due to Western education that was internalised by Black students. Hence, such education betrayed the spirit of Black critical consciousness, national consciousness, solidarity, and above all of self-becoming. Taking from Fanon's concept of "national culture" and Biko's "authentic culture", Gibson is careful to point out that a "return to the native land" (Aimé Césaire) or "to the source" (Cabral 1974) requires a "mental liberation from all the inferiority complexes that had been produced from years of living in apartheid South Africa". This return from a repressive colonial culture was necessary for South Africa to reverse poverty and destitution which Biko believed were "not endemic to Africa but a product of colonialism and apartheid" (p. 52). Indeed Biko argued that "the concept of poverty was foreign" (Biko 1978: 43) to pre-colonial Africa. Also, for Biko, the idea of African culture would initiate a positive change as it enables people to critique and resist apartheid and capitalism which are both repressive and dehumanising. Biko, like Fanon, however, warns that the idea of African culture can be attained through strong national consciousness to avoid it "disintegrating into regionalism, tribalism and ethnic xenophobia" (p. 56).

Yet “with eyes of today,” the greatest challenge to Biko’s *Fanonian practices* remains the question of how to deal with the Black middle class and the “super rich” in post-apartheid South Africa or what Gibson calls “the pitfalls of South Africa’s liberation” (p. 71).

Chapter two takes up the issue of “the pitfalls of South Africa’s liberation”. Gibson points out the changes that have occurred in many parts of South Africa. While Gibson gives credit to the African National Congress (ANC) for ending “the crude racial laws of apartheid” and ushering in the new democratic Constitution in 1994, he blames the same government for having short-changed its people. The “exclusivity of heavily guarded colonial spaces that Fanon describes in his *Wretched* seem to have increased since ANC came to power” (p. 72). Racial classification has not been abolished with “gated communities and secure shopping and entertainment centres now being the new Manichaeian divides...that keep the poor people out” (p. 72). In fact for Gibson, “post-apartheid South Africa has created more poor people than anything else” and, thus, has failed to liberate the people in Fanonian (and also Bikoan) sense. Yet, while we agree with Gibson that most of the post-apartheid South African people have become even poorer than before, we feel that it is not justified to lay the full blame on the ruling government. This is because in post-apartheid South Africa, the White minority and a few Black elites, and not government, have remained at the helm of the country’s economy. In fact only political power and not economic power was transferred to the ruling government in 1994: the independence was not authentic/ complete in the Fanonian (and Bikoan) sense. The White minority still owns the most important resource in the country, land, and continue to control the country’s economy. As Cheryl Walker of PLAAS (2013) observes:

In 1994, as a result of colonial dispossession and apartheid, 87 % of the land was owned by whites and only 13 % by blacks. By 2012 post-apartheid land reform had transferred 7.95 million hectares into black ownership (Nkwinti 2012), which is equivalent, at best, to 7.5 % of formerly white-owned land. Whites as a social category still own most of the country’s land and redressing racial imbalances in land ownership is land reform’s most urgent priority.

Thus as can be seen, the formerly privileged White minority in post-apartheid government continue to own and control the modes of production and the most important resource in the country, land. This partly explains why the majority remained poor and even more others fell into abject poverty. Granted, this entails that Gibson’s argument on runaway poverty in post-apartheid South Africa falls short: it could have been enhanced by critiquing both the ruling government and the minority elite (former colonial masters and few Black elites) as well as the imposed International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank’s Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the 1990s that widened the rift between the poor and the rich.

Gibson does not simply out all of the blame on the ANC government but argues that 'Post-apartheid South Africa has become more fully integrated into global capitalism during a time when the world has witnessed increasing inequalities between rich and poor and between North and South'. However, he still insists on the political determinants. '[W]hile international capitalist powers and interests, including especially mining capital, were (and remain) absolutely essential to managing the transition from apartheid, pointing an accusatory finger at the IMF, USAID or the US- and UK-based multinationals obscures important determinants in the contested terrains of homegrown South African politics' (75).

In post-apartheid South Africa, when ESAP was launched in 1993, no significant improvement on the national economy and poverty levels was made. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (1998: 41), the South African rand fell from levels of R3,65:\$1 during most of 1995, to R4:\$1 in March 1996. By mid-December the currency was trading at R4,7:\$1, therefore having depreciated by 30% against the US dollar during 1996. In short, while we appreciate Gibson's analysis of poverty and pitfalls of liberation in Africa and in particular post-apartheid South Africa, we believe his case could have been even stronger if he taken further into account the points we have raised here.

Gibson's chapter three is an extension of his chapter two as it further explores the pitfalls of South Africa's liberation in terms of new struggles that continue to emerge from within the marginalised [the poor] group to confront and challenge the pitfalls and the elite group [the rich]. The chapter is in fact a critique of post-apartheid South Africa using Fanon and also Marx's humanism. For Gibson, "both Marx and Fanon pose a theoretical challenge and an ideological alternative to the existing (bourgeois and elite) transition" (p. 112) and to achieve "new humanisms" that seriously consider the plight of the poor. Basing on our experiences in South Africa, Gibson is correct in his observation that:

The measurement of how far we've come since the end of apartheid is considered in stages, focusing on constitutional changes made and the standards of middle class life in civil society. The lived experience for many in post-apartheid in South Africa is either bracketed off or also considered in stages, reducing liberation to a question of access to basic services (p. 112).

Such an observation is critical and should be greatly commented as it clearly depicts the situation in post-apartheid South Africa where life in the urban areas, for example, is a tale of two cities. In Cape Town city, for instance, there are places and buildings around the city centre that are super beautiful while in other parts of the city such as Khayelista, where the poor majority live in structures that are not only poorer than shacks but extremely hazardous to human health. For Gibson, following Fanon and Biko, such inequalities between the poor and the rich should be addressed as a matter of urgency in post-apartheid South Africa.

Gibson suggests Fanonian dialectics and not Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) as solution to this problem. Citing Moeletsi Mbeki (2009), Gibson reveals that BEE was not an ANC invention but a neo-colonial policy with roots in the Urban Foundation established by Anglo-American and Rembrandt Group after the 1976 Soweto rebellion. Neither was it really meant to benefit the poor majority but to “co-opt leaders of the black resistance movement by literally buying them off with what looked like a transfer of massive assets at no cost” (p. 117). For Gibson, this is “social treason.” Unlike BEE which is crony capitalism, Fanonian dialectics has the merit of considering the lived experience and thinking of the majority of South African people who have been excluded from a sustainable dialogue about South Africa’s future. It is through such dialectics of liberation that everyone could realise “authentic” and not imaginary freedom, and that the gap between the poor and the rich could be meaningfully negotiated. On this note, Gibson’s analysis is not only meticulous but convincing.

In chapter four as in the next, Gibson concentrate more on the “emergent grassroots movements among the poorest,” movements which also employ Fanonian thought in many ways to critique the idea of liberation and freedom in post-apartheid South Africa. In this chapter, Gibson gives the central focus to Abahlali baseMjondolo which was born on 19 March 2005 and has become “largest and most sustained grassroots movement of the poor” in post-apartheid South Africa. Gibson should be applauded for observing that the birth of the new shack dwellers’ movement, Abahlali (first under the presidency of S’bu Zikode) is “unfinished struggle for freedom” (p. 144) by the poor, particularly their right to decent housing which was part of the ANC manifesto when it won the first democratic elections in 1994. Truly speaking, the problem of housing remains a thorn in the flesh for both the rural and urban dwellers. For scholars such as Dewar (1991), Mabin (1992) and Hendler (1991), the housing problem though not peculiar to South Africa, is exacerbated by the sad history of apartheid and complex resource distribution in post-apartheid South Africa that have created even a bigger gap between the rich and the poor. Yet, unlike scholars such as Mabin, Dewar and Hendler, Gibson appears to be convinced that the present ruling government has to be fully blamed for the housing problem and other such problems that haunt contemporary poor South Africans. Gibson thus says that the contemporary poor South African has been: “forgotten in post-apartheid South Africa, they [the poor majority] live without basic services like sanitation, water or electricity, in shacks dug into the side of the hill and build out of advertising boards, corrugated iron, branches and mud” (p. 145) and “after many promises, all of them broken, they saw the empty rhetoric of the local authorities” (p. 146). These differences in opinion shows that poverty problem in post-apartheid South Africa is a complex issue. Gibson certainly notes the legacies of apartheid. For him it is not either or, but both the structural legacies and also the neoliberal present, and ANC party patronage working within that context that colours the present. This is suggested by Fanon and developed throughout the book and is a central point. It would be a mistake so see Fanonian practices as only critical of the ANC.

But whatever the case, the problem has to be confronted and amicably solved. Gibson sees grassroots movements such as Abahlali as the most appropriate way forward for “the birth of a new Mandela” (p.155) and a force that will voice the problem of poverty and inequality and help achieve true freedom in post-apartheid South Africa. He [Gibson] thus considers the May 2005 organised Durban shack dwellers march of over 3000 people which expressed their collective will with banners demanding “land, homegrown housing, jobs, sanitation, medical care, education and safety from police brutality” (p. 148), a continuity of the logical struggle for grassroots democracy and against apartheid which segregated people. For Gibson, such is an example of Fanon’s “practice of freedom” (p.157).

While in chapter four, Gibson focus on the grassroots movement, Abahlali, in his last chapter, Gibson interrogates xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa. Gibson relates the situation in apartheid South Africa with that in Algeria during Fanon’s time. He makes a point that in apartheid South Africa as in the colonised Algeria, “the expropriation of the best rural land and the pauperisation of the peasantry from the early years of the twentieth century in Algeria helped speed up rural migration and with it the growth of [shack] settlements” (p. 181) around cities. Gibson is right to observe that “shack settlements were a response to the rural crisis” and urban unemployment. We add that, in South Africa, this crisis which started with the colonial [and intensified during apartheid] regime continued into the post-apartheid era chiefly because the larger part of land [taken away from African people during colonial period] remain possessed by the White minority and few Black elite/ “black diamonds” (p. 186). The struggle in post-apartheid South Africa thus is the struggle for the right to “space and land,” including “right to the city” (Harvey 2008: 23) where there is possibility for employment and good life: it is a struggle to complete decolonisation. As Gibson points out in his analysis, “one symptom of this incompleteness is the rise of ethnic chauvinism and nativism, which is legitimised via claims of indigeneity” (p. 190) and which in turn creates politics of exclusion. It is this politics of exclusion that gave birth to the “May 2008 xenophobia, leaving over 60 people dead and thousands homeless and destitute” (p. 190) in South Africa. We append that the most affected were African people from other African countries such as Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Somalia, among others. These were targeted by the poor of South Africa who believed that non-South African nationals were taking away citizens’ jobs, among other allegations thereby betraying their struggle (see Nyamnjoh 2005; Landanu 2005; Yakushko 2009; Graf 2011). Graf (2011: 17), for example, notes that “the already existing competition amongst the less well-off for scarce resources is exacerbated by the widespread assumption amongst South Africans that foreigners are stealing their jobs, houses, and other services and resources to which they themselves feel entitled”. For Gibson, xenophobia was a re-direction of the poor South Africans’ “disappointments, frustrations and aggression towards African foreigners” (p. 191) by politicians to avoid the poor’s direct confrontation with the ruling government.

Abahlali organised against the xenophobic violence in Durban arguing that nobody was illegal and Gibson sees movements such as Abahlali's "living politics" as the lasting solution and an expression of what Fanon calls a "new humanism" (p. 213). What Abahlali calls "living politics" (p.197) is a politics with the goal to actively engage with and involve the poor and the formerly marginalised: politics that treat everyone as equal regardless of race, place of origin, academic qualification and so on.

Yet while Gibson's book is relevant par-excellent to those interested in the geopolitics or social movements in South Africa, it fails in many places to provide all the necessary evidence and data that the readers might expect. Readers, for example, could in a book such as this expect statistical figures and other related data on xenophobia, the impact of IMF policies and land distribution in post-apartheid South Africa to enliven the themes and arguments that run throughout the book. In this regard, Gibson's *Fanonian practices* in relation to South Africa could be criticized for being too theoretical, a point which the author himself acknowledges in the preface to the book (p. xix). Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Gibson's book remains a text theoretically critical to activists of social change and those in the fields of cultural studies, development studies and literary theory, among others: it is a book that is wonderfully relevant to the people of South Africa and those interested in the geopolitics of Africa and South Africa in particular.

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