Critique and Society – Whose Society?

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The question of whose society critical thought addresses is not a new one. It's a question that has troubled intellectuals right through the twentieth century, including notably Jean-Paul Sartre, known for his insistence on the necessity of political 'engagement' and of addressing the political and social concerns of the people in both intellectual and literary writing. In his 'Plea for Intellectuals', first delivered as a conference speech in Tokyo in 1965, Sartre pointed out that the intellectual was seen as 'a man *who interferes in what does not concern him*', and his dissidence originates in a universal conception of man rather than in a specific and rigorous study of a particular society.[1] He also describes the intellectual as split between his position as a member of the bourgeoisie and his endeavour to act as a spokesman for the broader population. Yet Sartre nevertheless defends the broad ambition of intellectual work by calling for a more nuanced and pliable notion of the universal. Those bourgeois thinkers who believe they can straightforwardly speak for the masses are deluded, he admits, and yet the intellectual must keep open the dialogue between loosely universal principles and the changing circumstances in which they operate: 'universality does not exist ready-made; but perpetually remains to be achieved'.[2] He must also continually turn his critique back onto himself by challenging, with a view to refining, his own efforts to apply universal principles to particular cases.

It seems that now we are more uncertain than ever about the ways in which critical thought in the humanities is able to address the diverse needs of an increasingly fragmented society. Many of the new developments of the 1980s that Stuart Hall charts in 'The Meaning of New Times' have continued to grow and have led to further splintering. Hall associates these changes with the growth of large-scale mechanised manufacturing post-Fordism, and describes their effects as 'greater social fragmentation and pluralism, the weakening of older collective solidarities and block identities and the emergence of new identities, as well as the maximisation of individual choices through personal consumption' (p. 250). He also stresses the increased rupture between those with rising aspirations in the market economy and those 'who are left behind on every significant dimension of social opportunity' (p. 250). This rupture has become only more acute recently, and is now mirrored or crystallised in the divorce between what are perceived as political and intellectual elites and those who feel that their needs are not addressed by the current system, expressing their dissatisfaction by voting, for example in the UK, for Brexit, or in the US for Donald Trump. Where does this leave 'engaged critical thought, then? How do we now negotiate the contradiction identified by Sartre

[1] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'A Plea for Intellectuals', in *Between Existentialism and Marxism* (New York: William Morrow, 1976) pp. 228-285 (p. 244).
[2] Ibid., p. 249.

between the educated elite and a population more than ever severed from and mistrustful towards that elite?

Hall's text largely emphasises the increase in the divisions he diagnoses, and stresses increased 'commodification, fragmentation, and isolation' (p. 256). Reading the text next to Arendt and Koyré, we can see how this commodification is also bound up with falsity, with the dominance of the image, with politics and culture packaged for the consumer in a society that only generates more alienation. I was also struck by the passage in Ernaux's *The Years* where she remembers the generalised support, in her intellectual milieu, for the decolonisation of Algeria in the face of the continuing War of Independence in the early 1960s, at the same time as a continued mistrust of Arabs – or of some image of the Arab that stands in for proper dialogue. She notes that people, 'had got used to the ideas of independence and legitimacy of the FLN', and yet, 'they still exhibited as much fear as ever, or at best indifference, in relation to "the Arabs"' (p. 77). This sounds like a further instance of the failed connection between intellectual principles and people's experiences of the sort that perplexed Sartre. And if Ernaux points out the continued blindness across the political spectrum to different cultures in the face of the dominant, manufactured images of them, it is difficult not to see that these misapprehensions have only hardened in the wake of the 'war on terror'. The populist movements we're seeing across Europe and the US are also related to an increasing turning inwards, a heightened fear of the cultural other, made into a spectacle, moreover, by the new opportunities offered to the media by information technologies.

There is, however, an arresting moment in 'The Meaning of New Times' where Hall suggests that these 'new times' might also provide new opportunities. These might contribute to our reflections on the place of critical thought in the society in which it is engaged. Hall first diagnoses the way in which the image has offered a 'mode of representation and fictional narrativisation of the body on which so much of modern consumption depends' (p. 259). Culture is created and channelled by the material world of technology. Yet he goes on to ask whether in vilifying the profit economy behind these representations, we haven't sufficiently understood the potential of this new democratisation of culture? The rise of new media and information technologies, while largely complicit in the process of commodification, might also be conceived to provide different sorts of cultural forum. Hall suggests that, 'modern technology, far from having a fixed path, is open to constant renegotiation and re-articulation' (p. 260). This also allows space for more diversity, 'related to the multiplication of social worlds and social 'logics' typical of modern life in the West'. So far Hall suggests that the new forums have worked in the service of more consumption, but his analysis also presages ways in which they could offer other cultural opportunities than those driven by the market.

As critical thinkers we ought to think further about these other opportunities. Bhabha also lends us food for thought on this question in his call for attention to cultural expression outside

the framework of the 'pedagogical', of national time. Bhabha's main premise in 'The Commitment to Theory' is that theoretical work should not be conceived as just an 'elite language' divorced from both politics and everyday experience; perhaps again responding obliquely to Sartre, he argues that critique and activism feed into one another. A leaflet calling for strike and a theory of ideology, he insists, are both 'forms of discourse that produce their object of reference' (p. 7). At the same time, Bhabha stresses how discourse feeds through both politics and culture, and in both cases the enunciative process introduces ambivalence, 'a split in the performative present, of cultural identification' (p. 19). Noting Fanon's objection to the opposition between intellectuals and activists, Bhabha's essay goes on to argue against determinism in theory and for a better understanding of the ways in which cultural knowledge, always processual and expanding, also structures the political. He also reads Fanon in such a way as to foreground this awareness of the ambivalence of cultural enunciation as it plays into political change, citing Fanon's injunction that, 'it is to the zone of *occult instability* where the people dwell that we must come' (p. 19). Ultimately he concludes with grand statements promoting the crucial ethical effects of paying better attention to cultural difference, an argument that could be linked with that of Hall in his call for more space for, and a better understanding of, the different forms of expression allowed by new technologies.

Bhabha has been much criticised for his celebration of textuality, of ambivalence and hybridity, conceived by materialist critics such as Benita Parry and Neil Lazarus to undermine the revolutionary politics of Fanon's writing. And it is certainly true that his attention to tensions within representation, though conceived as integral also in political discourse, can seem to elude the specific and practical goals of political activism as well as undermining the starkly opposing positions behind real conflicts. I would like to return to Bhabha's comments on Fanon in 'The Commitment to Theory', however, because they raise questions about culture and activism which remain relevant today. Bhabha stresses how for Fanon, 'the time of liberation' is also 'a time of cultural uncertainty, and most crucially, of significatory or representational undecidability', and he uses Fanon's notion of '*occult instability*' to challenge the construction of unified or totalised cultures in the expression of resistance. Yet Bhabha's analysis emphasises how representation alters the culture it creates, how this 'undermines our sense of the homogenizing effects of cultural symbols and icons' (p. 19). Bhabha's discourse speaks of the resulting disruption to that idea of culture as a unifying force, and slips quickly from Fanon to Derrida in a reference to cultural 'différance'. Yet it seems here that Bhabha himself does not succeed in bridging the potential separation between cultural analysis and politics, since his privileging of significatory activity has no anchoring in action. Although he argues forcefully that 'différance', the gap in enunciation associated with the 'Third Space', is crucial to our understanding of the functioning of political discourse, it is difficult to read Bhabha's reflections as properly connected to the mechanics of real struggle.

Fanon's own thinking might nevertheless offer a more inspirational if incomplete vision of the place of culture in the creation of a better political future. *Black Skin White Masks* ends with the intriguing pronouncement that, 'the real *leap* consists in introducing invention into existence', as if to call for an aspiration to renewal so complete it would be able to abolish the internalised racial schema.[3] And in 'On National Culture' in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon goes on to argue for the invention of a new liberated culture in Algeria arising directly from the experience of its people. The demand for independence will be directly mirrored, he insists, by this invention of new cultural forms. And since the new decolonised order is to be a *tabula rasa*, nothing less than the 'creation of new men', these new cultural forms are uncertain and unpredictable (emerging from this 'zone of occult instability'). Whilst Bhabha reads this is a sign of the ambivalence within cultural discourse, however, Fanon is in fact calling for something more directly engaged, a 'literature of combat' more directly wedded to political activism but also aesthetically unprecedented. His vision is in some respects troubling, as he binds culture to armed struggle and never really fleshes out the form of aesthetic creation he seeks. His idea of national culture certainly does not seem to be realised quite as he imagines it in the cultural artefacts he cites. Nevertheless, Fanon also privileges both spontaneity and the immersion of cultural activity in lived experience, indeed in bodily experience, in this arresting vision of 'invention'. The new culture must be the direct expression of people's lives, somehow combined with a visionary innovation, both springing from and feeding into the political demand for change: 'by imparting new meaning and dynamism to artisanship, dance, music, literature, and the oral epic, the colonized subject restructures his own perception. The world no longer seems doomed. Conditions are ripe for the inevitable confrontation.'[4]

Elsewhere Fanon cites Césaire, with some ambivalence in *Black Skin, White Masks* and with more enthusiasm in 'On Violence', where the murder of the slave master by the Rebel of *And the Dogs were Silent* is cited as both a moment of devastating destruction and a potential rebirth.[5] But on the whole he struggles to find examples of cultural production that combine invention and activism quite as he would like. To return to the question of critique and society, however, and to Hall's essay, Fanon's extraordinarily vibrant if unresolved vision of cultural invention might help us to reinvigorate our attention to new aesthetic opportunities today, even if his accompanying vision of the potentially liberating power of violence is highly questionable. If Hall suggested that our new technologies might offer new opportunities for cultural expression, we might think more as critics about how to engage with contemporary forms of spontaneous invention and incorporate them into our study of critique and society. Fanon's critical thought is, moreover, steeped in cultural references; *Black Skin White Masks* in particular is both littered with citations from writers and poets, and Fanon's own prose has extraordinary creative power. Critique can in this way not only take the form of theoretical

[3] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008) p. 179.
[4] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004) p. 176.
[5] Ibid., p. 46.

analysis but can also draw on other innovative and dynamic forms of expression as they emerge. These can include digital forms, multimedia forms, or perhaps new kinds of poetry or performance art. Fanon was in many ways unsure about the power of cultural invention in the absence of more militant combat, and the revolutionary moment in Algeria is clearly far removed from the present context. But his privileging of poetry and theatre implies that certain dynamic, performative, often spoken forms can contribute to political and social change. We might think about how this kind of dynamic invention could articulate a critique that might also challenge and stretch our own theoretical language.