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Critical voices in critical times: Fanon, race & politics - an interview with Mireille Fanon-Mendès France (part 1 of 2)

LINDA HERRERA 11 September 2017

Mireille Fanon-Mendès France, activist, scholar, and daughter of Frantz Fanon, talks about the enduring relevance of his ideas and passions in contemporary political life.



The Fanon artwork by Gaber at <http://gaberism.net/> portrait of Mireille Fanon-Mendes France by Linda Herrera.

The work and life of Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), whose incisive and visionary work on revolution, liberation, race, emancipation, and decolonization, continues to resonate in these “interesting” times. Who better to talk about the enduring relevance of Fanon’s ideas and passions in contemporary political life than his formidable daughter, Mireille Fanon-Mendès France. In addition to being an authority on Fanon, Fanon-Mendès France is a scholar of decolonialism, UN expert on people of African descent, legal advisor in a law firm in France, and human rights [activist on Palestine](#) and other places where the right to self-determination is in question. She also works on issues of land tenure in countries where people were enslaved and indigenous people annihilated after colonization. She is a member of the [Frantz Fanon Foundation](#). Her most recent article is, “[Charlottesville, un rassemblement, une question allant bien au-delà des Etats Unis.](#)”

We met in the Luxemburg Garden in Paris on June 9, 2017 for a conversation about Fanon, populism, race, migration, policing, new social movements, and education. Above all, we pondered if and how the kind of emancipatory movements that rose with such force half a century ago during the anti-colonial and civil rights movements, could have a chance in an era of policed and neoliberal globalization.

This interview and accompanying [videos](#) is in two parts.

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How is the work and writing of Frantz Fanon relevant today?

What Fanon began to do as an activist, psychiatrist, and journalist, was to find the way to free the people from alienation, colonial alienation and, in the case of Fanon, social and mental alienation. He was not alone. We have to underline, he was not the only one doing that. In the 1960s there was a movement. We can think of [Patrice] Lumumba (1925-1961), and also Steve Biko (1946-1977). But he was the only psychiatrist linking his professional practice to his activism and his thinking. We can speak of Fanon as thought in action, this is one of his unique features.

[These figures] tried to free the people of alienation, but they did not succeed [in completing] the process of liberation. What they got was the liberation of people, but not their emancipation. We have to think now about how to get the emancipation of people in order to have a free Being, non-alienated, emancipated, and non-racialized, non-stigmatized for reasons of skin color, gender, sex, class, religion, or whatever the reason. And that’s why the work introduced by Fanon is still relevant. Because in fact, his work is not done. He thought about the first steps of this process of emancipation. He was thinking about issues like women, and role of the veil among Muslim women. He was thinking about what does it mean to be a Being? The question of universality. Is there a real universality or a “colonial universality”? Is it a “decolonial” universality, or colonial? Until now, there is only colonial, not a decolonial universality. We need now to find answers to all these questions he raised.

We [have to be cognizant] that we are asking these questions from within a financialized and militarized system that took shape after World War II. This system tends to [divide humans] into "Beings," and "Non-Beings." This universality we speak of denotes a colonial perception of the world. In fact, it has become clear that the capitalist world was built on a series of lies which are being constantly repeated. They become truths through the international community and its multilateral institutions, and also by a large part of civil society.

There has been a continuous wave of uprisings and popular movements around the world since the Arab Uprisings of 2010/2011. Do you think we are in an era of emancipatory movements, or are they something else?

In most of our societies, people are ready to carry on and work for social transformation, to break the divide of Beings / Non-Beings [but they don't know the way]. The financialization of the world unfortunately even negatively impacts the way people live and think. I think now people want to see some change, but I don't think they want to have political change. They want to see change for [the sake of] change, but not for a strong project for social transformation. [That's why I think] people don't care about social transformation. I really think they only care about some small change at the political level. For example, to be able to watch someone else on the television, [different from] the formal politicians we have in France, the US, and other countries. We are no longer in a society that fundamentally values human emancipation. We are in a society of illusion, built from the past but with more cynicism.

It is in this narrowing space, in this time of decline, that populist movements emerge. It's very dangerous because these [populists] are not in favor of the people. They are in favor of a certain part of the society, and particularly in favor of the Being. Their concern is with rich people, the powerful people, and how to keep the power between them. Their objective is not to share the power, to see for example, a participatory democracy, the application of fundamental rights or environmental [issues]. They are not concerned about these things. They give us just some carrots to eat. But just some very small carrots to say we are happy, and it's okay. But really, they are just concerned with how they can keep the money and use the system to work more in their favor, for their own profit.

You can take the last US and French elections as examples. A lot of people voted for Trump. He is a very dangerous person, and absolutely unpolitical. He knows nothing about fundamental rights, not even about human rights. Really, he does not know anything. He is very focused on himself and his family. And in France there's Macron. He's just a technocrat. He does not know about politics either. I think the people who elected Trump and Macron made a huge mistake. And for me, I am now hopeless. I don't see how we can transform this kind of situation. It will take a long time.

This type of election has an impact on the mental health of a society. The members of society feel themselves dispossessed of their intelligence and of their right to think. The question becomes, how we can find a space where thought can be reconstructed and people allowed to think? In the meantime, we are in a depressed state and somewhat hopeless.

In France, many people supported Emmanuel Macron for president even if they opposed his policies. They considered the far right National Front party, [Marine Le Pen](#), more dangerous.

I disagree totally with all these people who were saying we should vote for Macron because we don't want Marine Le Pen. If we decide to vote for Macron in order to avoid having Le Pen as president, it could be a solution. But then we [would have needed] to negotiate with Macron, to say, "We are not in favor of your policies. We refuse your policies. But we know we need to be behind you in order to avoid Marine Le Pen." But without any negotiation, the people gave Macron the *carte blanche*. And now Macron considers that the people support him. And he's very happy with that. He's doing political games. Politics now is like an internet game, [trying to have stories go viral].

I'm sure he's absolutely not aware about African descent here or what it means to be racialized in this country where there is this stupid slogan, "*vivre ensemble*" (live together). That means absolutely nothing. They have individual projects for their own interests, not for the good of the people. We really shouldn't wait for anything [positive] from them. Presidents like Trump, Macron, and many others around the world, are very destructive.

At the same time as the rise of “anti-political” populists, we also have the rise of more left-leaning figures like Bernie Sanders in the US and Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France. Do you think they represent a different kind of political project with possible emancipatory elements?

For me, Mélenchon is absolutely not at the same level as Bernie Sanders. I don't know Bernie Sanders very well, beyond what I read, but if I make some comparison with Mélenchon, I can say Mélenchon for me is not an alternative. I do not see in him any real change of approach, or something substantially different than what we have had in government for decades. He's a nationalist, a chauvinist, and sometimes expresses curious understandings of Islam and the Arab world. And even if during his presidential campaign he took some lessons to appear politer and [more politically correct], in fact, he has a background of verbal violence. By this I mean he is above all oriented by a “white” perception of the world, shaped by European Modernity.

He's not concerned with [suffering] people and he does not know anything about Africa. He knows of course about politics in South America, but not about the largest part of the population, those Non-Beings in South America. And here I'm speaking about people of African descent. He knows nothing about the continent of Africa and nothing about Asia, about India. He repeats things like, “China is the enemy.” No, China is not the enemy. We have to deal with China. We have to work with China to build a decolonial and social approach, and not an approach based on hierarchy and domination. For me, this moment is really like a nightmare and every morning I ask myself, “Oh, how is the world today? Is it the end?” Not in terms of armed war, but in terms of war against the human being.

How has France remained intertwined with countries of the African continent?

The African continent is *still* under colonization. We just have to note that it's a new form of colonization. It is under colonization not only by former colonizing countries, but by the IMF, the World Bank, European Bank, European commission, the European Union. Europe pays the salaries of the functionaries of the African Union and imposes bilateral agreements that are unfair and wrong.

One of the reasons [France] is a rich country, though we have a lot of debt, is because of the money given by the African states to manage *their own money*. [This money is] coming from Africa. ... And it's terrible. Francophone states in Africa are obliged to pay a kind of tax from colonial times. If they don't, they are expelled from the [CFA](#) [franc currency] system. Nobody thinks about that. And there is not one current president from these 14 African countries ready to say to France, “Ok, stop now. Enough is enough.” And really, they have to do that if they want to work for their populations. Because by accepting [these conditions], they accept that France transnationals and private funds can plunder Africa's natural resources without any redistribution. You can see how transnational capital succeeds with the help of [African] states to plunder the natural resources and steal the lands. You see this in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Uganda, throughout southern Africa. It's terrible to see how the population is expelled from their lands in the interest of just a few. This plundering partly explains the high level of poverty. Europe, the “white world,” needs Africa's and South America's natural resources to live. It needs to continue to do what it wants and to exploit the world for its own profit.

We need a strong African continent in order to balance political international relations and to have a real third force. We need a third force. We cannot leave these [destructive] Occidental countries to do what they want, to bring war everywhere. Because they put all people in danger and they push the world to its fall.



Mireille Fanon-Mendès France, 2017 Picture by Linda Herrera.

Do you have ideas about how to build a “third force”?

It's always difficult because if there is something on Africa, it's not coming from Africans. It's coming always from abroad, from the “experts.” If you go to Africa you will find lots of people who can speak about the future of Africa. They have projects. They have political ideas. And they're absolutely able to think about their future. But the former colonizing countries do not want to see such people. They don't care. More or less they are considered as enemies. And related to that, one of Frantz Fanon's concerns in the beginning of 1960s, the main objective and obsession for him, was how to build African Unity without the former colonizer. Otherwise, if you maintain the former colonizer in one way or another, you are still under colonization. And it is the reality now. This continent is still under colonization.

How can returning to the work of Fanon help us to tackle some of these contemporary issues in Africa and beyond?

Fanon is helping us because he forces us to not renounce the project of emancipation. He forces us to go further and continue his work. In fact, when you read, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) or *L'an V de la révolution algérienne* (1959) (*A Dying Colonialism*), there is some thinking on the evolution of the coming world, but via the African continent. He anticipated that if the African continent did not build unity, their liberation movements would fail. And this is exactly where we are [today]. And that's a problem also because the African continent is not the continent we need to balance international relations.

But now, I don't know how we can proceed. Really, I don't know. It's a difficult situation. Here in France we are under a State of Emergency. It means our private and public liberties are really reduced and anyone can be arrested. For example, if someone here passes and understands we are speaking about emancipation or whatever, and he misunderstands something, he can go to the police. We could be denounced. And we could be arrested under the *fiche S* [as a threat to national security.] And with no access to a lawyer for 72 hours.

And when there is a demonstration, like the COP21, ([global climate conference in Paris](#) in November-December 2015), a lot of people [roughly 200] were arrested, without any reason. Without any tangible proof, just based on denouncement, suspicion. And people are afraid. The consequence now is that people are afraid to be engaged. It takes a lot more courage now to be engaged. That wasn't the case before, it was much easier. Today to be active requires a double commitment: a commitment to solidarity, but also a commitment to be willing to give up your freedom for the collective good.

There is also an anxiety that permeates this elitist and financialized world order, that of losing one's work or of never finding work to begin with. And this is especially true for young people. Most of the people are living with anxiety. And in this way, the dominant class succeeds to win and to impose the kind of life they want, to control the people.

I'm thinking, related to Fanon, what Fanon said about colonization and how it affects the colonized people. Now, we are in the same situation but not because of colonization, but because of globalization. They succeed to maintain in all of us a high level of anxiety, of fear. For example, walking in the public space we don't know if we will have an attack, or whatever. And then there's the instability

with work, the difficulty to get good healthcare, a quality education for your children, whatever. At every level of life you are under anxiety. Because with globalization, if you are out of the globalization system, you may be considered or feared to be out, totally out of life. And for people, the most important thing is to be maintained inside this globalization system. It's functioning exactly like the colonized system. I think really, we have to think like that—what Fanon said about colonization, how it could be applied to the globalization system. Really very intelligent (laughs). It's just because we have an interview [I came up with this idea]. I did not think about this before that.

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