From DuBois to Fanon

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...W.E.B. DuBois wrote about Africa for a long time, and he set himself to make not only Africa, but Western Civilization understand that the enslavement of the African people was not only a disgrace but a burden to Western Civilization itself. He held a series of Pan-African conferences. I hear people say that DuBois was a great Race leader. That was only part of it. At the time DuBois was holding these Pan-African conferences, there were secretaries of state in the United States, there were journalists, there were writers, there were travelers — not one of them understood what Africa meant and would mean in the years to come. DuBois stood alone. It is true he was helping the Negro people, the African people, but it was not an African task. He was not an African leader. In that respect as well as in the writing of history, he was one of the foremost Americans of his time. And in regard to what he was saying about Africa he was one of the foremost men among politicians, economists, sociologists and the others who were dealing with world civilization at the time and not confining themselves to the narrow limitation of one country. In 1935 DuBois wrote BLACK RECONSTRUCTION, a history of the Negro in the Civil War and its aftermath with general remarks about the Civil War, and what happened in the states Negroes governed or took part in governing after the Civil War. DuBois not only told that story; he brought into it many important matters — the French Revolution, the American Revolution, the Paris Commune, the Treaty of Versailles, the condition of the Communist International—and he knitted all of these into a structure in which he placed the contribution of the Negro people to their own emancipation. It is one of the greatest history books ever written...

The world needed the work of DuBois at the time. It was what was required. The beginning of the twentieth century saw the beginning of the necessity of involving not only Negro people in Western Civilization, but also the African people in the world that was being born. DuBois saw the importance of history, economics, sociology, etc., and saw that without an understanding of the role of the Negro people it was impossible to get a clear and consistent and comprehensive view of American civilization as a whole. And that I believe was the cause of his strength and the remarkable range of his accomplishments. I insist that to call him only a Negro leader is to do him an injustice; it is to do an injustice to the Negro people, to strike a great blow against a clear view of Western Civilization as a whole.

Next, I want to speak of Marcus Garvey, who works a new stage. What DuBois did in regard to the Pan-African movement, in educating intellectuals, journalists and persons who were interested in Africa, Garvey took up. He did not get it from DuBois. Garvey found his task because the West Indies were in a certain situation, and being a black man and limited by this, Garvey felt it necessary to clear a space. And in clearing a space for himself and the Negro people of the West Indies, he cleared up a lot of litter about the history and development of the African people.

Marcus Garvey was not a scholarly man, he was careless in the things he said. He used to say “400 million Negroes” — multiplying the number by two. That is okay with me; he could have multiplied by three as far as I am concerned. He was saying something that had to be said. He had picked it up from various books he had read, but I don’t think it was so much a matter of scholarship with him. DuBois had been writing scholarship about Africa for many years. Garvey said: “The Negro was born free, but is everywhere in chains, and he must break the chains to recapture a lost freedom.” It was a conception, it was necessity he saw; there was an encumbered space that had to be cleared up, and he did so with great vigor.

Marcus Garvey at his height functioned from about 1917 to about 1923. When he was finished, the Negro people and the people of Africa were an integral part of world history, where they have remained ever since. This despite the mistake he made.

Garvey mobilized, he put forward schemes that were not very good. Many men have done that. But what Garvey did was to make people understand that the African people had to be incorporated into the future, that they had had a civilization in the past. Garvey did not have the historical knowledge for speaking about Africa’s ancient civilizations (which have since been established by scholars), but he felt it was right, that it was needed. Garvey, without scholarship, felt an empty space in the history of the Negro peoples, and according to his limited historical ability, he filled it in the best way he could. In doing so he accomplished, in my opinion, the greatest propaganda feat of the twentieth century...

And now I go quite rapidly to George Padmore. I have to spend a little time here. You know, when I was a boy I lived in Trinidad. My parents were Trinidadian. We knew nothing about Africa except what we had learned from the British. And what they taught us was what they themselves believed about Africa—or perhaps what they wanted us to believe.
I knew a boy in Trinidad named Malcolm Nurse, who later became George Padmore. I knew his family, he knew mine. He used to go to Arima (Trinidad) as a boy of 10 or 11 where my father used to teach and spend his vacation. During July and August, morning after morning, Malcolm and I used to go to the Arima River to bathe. At the bottom of the hill, which at the top was an ice factory, we'd go walking up the river about a mile to the Blue Basin and swim. We hadn't the faintest idea that the time would come when we would be heading movements in Europe and America for the emancipation of the African people. You never know where you will be and what will happen to you. Well, we remained great friends. In about 1922 he went to the United States and joined the Communist Party. I think he was profoundly influenced by Garvey. I know I was. Because Garvey used to publish a paper called the *Negro World*, the Trinidad government forbade it coming into the country, but I managed to buy my copy every Saturday morning down St. Vincent Street in Port of Spain. I'm pretty sure George used to read it, too.

Well Padmore went to England. Then in 1928 the Communist Party made him head of the Negro department of the Third International. I do not think any other Negro had such a position of power and influence in the International. George really was one of the Communist leaders, and he did tremendous work organizing Negroes, stimulating Negroes, writing in Negro journals, writing books, etc., and all with the power and authority of Moscow. I used to see him. In those days I was a Trotskyist, but we remained good friends and never quarrelled about our differences. He was a remarkable man in many respects. One day in 1935, I remember it well, there was a knock at the door of my flat in London. I opened it and there was George. I said, "George, is something wrong?" He said, "I have left those people, you know." I was startled. He supported Moscow, I was against them, and he had left them. So I said, "Well, come in, sit down." I said, "What is it?" He said, "They are changing their policy." And George told me that they had now told him they were going to make friends with the democratic imperialists, Britain, France and the United States; and that future pro-Negro propaganda should be directed against Germany, Japan and Italy, and played quite softly in regard to the "democracies." Padmore said, "But that is impossible." He said, "Germany and Japan have no colonies in Africa, so how can I say that the Negroes in Africa must be emancipated, but they have friends in the democratic imperialists of France and England? They say, "Well, that is the line."

There was something else very important about him. Padmore remained a leader of the people who had joined him when he worked as a leader of the Communist Party, and no attempt of the Communist Party to change them ever did. I think he was one of the few who were members of the Communist International, left it, and retained his influence over the people he had built up while under their aegis.

At the time I was chairman of an organization in London, "The International African Friends of Ethiopia." Geroge joined the organization and when it came to an end, formed the International African Bureau. Padmore was chairman of that, and I was editor of the paper, *International African Opinion*. The Bureau was at that time the only political organization devoted to the emancipation of the African people. A more tireless leader than George would be hard to imagine: anyone who came from Africa, whether as a member of the government or to escape persecution by the British police, found his way to Padmore's house and received Padmore's advice.

In New York I met a man called Francis Nkrumah. I used to call him Francis in those days, we all did. We became very friendly, and when he said he was going to London, I wrote a letter to Padmore saying, "George, this young man is coming to you. He is not very bright, but nevertheless do what you can for him because he's determined to throw the Europeans out of Africa." I am not disturbed about saying he was not very bright; he used to talk a lot about imperialism and Leninism and export of capital, and he used to talk a lot of nonsense. But he went to England; Padmore met him at Victoria Station. And he began to work with Padmore. In 1945 there was a conference in Manchester, the Fifth Pan–African Congress, organized by Padmore. Kwame Nkrumah delivered a speech on imperialism which was an absolute masterpiece. He had learned all there was to be learned from Padmore.

From that conference in Manchester in 1945 Padmore got Dr. DuBois to come from the United States and be the chairman because of the work DuBois had done on Pan–Africanism from the time before Padmore had been born.

That was quite an event, in 1945; a little later something happened. Kwame Nkrumah was invited to Ghana to work, the Gold Coast it was called then. The story runs that he didn't want to go particularly, because he was busy organizing in London and Europe. Padmore insisted that he should go. Francis went, and the revolution, and while that was going on in the west of Africa, the Mau Mau were carrying on their activities in the east, and I want you to understand that we had no idea that the things which we were fighting for would come with such rapidity. Naturally we backed Nkrumah, and Padmore worked with him to the end; I did what I could also, But we had not the faintest idea that after
it had taken place in Ghana, before ten years had passed, seven-eighths of Africa would be independent. That demonstrates an important political lesson: do your business, do your work and trust that things will come your way if you have an idea that is ready to work.

You know in those days they must have thought Padmore and the rest of us (Jomo Kenyatta was a member, Nkrumah became a member, but most of us were West Indians at the time) were well—meaning but illiterate people talking about the independence of Africa, Pan—Africa, a lot of nonsense. But it turns out that we were right and they, the learned ones, were wrong. We were able to see it because we were members of an oppressed group of people and knew what was in front of us had to be cleared up. That is what made DuBois and Garvey the historical figures that they were. Now Padmore went to Ghana when it was established, working with Nkrumah, organizing the first Conference of Independent African States and the first Conference of African Freedom Fighters. He worked in Ghana until he died, and I was then in the West Indies. Three or four days after I heard the news came a bundle of pamphlets and documents about a conference from Padmore, saying “We have finished and I sent this to you.”

Finally, I wish to discuss Franz Fanon. I want you to follow the general trend. First, DuBois the scholar. A wide range of matters concerning Africa — he dealt with each of them and laid down lines which are valuable to this day. DuBois introduced Africa to the intellectuals. Then came Garvey, who translated a view of Africa into public property: that was a stage in the development of the consciousness of the world. The next, Padmore, who became a political organizer, was a man very different from Garvey and from DuBois, but an organizer of the first class. And the last one, Fanon, from Martinique, French West Indies, went to France and studied psychiatry. Fanon then went to Algeria and joined the Algerian Revolution. While Padmore organized various people to prepare for the Revolution in Africa, Fanon went himself; he went to Algeria, and as a doctor and a revolutionary he played a tremendous role. Before he died, he left a book that has recently been translated, called LES DAMNES DE LA TERRE. In this book Fanon went a stage beyond DuBois, Garvey and Padmore.

Fanon said: In the nationalist revolution of the twentieth century, the people must be against not only the imperialists. Some of the people's leaders who come forward to lead the revolution have nowhere to lead the people, and revolution must be as fiercely against them as against the imperialists. He said that some of the writers, having learned all they could from Western civilization, will join the revolution, but bring nothing positive and corrupt the revolutionary movement. The intellectuals will have to learn that they must dig deep among the mass of the population to find the elements of a truly national culture.

While one can find many mistakes in Fanon's work, his greatness lays in this total devotion to the revolution, to wiping away everything but the mass of the population, to creating a new and revolutionary nationalism. Nothing else will do. And the book is, in its way, a hymn to the idea of revolution. Sartre says that Europeans have to read the book because the state in which civilization now is demands on the part of “les damnes de la terre”—not only the colonial peoples but all who suffer the weight and bitterness of what Western Civilization has done—must feel all this totality of revolution and of what government is as Fanon felt it.

Fanon was swept away by a certain conception, the necessity to finish off what is bound to corrupt and pervert the development of a colonial population. And the value of the book is not only what it says to colonials. It is recognized more and more by Europeans that something of this spirit is needed to rid from Western Civilization the problems and burdens that are pressing down humanity as a whole.

Now I think that this is the final stage which we have reached so far. I don’t know where we will reach tomorrow. That is a consistent sequence that tells not only the history of the development of the Black intellectuals, but the history of the development of ideas which are of the greatest value to civilization as a whole. Fanon calls his book Les Damnes de la Terre; it is translated as the “Wretched of the Earth,” but I prefer “The Condemned of the World.” I want to end by saying this: the work done by Black intellectuals, stimulated by the needs of the Black people, had better be understood by the condemned of the earth whether they’re in Africa, the United States or Europe. Because if the condemned of the earth do not understand their pasts and know the responsibilities that lie upon them in the future, all on the earth will be condemned. That is the kind of world we live in.