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Power as (or in) Vulnerability: Fanon and Levinas on an Ethical Politics

Abstract

The ethical significance of vulnerability clearly shapes the trajectory of Levinas' work. In this paper, I use the work of Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, to etch out a similarly *political* significance of this Levinasian account of vulnerability. My claim is that the identities that embody concrete vulnerabilities (the actual 'widows, orphans and strangers' in our history's midst) are particularly attuned to the structural dissonance emblematic of Levinas' formulation of the relationship between the 'I' and the 'self'. As such, a notion of the political that takes seriously his account of alterity is likely to come from, or germinate in, these concrete modes of embodiment. My analysis will pursue this possibility (of a politics founded on the priority of vulnerability) in the kind of interiorized dissonance concretized in racialized and colonized subjectivities. Most importantly, I read, in the first chapter of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, a political exposé that can, albeit implicitly, assist in such a pursuit. Though Fanon recognizes an inevitable violence in moment of decolonization, he is explicitly critical of a postcolonial 'ultra-nationalism' that disregards the need for open-endedness, and even hesitation, in those 'post-independence' moments,. Even though Fanon's call for nation-specificity find little to no echoes in Levinas, his sentiments are very much present in Levinas' explicit attack on the notion of the virile subject, who uses her place in the world to employ mechanisms of ethno- and logo-centrism. In other words, I read Fanon's recognition of revolutionary violence to be nevertheless founded on somewhat Levinasian conceptions of hospitality for (or welcoming of) the Other or the stranger.