

Fanon's Nordic Adventure: A Brief Study of Translations and Reception

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Fanon seems to have played an exceptional role in Scandinavia, and especially in Sweden. Last year's appearance of Göran Olsson's documentary film *Concerning Violence. Nine Scenes from the Anti-Imperialistic Self Defense*, based on the first chapter of *Les Damnés de la terre* and narrated by Lauryn Hill, only goes to show that he is still highly relevant. When working toward the completion of this special issue on Frantz Fanon in a Caribbean context, I came to reflect upon his position in the North wondering if it would be possible to map Fanon's presence in Sweden, and from this mapping, understand why Fanon has been a prevailing reference for academics, intellectuals and artists. Studying Fanon's presence involves various subjects and disciplines since it raises questions of how the Left has evolved, of how certain concepts are transposed from one language and context to another reality in another language depending on factors such as who introduced Fanon, through which channels and to what purpose. What follows here is an essayistic pilot-study, more based on conversations and observations than on theory and methodology. Hopefully, it will offer the reader a basic outline and a description of a phenomenon in what we can call a "peripheral translation zone" that may, even though it is incomplete, contribute to decentering translation studies, and allow us to estimate the tremendous impact of Fanon in this region, an impact that, as we shall soon see, has far more ramifications than one would tend to believe.

Already the year after its first publication and despite being banned in France, *Les Damnés de la terre* appeared in Sweden around the same time as the Italian translation of the book. But whereas the Italian version seemed to be the result of Fanon's links to Italy and the country's commitment to the Algerian cause, the Swedish translation appears to come out of the blue. As the story goes a small publishing house in Gothenburg, Gösta Skoogs förlag which had mainly published essays with a focus on the city of Gothenburg, had decided to widen their perspective and, perhaps, increase their cultural cap-

ital by starting to translate foreign texts. Naturally, they turned to Paris – the Greenwich meridian of literature, to echo Pascale Casanova. Being a small player in the editorial world Gösta Skoog didn't contact the Parisian publishing houses. To find out which books made the front pages they asked a young Gothenburgois, Ulla Swedberg, who was then studying in Paris. Considering the stir Fanon's book caused it comes as no surprise that she suggested *Les Damnés de la terre*. When Swedberg told this story to historian Erik Tängerstad who in turn was kind enough to share it with me, she explained that she didn't have any personal interest in Fanon and that she was quite surprised when Gösta Skoog asked her to translate the book.¹ Being an ambitious student, she could hardly refuse such an opportunity but she would later regret the decision. For Gösta Skoog wanted her to work fast, and the translation was completed in less than a year. Given that Swedberg was an inexperienced translator this was an impossible mission. The translation suffered from being too literal and the critique was sometimes hard. *Les Damnés de la terre—Jordens fördömda*—was the only translation Ulla Swedberg would do throughout her career (although as a cultural journalist specialized in film she did play a key role in transmitting French culture to Sweden).²

Now the story could have ended there: by chance one of the founding texts in what was to become postcolonial studies was translated into a marginal language by a young student who would never again translate from French to Swedish. However, according to Tängerstad the terrain was prepared: Fanon had already been introduced in Sweden. In 1960 the sociologist Göran Thernborn who was a radical leftist at this time wrote an article on Fanon in the journal *Zenit* where he was the editor. Still Swedberg's contribution could have been a parenthesis in Swedish translation history, but

¹ I am deeply indebted to Tängerstad who had the generosity to share not only his research but also his knowledge with me. Without his participation this essay would merely be a sketch. It is my hope that my text may also contribute to his future analysis of Fanon.

² I would like to thank translator and honorary professor Jan Stolpe for informing me about Ulla Swedberg's career, and for discussing the reception of Fanon in Swedish Leftist circles in the '60s and '70s. He also reminded me of his own translation of "Racisme" in 1968, and provided me with important contacts. This article owes a lot to Stolpe. Thanks also to Professor Ingrid Elam, Göran Palm, Michael Azar and the editors of *Daidalos* for answering my questions.

Fanon found an audience in the North. In 1963 Joachim Israel offers a long reflection on the “third world” (*tiers monde*) in *Stockholms-Tidningen*. This concept, Tängerstad claims, was most likely picked up from Fanon (Tängerstad, 14-15), and would dominate discussions 1965-67, in books like *En orättvis betraktelse* (“An unequal observation”) by writer and critic Göran Palm directly inspired by Fanon. Around this time Fanon also caught the attention of young philosophers based in Stockholm. Åke Löfgren wrote an article, “Kunskap, engagemang, allvar” (“Knowledge, Commitment, Seriousness”) in a Christian critical journal where he claimed that *Les Damnés de la terre* was one of the most important analysis of international relations.³ In 1968, Jan Stolpe, today perhaps the most acclaimed translator in Sweden, translated “Racisme et culture” from *Pour la révolution africaine*, in a special issue of *BLM* dedicated to African literature. In this issue, edited by Lars Gustafsson, Fanon appears with authors such as Virgilio de Lemos, José Craveirinha, Wole Soyinka, Justin Vieyra, Dennis Brutus and Castro Soromenho. The real breakthrough comes in 1969, when a new translation of *Les Damnés de la terre* was published by a far more established publishing house, Rabén och Sjögren, and by a far more experienced translator, Per-Olov Zennström. This translation was republished in 2007 by Leopard Förlag (a publishing house founded by the crime-fiction author and former Leftist activist Henning Mankell), and with a preface added signed by Tängerstad. This new edition was preceded by the first translation of *Peau noire, masques blancs* done by Stefan Jordebrandt and published with another Gothenburg publishing house, Daidalos, first in 1997, and the second edition came out in 2002. Daidalos is mainly known for academic titles, and the translation was prefaced by a professor in the history of ideas, who was, at the time, a Ph. D. student at Gothenburg University completing his thesis on Camus and Fanon and the Algerian war. Fanon was in other words re-discovered by a different audience in the 1990s.

Fanon’s reception in Sweden thus seems to follow the same pattern as in other countries and reflect two phases. The first took place in the 1960s

³ Again, I thank Tängerstad for giving this information, taken from a seminar paper by Alexander Ekelund.

among Leftist activists, writers and intellectuals evolving around *Les Damnés de la terre*. The second occurred in the wake of postcolonial studies entrance in Swedish academia in the 1990s, based on the translation of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, and driven by young up-and-coming scholars who now hold key positions within Swedish universities: Azar at Gothenburg University, professor Stefan Helgesson at Stockholm University, and professor Stefan Jonsson at Linköping University. In a Scandinavian context, this is unique. Four years after the Swedish translation *Les Damnés de la terre* was translated into Danish and in 1968 into Norwegian. In 1967 *Pour une révolution africaine* appeared in Danish; a year before the Swedish translation in *BLM*. As Yvonne Lindqvist argues, if we delineate Scandinavia as a particular zone within the global system of translations and circulations of literature, it is clear that Sweden plays the role of “consecrator” and introducer of new literatures in large part due to the Nobel Prize. The pattern, Lindqvist shows, is evident: books are first introduced in Sweden before they pass into the other Scandinavian countries, meaning that in peripheral literary fields books pass through a “double consecration process” (Lindqvist, 90-92).⁴ Elisabeth Bladh’s corpus of Caribbean literature translated into Scandinavian languages confirms Lindqvist’s observation and shows that it is accurate also when it comes to Fanon and, adds Bladh, particularly in the 1960s (Bladh, 137, 140). Bladh’s study doesn’t specify or analyze the channels through which these translations appeared, but it is plausible that Zennström and other major Swedish figures such as Thernborn, Palm and writer Sara Lidman, had a part in it. However, *Peau noire, masques blancs* has never been translated into either Danish or Norwegian. Why this is would need a far longer article than this one: it could depend on a shift in the translation systems, in editorial policies or in the book-market or to a lesser extent the degree of cooperation among postcolonial scholars of the Scandinavian countries (as opposed to the leftist groups in the 1970s).

Each translation of Fanon is left with traces from the particular circumstances in which it came about. Considering the postcolonial reception that

⁴ Lindqvist’s study also shows that in a peripheral context, Casanova’s theories on how literary circulation operates need to be slightly altered

reintroduced Fanon in Scandinavia it is interesting to note that the 2007 translation of *Les Damnés de la terre* is not revised. Zennström's version is very much marked by the translator's own political engagement and turns Fanon into a radical Marxist, using Marxist terminology where there is none in the original (the few translations Zennström did during his career were all in line with Marxist theory from Mao, via Lukács to Sartre).⁵ Swedberg's translation on the other hand is literal: she is very close to the original which sometimes results in a rather clumsy Swedish based on French syntax. Her faithfulness to the original is also exposed in a number of footnotes that mainly serve to specify different Algerian references. These do not exist in Zennström's translation. Swedberg's strategy is hardly surprising considering that this was the work of a beginner. Yet, despite its shortcomings, her contribution offers an important base for comparison and for understanding Fanon in that it is less ideologically driven. On this note it is interesting to make a quick excursion to the English translations of Fanon. Ironically, one of the most recent translators of Fanon into English, Richard Philcox, in a talk he gave at La Maison Française at NYU in 2004, said that the reason why postcolonial thinkers could turn Fanon into a philosopher of hybridity and negotiation is that the first English translation of *Les Damnés de la terre* evens out the Marxist edges and revolutionary violence in Fanon's text.⁶

In Sweden in the 1960s things were quite different and the critique raised against Swedberg's translation which probably incited Zennström's re-translation, informs us about the *uses* of Fanon in the Swedish context. He was read as a revolutionary theorist, but most importantly he offered a *vocabulary* to describe and discuss colonial inequalities that was missing in Swedish. This is visible in Jan Stolpe's translation of "Racism och kultur" as Stolpe directly draws from the French *racisme* and writes "racism" with a c instead of today's spelling, rasism, more adjusted to the Swedish language. *Rasism* was indeed a term that had existed in Swedish since 1838, but as Stolpe re-

⁵ It should be noted that Zennström's bibliography includes books on artists and art history, but most of all books about class struggles in different contexts.

⁶ I quote this from memory. In case my recollection is wrong I humbly ask Richard Philcox to forgive my bad memory.

minds us, it wasn't commonly used in the 1960s.⁷ Tängerstad, for his part, suggests that the renewed interest in Fanon, seven years after the first translation, came via a detour: Fanon's use of the concept "*tiers état*", translated into Swedish "tredje världen" like the English "third world", had been appropriated by the Left in their engagement with decolonization and global inequalities and it was this concept that led them back to Fanon (Tängerstad, 14-17). Both Göran Palm and Stolpe affirm that it was writer Sara Lidman (1923-2004) who spoke most passionately about Fanon.⁸ Especially in discourses held in various contexts she would urge the audience to read Fanon. She also included the famous passage from *Les Damnés de la terre* where Fanon discusses the importance of constructing a bridge from below (Fanon, 141), in her 1968 documentary novel about the miners in Northern Sweden, *Gruva*, thus ingeniously connecting Fanon's discourse on defense against colonization to the Swedish context of class-struggles and exploitation of the people of the North.

When Fanon reappeared in the 1990s he reached the Swedish audience through another detour: French Theory, which paved the way for the introduction of postcolonial studies. Fanon was picked up by a group of young scholars at the University of Gothenburg with a postcolonial orientation. Azar most likely initiated the translation that came out in 1997 done by Stefan Jordebrandt.⁹ The publishing house along with the translator (and Azar as well) were all shaped by the French theory wind that came from America and swept over Scandinavia in the 1980s, and it was most likely Homi K. Bhabha's reading in *The Location of Culture* that again directed the attention toward Frantz Fanon.

⁷ The term's etymology and history would merit a study of its own, especially in light of institutions such as Rasbiologiska Insitutet in Uppsala (an independent institution that was never a part of the university).

⁸ Per Wästberg, member of the Swedish Academy and part of the same circles as Lidman during this period, writes in his memoirs that another member of the Academy, Artur Lundkvist a former surrealist who introduced Aimé Césaire in Sweden, said that he'd consider giving the Nobel Prize to Sara Lidman if she'd stop reading Fanon.

⁹ Azar doesn't remember himself but says in our correspondence that it might have been him. The publishing house also can't remember but thinks it was Azar.

Interestingly, the reception of *Peau noire, masques blancs* occurred in a moment of crises in Sweden. The Social Democrats had lost the election in 1991 and the right wing led a coalition government that was constantly threatened by a racist right wing party, “The New Democrats”, which had gained seats in the parliament in the midst of a wave of neo-Nazism and of various forms of more or less violent acts of racism that swept across the country. For the first time questions of racism, whiteness and colonial guilt started to be discussed in the media and in Academia. Fanon played a huge role in these debates, and still does. In fact, the discussions from the 1990s seem to have caught the attention of a younger generation of intellectuals and artists who also show an interest in the more activist Fanon. Leopard Förlag was clever enough to realize this when they republished the 1969 translation of *Les Damnés de la terre* in 2007, although, as professor Stefan Helgesson pointed out in his review of the edition, they should have made the effort and invested the money for a new translation.

Azar’s book *Frihet, jämlikhet, brödrarmord* (“Liberty, Equality and Fratricide”, originally his Ph. D. dissertation) underscores the important need to contextualize and situate for a deeper understanding of Fanon’s thesis. In a sense, this also holds true for the receptions and translations of Fanon. It is quite remarkable that he had such an impact, such that in the course of ten years there were three translations of texts by Fanon in a small Nordic country. To understand the first phase of Fanon-reception Tängerstad offers a compelling hypothesis: Fanon came to Sweden at a crucial moment when young artists, writers and intellectuals had just begun to articulate their international political engagement. Furthermore, the country was shaken by the death of UN ambassador Dag Hammarskjöld in Zambia. Already in 1960 Swedish unions and organizations strongly linked to the Social Democrats (LO and KF) and the leftist movements associated with them had become part of the fight against apartheid, and many writers and artists went to Africa to pursue the struggle in solidarity with the colonized and the oppressed (Granqvist, 2013). On a more general level and in regard to the second phase of Fanon-reception philosopher Nicholas Smith pointed out in an e-mail conversation, there are striking and interesting similarities between

the exceptional role given to Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième sexe* within Scandinavian feminism and the way Fanon has been received. They have both been constantly recycled by younger generations and in an international perspective they have both been subject to singular readings both by scholars, writers, political activists and, thanks to Olsson's documentary, filmmakers.

Tängerstad's preface to the 2007 edition of *Les Damnés de la terre* actualizes Fanon and re-contextualizes him within the postcolonial and Post-Communist era of global terrorism. In Azar's preface, the poststructuralist and postcolonial re-interpretations of Marx are present and he underscores the new or current relevance of Fanon in the light of postcolonial studies (9). In other words, the Marxist dimension was never obliterated in the second wave of Swedish Fanon-reception, only refashioned and connected to more actual issues concerning subjectivity, race and colonial memory in a more globally interconnected reality. However, the bridge between earlier forms of activism and today's political engagement that may in fact be built via Fanon, is not clear to everyone. As discussed by Nicholas Smith in his discourse for the opening night of the film *Concerning Violence*, the way Olsson used documentary footage from the 1970s on which he superimposed Lauryn Hill's voice reading Fanon was heavily criticized by some who accused him of decontextualizing the photography.¹⁰ Smith rightly reads this as a clash between cultural traditions as Olsson borrows from a hip-hop culture of mix-tapes and sampling. This way, Smith contends, Olsson's film connects the decolonization of the 1960s and 1970s to the present, suggesting that the struggle is not over but takes on different paths and perhaps different shapes as the opponent also evolves with time and place. It would, in this regard, be interesting to see to what extent Fanon has influenced intellectuals and artists that are today engaged particularly in the struggle against the extreme right in Sweden. This extends to the heated debates about integration, "culturalism", race, identity, and representation tied to both image and language, like Jonas Hassan Khemiri's open letter to the Swedish Minister of Justice, asking her to "step into his skin" in response to racial profiling im-

¹⁰ I thank Smith for sharing his text with me and for discussing Fanon-reception via e-mail.

plemented by the Swedish police in 2013,¹¹ poet Athena Faroukha's exposing racial and class inequalities in Sweden today and calling for direct resistance both in acts and in poetry, or all the voices raised against stereotypical representations of people of color, Muslims, the Romani, and minorities.

I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that few other thinkers have had such a direct impact on politics, intellectual debates and artistic creativity in Sweden during the last sixty years, as if the Scandinavian social states could offer a particularly fecund growing ground for Fanon's ideas. Perhaps Fanon's destiny in Sweden shows that what has been seen and interpreted by some as an antagonism between old school Marxists and current forms of political activism is not a matter of two generations opposing each other. Rather, the continuous presence of Fanon tells us that it is a matter of social critical thinking and engagement that continues to evolve and take new forms while still listening to his voice.

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¹¹ For contextualization and English translation of this letter that was published in the *New York Times*, see: <http://www.asymptotejournal.com/article.php?cat=Nonfiction&id=47>