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Ananya Usharani Ravishankar

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2021

***The Possibility of Transnational Anti-Capitalism/Imperialism***

Ananya Usharani Ravishankar  
Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut

## The Possibility of Transnational Anti-Capitalism/Imperialism

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Ananya Usharani Ravishankar

The problem with globalized internationalism and liberal inclusion politics is the focus on difference rather than commonality. Both seem to take the universal as a given, and focus on constructing and unearthing differences, which runs the risk of a preoccupation with identity politics. The principle upon which a call to transnationalism rests upon fundamentally is that differences are those which are given, and universality is what is to be constructed from finding commonalities within that very plethora of diverse experience.

This approach is also articulated in Frantz Fanon's notion of a 'national culture', as opposed to a self-enclosed approach such as *nationalism*. In discussing the development of, and the struggles with a national consciousness in the wake of colonialism, Fanon describes a constant wavering in African unity, seemingly making a return to chauvinism, racism, and "regionalisms within the same national reality" (Fanon 2004, 106). Evidently, a preoccupation with identity politics, and the failure to see past immediate group interests is what proved the national bourgeoisie to be incapable of achieving a national unity, or 'building the nation' (Fanon 2004, 106). He describes the way that,

"Colonialism [...] undertakes to break this will to unify by taking advantage of every weak link in the movement [...] shamelessly pulls all these string, only too content to see the Africans, who were once in league against it, tear at each other's throats" (Fanon 2004, 107).

This demonstrates the very tendencies which Žižek and Badiou call attention to as well. The focus on differences are these very weak links which Fanon talks about. Colonialism pulling at these weak links is a strategic attempt at shifting attention away from the common ground of anti-colonialism, and instead toward the multitude of ways in which those same people differ – a refocusing which eventually leads to groups that were once united on a common front, now at odds with one another. This is what Fanon calls a "narrow-minded nationalism" (Fanon 2004, 109).

A perfect example of this is that of the 'national party' which Fanon draws our attention to. Although it claims to speak on behalf of the interests of the people as a whole, the fact that it operates on a tribal basis absolutely undermines such a claim. The 'national party' ultimately ends up being a self-enclosed group, outwardly claiming to represent universal interests. Any successful revolutionary outcome, or aim toward a 'common salvation' is dependent upon a coordinated consciousness of the people in a collective struggle (Fanon 2004, 140). Such a collective consciousness cannot come from narrow-minded nationalism or divisive regionalism which preys upon difference over commonality. Individual experiences ought not to be weaponized as an avenue for identity politics or a preoccupation with difference. What happens when we begin to see it in the way Fanon suggests?

"Since individual experience is national, since it is a link in the national chain, it ceases to be individual, narrow and limited in scope, and can lead to the truth of the nation and the world" (Fanon 2004, 140-141).

To see individual experience as national, and the claim that it can lead to the truth of the nation, is the very possibility that Badiou articulates, namely that of using individual experience to unearth and to construct those universal truths, the universal which can be used as the point of departure and as a tool of mobilization. Fanon argues that this truth

ceases to be narrow and limited because the truth of the nation is what is *universal* despite all regionalism and tribalism. Such kind of truth, and this notion of the individual experience as the national, and I would argue one step further, as the *transnational* as well, is a manner by which the prospect of a transnational solidarity-building project can come to fruition. Fanon continually places emphasis on the need to “detrribalize” and to “unify” (Fanon 2004, 141), and more importantly to shift from a national consciousness to a social and political consciousness.

The notion of ‘national culture’ to Fanon is one not on the basis of any kind of concrete, pre-determined membership, but of a “collective thought process of a people to describe, justify, and extol the actions whereby they have joined forced and remained strong, [...] at the heart of the liberation struggle” (Fanon 2004, 168). This is what is meant by a group which is not self-enclosed – it is not a given, not based on essentialism, but instead is based on invention. He also goes on to emphasize that it alone is “capable of giving us an international dimension” (Fanon 2004, 179). *Nationalism* on the other hand is the opposite – self-enclosed, characterized by essentialism, *is* a given, and very much embodies the tribalism and regionalism he previously mentioned. National culture can be said to be based on those universalisms, while *nationalism* can be said to be based on difference, and is an avenue whereby differences become more pronounced and are at the centre.

The significance of Fanon in my argument is the character of the national culture he identifies. This is very much a culture that embodies the path of transnationalism, in fact it can be seen as the intermediary toward the transnational. In the same way that the national culture is a construction from the commonalities which emerge from the collection of individual experience (Fanon 2004, 141), so also can a transnational ‘culture’, in the same sense, be constructed from a similar frame, emerging from the commonalities between national cultures. The role of the national culture in anti-colonial struggle and revolution is precisely the role that is so desperately needed in anti-capitalist and imperialist struggle today in the face of globalized capitalism. Fanon’s ideas of the need for such an experience which surpasses the individual, and embodies the national, the unity in the liberation struggle, are precisely what seem to be echoed by Badiou and Žižek, and I would argue to be essential in conceiving of anti-capitalist mobilization and comradeship today. As Badiou suggested, global capitalism has already laid the groundwork for us to have a global response (Badiou and Engelmann 2019, 89), a groundwork which guarantees us that on some level we must be able to find commonality and invent the universal.

In a pool of such wide-ranging experiences and circumstances, there is bound to be an overlap, a uniting commonality. But, again, this is in no way to suggest that a uniting commonality overrides or blurs the utter difference in experience. On the contrary, that powerful uniting factor emphasizes the utter difference in experience, such an emphasis makes it all the more powerful as a point of departure for transnational alliance (Badiou and Engelmann 2019, 98). Ultimately, the argument for transnationalism is not to suggest that we must act in the exact same manner, in unison, and that we can collectively compile a list of measures to take that would apply universally. Instead, what is argued here is that in light of a global issue, there must be a global common ground to take as the point of departure. To put it in similar terms to Fanon, the individual experience is national, and could further be argued to be *transnational* as well. To take our individual societies, and more importantly those differences as our separate points of departure, is to overlook the global nature of such issues and the potential of finding those individual experiences which are the national which are the transnational, and to necessarily

bring about limitations to our ability to resist such systems. There is only so much we can do as separate societies in the face of a global problem.

A ‘politics of difference’ is often seen as one which recognizes different identities, and further recognizes the autonomy of those different identities (Rutherford 1990, 10). Because of this understanding of difference, the kind of call to internationalism that I argue for faces the risk of being understood as the opposite of this – to *not* recognize different identities, to *suppress* their autonomy. But, this misses the point. It once again comes down to the focus of difference over universality. As much as we recognize and address differences, the fact still remains that difference cannot be a point of universalizability, that which is required to build solidarity to begin with. Such a project of simply recognizing difference, or a diversity project has its limitations in that this is all that it is - seeking to recognize different individual identities. What is this collection of difference acting as the point of departure for? What is the greater project toward which this is necessarily the foundational framework?

It is important to note that Badiou does not *dismiss* difference, in fact he praises the sheer multitude of difference as that which allows the universal to be all the more powerful (Badiou and Engelmann 2019, 98). A politics of difference becomes too individualistic to a point where there is no basis to even search for, or seek to construct the universal among them, because the universal then takes away from individuality, and with it, the notion of autonomy as well. In his paper, a major grievance Rutherford has with the ‘new left’ is the belief in “some underlying totality that united differences into homogeneity” (Rutherford 1990, 15). I disagree with him in characterizing these ‘united differences’ as homogenous. To argue as such is to make it seem as though the creation of a universal to unite among differences is actually a method of silencing or repressing those differences. I would argue that under such a belief, the preoccupation with difference pushes one to see any uniting factor among them as opposing what difference stands for, and as the problem itself. A commonality that happens to emerge is not itself the problem, but is something necessary to comprehend what the problem actually is based on what such a unifying shared experience signifies.

Rutherford’s main issue seems to be that the focus on a uniting factor or cause erases or posits as secondary all those issues regarding and stemming from the differences in identity (Rutherford 1990, 16). But this seems to be an assumption made in response to a unifying anti-capitalism in the face of global capitalism. Is there reason to believe that there cannot be unifying factors outside of the shared grievances of capitalism, or that such grievances are not inherently linked to the interests of capital?

Take for example the issue of police brutality. In the context of the U.S. we see this addressed time and time again by the Black Lives Matter movement. But this is not the only context or country in which police brutality is a pernicious social ill, and the institution of policing is misguided, outdated, and unjustifiably violent. We also see this brought to light with the movement to end SARS in Nigeria, a unit of the Nigerian police force known to have a record of abuses of power. We see it in India with the ruling party’s henchmen called to fire at protestors dissenting against the Indian military occupation of Kashmir and a xenophobic citizenship act, at farmer’s defending their livelihoods, and at Muslims and Dalits for no apparent reason. We see it in Myanmar as police open fire at protestors, detaining activists, abducting and executing its citizens. The list can go on endlessly.

What is notable is how diverse these groups are, yet simultaneously, how painfully similar. The nuances of each differ, no doubt, but the common ground is the disproportionate monopoly on violence held by the state, the role of the antiquated institution of police as it exists

in carrying out state-sponsored tyranny and executions how they see fit, and the appropriation of such institutions for the purpose of protecting the interests of capital. Anti-police brutality is anti-capitalism as well.

The push for a transnational comradeship then is not 'restricted' to what is made to look like the 'singular', 'narrow' issue of global capitalism. The idea that it *is*, or that the issue of global capitalism does not implicate any further issues, is what seemingly leads to the conclusion that the prospect of transnational solidarity through a construction of a universal is a glazing over the intricacies and nuances of individual experience, and therefore a homogenizing move. This is a call to act in a manner that is conducive to transnational solidarity. Resisting from within self-enclosed groups which are all preoccupied with the needs of their specific group identity does not allow for *revolution* - it deprives us of the space to find those commonalities and build solidarity with other groups. We cannot aim to act from a self-enclosed group in the face of *global* phenomena since this would simply not bring about the impact of resistance which is required if every group is primarily concerned with their own needs, and risks a turn toward fascist tendencies. Solidarity here does not emerge from a recognition of one's own identity through another's, but through the very identities by which they defer. As articulated so brilliantly by Fanon, what unites us are the ruptures, not as much the identity groups to which we belong. In identifying those moments of oppression and exploitation that characterize our societies and our experiences, we are able to connect to those who identify similarly. This is the foundation for transnational solidarity and comradeship.

When we are looking at an transnationalism in global anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggle, this is not to say that all these different groups of people who have to come together in solidarity are identical in their standpoints, in the scope of their issues, or in the way they think fit to combat the global phenomena. Instead, it is to say that regardless of these different identities such groups and people may take up or find themselves in, we ought to connect with one another on a transnational level, in a shared non-identity with the global capitalist and imperialist system, a shared experience of exploitation and oppression by them. This is why I argue that Fanon's notion of the national culture is what is needed here to take that step toward the transnational.

Without this, there seems to be no viable prospect strong enough to counter a global phenomenon like capitalism, and all that it entails. The intent of liberal 'inclusion' and 'representation' politics derails any aim at international solidarity by centering difference over the common in the abundance of individual experiences we bring together in a group. To focus on the universal as central to a transnational consciousness is not to inadvertently devalue all those aspects which are not universalizable - this is not necessarily a zero-sum game of value. The main assertion here is that those commonalities are what act as intermediary steps to finding a common ground and common solution. The only way we are even able to evaluate our differences and find such a common ground is first and foremost through the acknowledgement of our existence within the globalized systems we seek to dismantle. The lack of exterior is important here because it is precisely what puts us in a position to compare experiences and have a chance at constructing the universal. From Fanon's notion of national culture, and historical examples of mass-mobilization such as the Haitian and French revolutions, we inherit and further develop a method of constructing out of the individual, a national truth, which we ought to push further in developing an international truth in our current situation.

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