

Dramatic Intellectuals

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Abstract Challenging reductionistic approaches to intellectuals that emphasize the so-called social origins of their ideas—the sociology OF culture approach—this essay proposes a cultural sociological approach that puts the search for meaning front and center. Intellectuals code their times in terms of sacred-good and profane-evil, and they provide narratives of salvation by temporalizing good and evil as protagonists in a master story of social transformation. Among the universe of significant intellectuals, however, one finds only a tiny subset whose ideas have actually been deployed to make things happen in the social world. To conceptualize this process, the theory of cultural pragmatics must be brought into play: Ideas must be socially performed, by carrier groups with access to the means of symbolic production, in propitious social settings, vis-a-vis potentially receptive audiences. After considering Marx, Freud, Keynes, and Sartre, this discussion is devoted to case studies of Ayn Rand and Frantz Fanon.

Keywords Intellectuals · Social theory · Performance · Drama

This essay is concerned, not with intellectuals as creators of important ideas, but with creators of important ideas who become compelling actors in a social scene, men and women whose ideas can make social things happen, either when they are alive and kicking (such intellectuals do kick) or after their corporal bodies have passed from the scene. This is not intellectual history, but a sociological approach to the historical achievements of certain kinds of intellectuals.

Reflecting Ideas: Sociology of Culture

Explaining such intellectuals does mean explaining something about the form and formation of their ideas, but much more as well—why their ideas had large effect. Most social scientists and

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theorists addressing these questions have offered reductionist models that make social-structural position determining. From Marx to Bourdieu, the focus has been on the *non-ideational* circumstances that the creators of ideas find themselves in: capitalism replacing feudalism; industrialism creating a working class; massification flattening society; the emergence of new ruling classes, middle classes, or power elites; or nations losing wars, suffering economic depression, or runaway inflation. Such emergent situations are portrayed as stealth conditions, lying in wait until they could properly be seen. Eventually, a smart, talented, and ambitious intellectual comes along who—finally!—can correctly read the social scene. *Et voila!* It is because intellectual theories mirror the nature of society (Rorty 1979), so the structuralist story goes, that they can affect it so.

A limpid statement of such reflection theory can be found in *The Communist Manifesto*. “The theoretical conclusions of the Communists,” Marx and Engels assert (1962[1848]: 46), “are in no way based on principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be reformer,” but “merely express in general terms actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes.” The *Manifesto* provides a structural approach not only to the ideas of intellectuals but to their motivation. Radical intellectuals are described as representing a “small section of the ruling class” who had once been “bourgeois ideologists” but whose class position has now been so reduced that they have become proletarianized (Marx and Engels 1962[1848]: 44). The “process of dissolution going on within the ruling class,” Marx and Engels suggest, is of such a “violent and glaring character” that the economic basis of bourgeois life has disappeared. Just as external reality explains the content of intellectual ideas, so does external circumstance explain why intellectuals have created it.

According to this model of *déclassé*, ideas are pathways for intellectuals who have lost their social position to gain compensation. Employing skills from their once privileged life, they enable a lower group to rise, and themselves along with it. Thus is a model of social determinism transformed into the semblance of a theory of agency. In the hands of such thinkers as Pierre Bourdieu (1988, 1991) and Michele Lamont (1987), intellectuals become unconscious strategizers. When conceived in this manner, however, agency is illusory. Ideas become simply a non-material means for profit maximization. There is no reference to the impact of ideas themselves, to the contingency of their creation, or to the symbolic power of their effect (cf., Bartmanski 2012). Reflection theory blocks a dramaturgical approach to intellectuals and a voluntaristic (Parsons 1937) understanding of ideational creation.

Two variations of the structural model have sought to modify its deterministic and reductionist cast. One approaches intellectuals as a new middle class. Once respected members of the *Bildungsbürgerstratum*, intellectuals have now become the best-educated members of an information-processing class. Working with information, Alvin Gouldner (1979) claimed, creates the “culture of critical discourse.” But if a discourse is a reflection of the labor process, can it actually be a critical reflection upon it? In *Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*, George Konrad and Ivan Szelenyi (1979) are more blunt. Their displaced middle class thinkers are not ideationally but self-motivated: Their ideas have no causal independence from intellectuals’ political and economic interest.

Yet another variation of the structural model approaches intellectuals as spiritually alienated and socially envious; they are expected to supply cultural patina, but possess neither political nor economic power. Edward Shils (1972) reasoned that such dislocation inspires a gnostic yearning among intellectuals: They demand a utopian but thoroughly impractical transcendence. Intellectuals are out of touch with actually existing possibilities for changing society in mundane but practical ways.

Structural approaches to intellectuals identify elements central to any sociological explanation. Highly educated persons are deeply affected by changing social circumstances. But only a tiny few among such persons respond by creating compelling systems of new ideas, and even fewer still have the skill and good fortune to ensure for their ideas have dramatic effect. Structural approaches cannot explain how ideas become causes. They exemplify what I have called a sociology *of* culture in contrast with a cultural *sociology* (Alexander and Smith 2004; cf. Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith 2012). Non-cultural, social factors are prerequisites of effective intellectual action, but they predict neither the content of intellectual ideas nor the process of intellectual action, much less their social effects. Structural models do not help us understand the drama of intellectual life and the performative possibilities of progressive and reactionary ideas.

Performing Ideas: Cultural Sociology

To achieve such understandings, we must turn from sociology of culture to cultural sociology, from a theory of external circumstances to a meaning-centered theory, one that models how social meaning is instantiated via social performance (Alexander 2011b). Intellectual actors orient themselves to meaning. They want to enact mythos and engage in symbolic action, but they must also be acutely sensitive to pragmatics and strategy. Social performance theory conceptualizes such cultural pragmatics. It develops a macro-sociology of how social meanings can become dramatic in the complex contexts of contingent social life (Morgan and Baert 2015).

Intellectuals play powerful social roles insofar as (1) their ideas provide poetically potent scripts; (2) the scripts not only read well but have the potential to “walk and talk,” thus contributing to the staging of social dramas; and (3) the enacted scripts so affect the meanings and motivations of audiences that social actors are motivated to participate in social movements and build new institutions. To the degree that these conditions are met, to that degree do intellectuals become dramatic personae in the deeply affecting performances their ideas have created. Their persons become iconic, condensed, simplified, and charismatic collective representations of the transformational models they themselves propose—contemporarily, in real time, or retrospectively, in memory.

When human societies were small and relatively unified, they had no need for intellectuals; the metaphysical, social, and natural worlds that composed such societies seemed tied together in an immanent way. The social performances that give body and direction to organic social worlds do not require reflection and innovation. They are rituals, scheduled social performances, habitual and consensual, that call out stereotyped emotions and meanings and produce predictable social effects. When organic societies decompose, under the pressures of social rationalization, institutional differentiation, and cultural fragmentation, the elements fused together in ritualistic performance begin to unwind. As the elements of performance de-fuse, mythos becomes more separated from mundane society and audiences become separated from actors. For social understandings to become widely shared, they must now be projected and elaborately staged. In conditions of de-fusion, it becomes more difficult to project authentic and persuasive performances, to bring the elements of performance back together, to make symbolic action stick. Shamans give way to priests and theologians and eventually to intellectuals, the first historical creators of ideas who have the burden of making things up (Eisenstadt 1982).

Powerful intellectuals create symbolic frameworks that re-fuse fragmented meanings, actions, and institutions. They provide a new horizon of meaning for social actors who, having lost the “sense” of social and cultural circumstance, experience emotional anxiety and existential stress. To command dramatic ideational power, intellectuals must code and narrate newly emerging social realities in a manner that offers salvation (Bartmanski 2012; cf., Alexander 2010).

To make meaning in synchronic terms, intellectuals define binaries of good and evil. They identify contemporary social arrangements as dangerous and polluting and conjure up utopian alternatives, antidotes that promise to purify and save. To be forceful, however, intellectual ideas must also be diachronic. They must place sacred and profane social forces into historical time and narrate them as protagonists and antagonists. The past becomes a golden age; the present is framed as a fateful falling away into oppression, nihilism, or anomie. Socially effective intellectuals persuade us that a far different future is possible. The present is not an end point but a hinge of history. While necessarily connected to the past from which it emerges as a present, contemporary time may swing either way. It may thrust forward to future salvation or remain caught inside the present, soon to become a corrupted past.

When intellectuals create narratives that juxtapose heroic protagonists with dangerous antagonists, the tension is portrayed not only as social struggle but as storied plot. Sacred and profane binaries thus become dramatic, energized by all or nothing battles that decide our shared human fate. They have inspiring ups and harrowing downs. There is a battle for position, and history can go either way.¹ When virtue wins, the sacred is protected and evil slain. When social crisis leads to collective catharsis, blocking elements are pushed aside and ordinary time becomes *Weltgeschichte*. Social protagonists become heroes; so do the intellectuals who created the theory scripting the struggle and its transformative denouement.

Intellectual Heroes of the American Left

In *Seeds of the Sixties*, their singular account of American social critics in the 1950s, Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jameson (1995) describe these intellectuals in exactly such heroic terms.² “This is a book about dissident intellectuals and the breathing spaces that they carved out of the postwar landscape.” As heroes, these 1950s intellectuals are praised for creating compelling binaries, for having had the courage to draw a sharp line between the human sacred and the dehumanizing profane. C. Wright Mills and Hannah Arendt are portrayed as condemning the “age of conformity,” “defending the right of dissent,” and “reinventing partisanship.” Lewis Mumford and Rachel Carson “gave voice to the deviant and downtrodden” at a time “when most intellectuals were falling in line.” Herbert Marcuse and Margaret Mead “kept open the critical processes of debate” in a world of “industrialized science and bureaucratic ... knowledge.” The courage of these heroic thinkers is demonstrable. Because they fiercely “struggled for autonomy and individualism” in the “quiescent days of the 1950’s,” they were able to provide “rays of Enlightenment” in “dark times.” These progressive intellectuals were able to weave the binaries of darkness and light into “before and

¹ The culturally oriented Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci (1971: 206–76) insisted, in developed capitalist societies, that the Communist struggle for material power—economically via control of the state—can succeed only if it is complemented by the struggle for cultural hegemony, which he called the struggle for position.

² The quotations following are from Eyerman and Jameson (1995): 1–7.

after” stories that narrate how temporally located social action could transform institutional space. Planting the intellectual seeds for radical transformation, “they helped inspire the emergence of new political energy,” “prepar[ing] the way for a new wave of radicalism [in] the sixties.”

As they interpret their empirical material, Eyerman and Jameson develop the culture structures that animate intellectual performance, imposing a model of meaning-making that allows intellectual drama to be made. What I want to suggest here is that these culture structures go well beyond the specifics of this American case. They are universal. To be dramatic, the performances of every powerful intellectual must be patterned in similar ways.

Intellectual Heroes of the European Left: Live Performance

Intellectuals clarify their times by creating tense moral binaries and narrating these qualities as social struggles between sacred heroes and diabolical enemies. Even as they crystallize dark fears, their theories create the alchemy for transcending them, all at the same time.

- In the chaotic and wrenching admixture of early industrial society, Karl Marx developed an apocalyptic story about good and evil, suffering and salvation (De Man 1984). There were just two, fiercely competitive social forces, proletariat and bourgeoisie. Capitalism was to blame, class struggle was the result, and communism the resolution (Marx and Engels 1962 [1848]; Marx 1962 [1867]).
- Amidst the suicidal anxieties of fin-de-siècle Vienna (Schorske 1980) and interwar Europe, Sigmund Freud portrayed the struggle between id and superego, the former terrifyingly primitive, the latter superciliously civilized. Id and superego engaged in titanic battle, not only in the course of an individual life but over the course of social evolution. Modernity was built upon massive repression, producing guilt feelings temporarily relieved by outbursts of deadly aggression (Freud 1962 [1930]). Only the heroic interventions of psychoanalysis could save the day. Where id was, ego shall be (Freud 1962 [1923]; cf., Rieff 1959).
- John Maynard Keynes came to public acclaim as a prophet of doom after what was euphemistically called The Great War. In his caustic, fuming scythe of an essay, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (Keynes 1920), the Cambridge educated and Bloomsbury cultivated Clytemnestra denounced the war’s victors as villains and portrayed the war’s aggressors as victims.

The Economic Consequences of the Peace ... was no mere technical treatise. The torrid *mise-en-scene* at Paris is vividly recreated; the failings of Clemenceau, Wilson, and Lloyd George are displayed with cruel precision. The writing is angry, scornful and ... passionate. [Keynes’] denunciations of bungling and lying [and] his moral indignation ... ring ... loud and clear. Giving shape to the whole is a brooding sense of menace; a sense of the travails of a civilization *in extremis*; of the mindless mob waiting its turn to usurp the collapsing inheritance; of the futility and frivolity of statesmanship. The result is a personal statement unique in twentieth-century literature. Keynes was staking the claim of the economist to be Prince. All other forms of rule were bankrupt. The economist’s vision of welfare, conjoined to a new standard of technical excellence, were the last barriers to chaos, madness, and retrogression. (Skidelsky 1983: 384)

In the two decades after, the sky darkened as Keynes had predicted. The economist who was increasingly regarded as a political hero created an intellectual opus that promised to save the day, the *General Theory* (Keynes 1936). Capitalism was not organic and self-regulating but dystonic, dis-equilibrated, and chaotic, possibly in a fateful way. The animal spirits of businessmen made rational evaluation of risk impossible, with boom and bust the inevitable result. Keynes' genial theory not only explained this dark reality but offered salvation.³ Keynesian economists could provide a new social ego. Where greedy impulse and destructive austerity once were, state planning and counter-cyclical spending could be.

- Jean-Paul Sartre came of age during the ashes of the Second World War that Keynes had earlier prophesized, in a country prostrate in military and moral defeat. When Sartre rocketed to intellectual dominance in 1944 and 1945, it was not only because of the subtleties of *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1956 [1943]), his new phenomenology, but rather because of the promise of existential and national salvation that the work implicitly promised to provide (Baert 2015). Social actors live in a condition of freedom, and if they are enchained it is their own doing. At every moment, we have a choice. If we take responsibility for our thoughts and actions, we act in good faith, with social liberty the result (Sartre 2007 [1945]). If we refuse to take responsibility, denying our ability to choose, we act in bad faith, and possibilities for civil repair disappear (Sartre 1995 [1948]). These broad brush ideas provided a morally compelling explanation for France's decrepitude and the promise that, if responsibility were taken, national salvation could still be achieved.

Intellectual ideas can be understood as performance-oriented scripts. Yet, while they represent extraordinarily creative ideation, they are neither *de novo* nor *sui generis*. Drawing from background representations, they constitute new *paroles*, new kinds of speech acts inside of already existing *langues*. Only in this manner is it possible for radically innovative intellectual ideas to make themselves understood. Insofar as they succeed in becoming dramatically powerful, they will become a new meta-language themselves. Marx was a German Hegelian, French socialist, and British political economist before he became "Marx," the communist theorist of capitalism. Freud was a psycho-physiologist and a hypnotherapist before he became "Freud," the psychoanalyst. Keynes was a probability theorist and neo-Marshallian before he became "Keynes," the master economist of the twentieth century. Sartre was the *devoté* of Husserl and Heidegger before he became "Sartre," the founder of existentialism.

Intellectual Heroes of the European Left (2): Post-Life Performance

Meaning-making is at the center of dramatic intellectual action, but it is not all there is. Materiality is critical, and power too. Performances need to deploy actors who can dramatically speak and act intellectual scripts; the actors need access to the means of symbolic production, to stages, props, media of communication, and other mass-projection techniques; and, even when such elements are at hand, performances need producers and directors who

³ Note the subtitle of the second volume of Skidelsky's biography: *John Maynard Keynes: The Economist as Savior 1920-1937* (Skidelsky 1992). Cf., Alexander 2011a.

can put them together into *mises-en-scenes*. Salvation can be promised intellectually, but it must be dramatically enacted to be felt and practical enough to be seen. And there is one more requirement for fused performance—a broad audience must be deeply engaged. To be dramatic, intellectuals must project their ideas far beyond their immediate networks and professional milieux, beyond disciplines and universities into the wider world. Will efforts to fuse with a broader audience be successful? Nobody can say. The element of surprise is integral to every great performance. It is what makes drama dramatic. Performances are electrifying because they are filled with risk.

- Marx needed the organization of the First and then the Second International for “Marxism” to become intellectually dramatic. Marxism needed mass political parties to act as producers of its social performances (Michels 1962 [1911]), and skilled directors such as Rosa Luxemburg, Vladimir Lenin, and Mao Zedong to develop techniques for so powerfully fusing with audiences of worker and peasant audiences that revolutionary action would result (McLellan 1979; Apter and Saich 1994; Sun 2013; Alexander *in press*).
- Along with his powerful written scripts, Freud developed techniques of therapeutic practice that fused psychoanalytic ideas with suffering patient-audiences. He assembled a priestly core group who became the central cast for globally projecting the psychoanalytic way (Roazen 1971). Their dramatic struggles to remake the modern psyche were empowered by organizations and journals, fueled by world congresses, and punctuated by moments of integrative triumph and splitting despair.
- Keynes would have been able neither to create nor to project *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* if he were not an insider at the postwar peace talks in Versailles. He could not have become an influential member of the British delegation to the peace talks if he had not been educated at Kings College, nurtured by Cambridge Apostles and Bloomsbury bohemians, and sheltered at the highest levels of the Treasury for the duration of WWI. Keynes’ access and centrality are not sufficient to explain his essay’s dramatic power, but they were necessary for its preparation. So was the fact that his audience was ready and primed. Within a year of publication, *Economic Consequences* had sold more than 100,000 copies and was translated into a dozen languages. The script’s instant worldwide fame depended on more than Keynes’ apocalyptic style and technical arguments: “It captured a mood. It said with great authority, flashing advocacy and moral indignation what ‘educated’ opinion wanted said” (Skidelsky 1983: 399).
- Sartre had access to the means of symbolic production only because, in the wake of French humiliation and defeat, much more established and powerful intellectual performers had been accused of collaboration and forced off the stage (Baert 2015). His essays on war guilt and existentialism became powerful because they appeared at the epiphanic moment of liberation, when the French nation was trying to salvage self-respect and forge a way forward domestically and on the international scene. Sartre appeared as a hero at mass rallies, wrote columns for newspapers, and spoke eloquently on radio. In *Les Temps modernes*, he organized a core group of existential actors to connect with other intellectuals as well as activists on the local and international scene (Davies 1987).

Thus far, my analysis of intellectual performance has been relatively schematic. Assuming familiarity with the ideas and influence of these world-historical thinkers, my aim has been to reframe this common knowledge theoretically, to suggest how the ideas can be understood as meaning-constructions and how their influence can be seen as

performative effect. In the second part of this essay, I investigate two cases in more detail. The intellectual careers and afterlives of Ayn Rand and Frantz Fanon are not nearly as widely known as the canonical thinkers, and their ideas have exerted less performative power. Both intellectuals, however, still have achieved remarkable dramatic effect. Exploring the sources of such power, the sociological reasons for its efflorescence and delimitation can shed further light on how social performance explains practical intellectual success.⁴

Heroine of the American Right

Among political theorists and cultural historians, Ayn Rand and her ideas have rarely been seriously considered. She was an ideological outlier, a radical conservative who celebrated capitalism, particularly what she regarded as the unsung virtues of its wealthiest elite. More theoretically revealing is that Rand was not herself a genial thinker. Mixing free market theory with Nietzsche, rationalism, and natural rights theory, Rand certainly stirred vinegar into the familiar bromides of bourgeois life. Still, her case violates the first criteria for intellectual power: She was not the creator of a consequential new idea. Rand does, however, meet the second requirement: Her ideas made social things happen. This highlights the paradox that performative success unfolds relatively independently of intrinsic intellectual merit.

In contrast with the regimes of social democracy, communism, and welfare states, twentieth century capitalism has had few significant intellectual champions. Such philosophers as Michael Oakeshott emphasized the extra-economic dimensions of conservatism; such thinkers as Frederick Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, whose anti-socialist polemics were highly influential, were narrowly economic in their aims. Since the middle of the twentieth century, no conservative, pro-capitalist intellectual has manifest anywhere near Rand's performative power, recently characterized by one liberal academic as "the most significant American ideological development of the last 35 years" (<http://www.rawstory.com/2015/04/ayn-rands-philosophy-of-selfishness-has-a-deep-influence-on-the-mindset-of-the-right/>). Even as Rand's thought has barely touched the academic disciplines, corporate leaders and buccaneering entrepreneurs have heralded it as secular theology. "I really felt like an Ayn Rand hero," one Silicon Valley entrepreneur recounted, adding "I didn't just feel like one, I was one. I was building the products. I was thinking independently. I was being rational. I was taking pride in what I did. Those are Ayn Rand hero characteristics" (Adams 2011). Yet, Rand did not pander to capitalist class-consciousness. She projected her *Weltanschauung*, not only to business people but also to the middle class and workers, to rebellious youth and pop stars alike.

Rand came of age during the early years of the Russian revolution. The nascent Soviet state not once but several times confiscated her father's small business, her once wealthy family experiencing not only massive status deprivation but also real poverty. This family trauma, triggered by revolutionary socialism, proved the defining emotional element in Rand's life, propelling her intellectual search for meaning (Burns 2009: 1–19).

Rand clarified the chaos and anxiety of her life and times, organizing the social world into binary codes and working the binaries into compelling stories. Private property is sacred, public property profane; the individual is inviolate, the state corrupt; money and commercial contracts are pure, bureaucracy and organization evil; accumulating wealth is admirable,

⁴ I am grateful to Alex de Branco and Christine Slaughter for their assistance with the following sections.

redistributing it the work of the devil. Transforming these binaries into a narrative form, Rand painted capitalist protagonists as fallen heroes suffering at the hands of oppressive, corrupt government, and ungrateful masses feeding from the public trough. In response to a comment that money is “the root of all evil,” one of the protagonists in *Atlas Shrugged* proclaims: “Until and unless you discover that money is the root of all good, you ask for your own destruction. When money ceases to be the tool by which men deal with one another, then men must become the tools of men. Blood, whips and guns—or dollars” (<http://capitalismmagazine.com/2002/08/franciscos-money-speech/>). Rand prophesied that salvation would emerge from capitalist social movements. Not only massive conservative protest but also the organized withdrawal of capitalist labor power—a “property strike”—were necessary if liberty and prosperity were to be restored.

Rand considered herself an intellectual, insisting that ideas were the only things that truly mattered, yet her most influential efforts at coding and narrating were neither abstract theorizing nor empirical analysis. Romantic fiction, not social science or philosophy, provided her most persuasive outlet for intellectual expression, the medium not the message that made her ideas dramatically great.⁵ A student of Russian film and photography, Rand fled Petrograd for Hollywood in 1921, becoming a highly remunerated screenwriter and publicist before turning her aesthetic skills to novels. *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), the first 700 pages, the second more than a thousand, were the epochal results.

With her gift for agonistic plotting and sharply etched, larger than life character, Rand was able to make the script of capitalist ideology walk and talk. From the mundane realities of money, markets, and self-interest, she made mythos, creating gods and goddesses who stalked the earth and held the fate of humanity in their hand. The mysterious hero John Galt haunted the first 700 pages of *Atlas Shrugged* before actually entering the plot. The epitome of rugged individualist, Galt had discovered a revolutionary electric motor, but, hounded by perfidious bureaucrats and ignorant masses, he refused to bring it to the market. Instead, he dropped out of sight, secretly organizing a utopian market society of self-exiled capitalists, Galt’s Gulch, in the deep crevices of the Colorado Rockies. Galt’s 60-page-long speech became the stuff of movies and urban legends.

All the men who have vanished, the men you hated, yet dreaded to lose, it is I who have taken them away from you ... Do not cry that it is our duty to serve you. We do not recognize such duty. Do not cry that you need us. We do not consider need a claim... We are on strike against self-immolation. We are on strike against the creed of unearned rewards and unrewarded duties. We are on strike against the dogma that the pursuit of one’s happiness is evil... I swear—by my life and my love of it—that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine. (https://docs.google.com/document/d/1x08QhNX_a1iB5Dt5uEC21q_GMvrM0sbd6zba2UOb6c0/edit)

“Where is John Galt?” became the catchword of ideological insiders. When CNN founder Ted Turner was a little known media executive, he paid with his personal funds for 248 billboards across the American South; they read simply “Where is John Galt?” (Burns 2009: 214).

⁵ In the wake of the extraordinary impact of her literary work, Rand made an effort to upgrade her ideas into an abstract philosophy she called Objectivism. The move contributed something to Rand’s performative power, allowing Rand to place herself at the head of the pantheon of the great thinkers (see, e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6gV1MUSXMg>) and providing a glossy patina for her followers. Only a tiny handful of contemporary philosophers, however, regard the upgrading as an intellectual success. In my view, it was the fictional, not the philosophical version of her thinking that propelled Rand’s dramatic impact.

Rand's novels were catnip for ideological iconoclasts in the 1930s and 1940s, but only during the perilous life-and-death atmosphere of the early Cold War did the texts take off, hotly fusing with wider, ever more fervid audience. "For many the Fountainhead had the power of revelation," writes Rand biographer Jennifer Burns: "One reader told Rand ... 'It is like being awake for the first time.' This metaphor of awakening was among the most common devices readers used to describe the impact of Rand's writing" (Burns 2009: 91). "Rand" became the node of a nationwide network of ideologically excited readers, and coterie of organic intellectuals created organizations spreading popular distillations of her word. The *lingua franca* of these circles were the literary metaphors that clothed Rand's intellectual binaries—"looters," "moochers," and "second-handers" on one side, "producers," "traders," and "creators" on the other. One of the principal protagonists of *The Fountain Head*, Howard Roark, attacked altruism as "the doctrine which demands that man live for others and place others above self," asserting that "the second-hander has used altruism as a weapon of exploitation and reversed the case of mankind's moral principles." Roark declares, "men have been taught every precept that destroys the creator. Men have been taught dependence as a virtue" (<http://www.workthesystem.com/getting-it/howard-roarks-courtroom-speech/>).

Rand insisted, "each man must be an end in himself and follow his own rational self-interest," but her biography demonstrates a performative contradiction, the theoretical tenet refuted by her exploding symbolic power. A cult of fanatically devoted followers formed around her person, christening itself "The Collective," among whose charter members was Alan Greenspan, a lifelong devotee who went on to become the longest serving and most influential Federal Reserve Board chairman in US history.⁶ Rand herself directed the expanding performance of her intellectual power, casting herself as leading persona, appearing at densely crowded live events and on widely network television shows, costumed in a flowing black cape adorned with gold dollar sign insignia and flaunting an elongated cigarette holder.

In the 1960s, Rand was hailed as an intellectual beacon by right-wing Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater and taken as totem by Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), the radical, newly styled "libertarian" organization that mirrored the New Left, planting the seeds of late-twentieth century neo-conservatism.

For libertarian YAFers it was, above all other conservative intellectuals, Ayn Rand who was most significant. Many libertarians say Rand taught them how to conceptualize, to put ideas in a larger framework. Sharon Presley says she was "totally apolitical" until at 19 a friend recommended she read Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. "It was like, 'Oh, my God, what a revelation!' I read the book; it came along at just the right time.... What she did for me was get me thinking about ... things in those kinds of philosophical terms that I never had ... That was a major, major influence on my life" (Klatch 1999: 69–70).

Later, political figures brought this new conservative ideology into the White House. In 1987, 5 years after Rand's death, *New York Times* Washington correspondent Maureen Dowd (1987) described Rand as the "novelist laureate" of the Reagan administration: "Many Reaganites favor the novels of Miss Rand, the goddess of enlightened selfishness and soaring

⁶ "Greenspan's attraction to Rand was fairly standard for those drawn into her orbit ... Before meeting Rand, Greenspan was 'intellectually limited ... I was a talented technician, but that was all.' Under Rand's tutelage, he began to look beyond a strictly empirical, numbers-based approach to economics, now thinking about 'human beings, their values, how they work, what they do and why they do it, and how they think and why they think' Rand pushed him ... to connect his economic ideas to the big questions in life." Burns (2009:150) quotes here from Greenspan's memoir, *The Age of Turbulence: Adventures in a New World* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

free enterprise.” Twenty-five years later, such presidential aspirants as Speaker of the US House of Representatives Paul Ryan and Senators Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, and Rand Paul proudly claim to have cut their political eye teeth on Rand’s work. In Orange County, California, ground zero for America’s postwar far right politics, the Ayn Rand Institute is funded by a \$10 million annual budget, supports a 35-person research and outreach staff, distributes gratis hundreds of thousands of Rand novels annually to high schools and colleges, and offers \$100,000 a year in prizes for essay contests that have involved hundreds of thousands of students ([https://ari.aynrand.org/blog/2015/04/21/ari-encourages-greater-educator-awareness-of-ayn-rands-ideas](https://ari.aynrand.org/blog/2015/04/21/ari-encourages-greater-educator-awareness-of-ayn-rands-ideas;); cf., Weiss 2012: 17). In the late 1990s, *Atlas Shrugged* ranked just after the Bible in a poll asking Book of the Month Club subscribers what book had most influenced American readers’ lives (Heller 2009: 287).

Hero of the Third World

In contrast with Ayn Rand, Frantz Fanon did create new ideas. Before the publication of *The Wretched of the Earth*, in 1961, no thinker had translated the exploding postwar struggles against colonialism into a coherent social theory. Fanon conceptualized a revolutionary struggle, triggered not by class but by cultural, emotional, and physical domination and, perhaps most singularly, by global processes of racial stigmatization. Fanon theorized colonialism broadly, as the worst of “Europe’s crimes,” something “heinous ... which has been committed at the very heart of man.” Citing “the immense scale” of the injury, Fanon indicted “racial hatred, slavery, exploitation and, above all, the bloodless genocide whereby one and a half billion men have been written off” (Fanon 2004 [1963]: 238). Repairing social injury on this scale, he argued, would require an equally massive response—a worldwide revolutionary struggle. “The Third World must start over a new history of man,” Fanon declared; “for Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man” (Fanon 2004 [1963]: 238–9). Such an anti-colonial insurrection movement would have to deploy violence against European colonizers as ruthlessly as the Europeans had employed violence to sustain their imperial domination.

While new, this theory about colonialism and its overthrow did not emerge de novo. Fanon’s revolutionary ideas drew from Marxist humanism and militant Bolshevism, but the intellectual representations he reconstructed went far beyond such traditional sources of twentieth century radical thought. Fanon forged his early intellectual identity in the Martinique lycée where he studied with Aimé Césaire, the literary and political figure that helped create *négritude*, the celebration of Afro-Caribbean cultural qualities as distinctive and valuable in themselves, independent from European colonial culture. When Fanon studied for his postwar medical degree in Lyon, after fighting with the Free French in North Africa, he took on board ideas from the institutional psychotherapy movement, a radical intervention in psychiatric thinking initiated by Francois Tosquelle.⁷ Fanon absorbed, as well, the left phenomenology pulsating through the pores of postwar French intellectual life, with its fusion of Heidegger’s

⁷ Guattari (1984: 208) describes this movement in a way that illuminates its relevance for Fanon: “Its main characteristic is a determination never to isolate the study of mental illness from its social and institutional context and, by the same token, to analyze institutions on the basis of interpreting the real, symbolic, and imagery effects of society upon individuals.”

“lived experience” and Hegelian dialectics.⁸ And throughout his *Bildung*, but much more intensely after he began practicing psychiatry in North Africa, Fanon imbibed the ideology of anti-colonialism.

Yet, while the later Fanon certainly created a new theoretical compound from this mixture,⁹ the intellectual influence of his ideas derived less from their originality than their performativity. Throughout the last decade of his life, Fanon’s ideas about the anti-colonial were no secret. His articles were published in political, psychiatric, and intellectual journals, and he delivered widely reported public speeches as an official representative of the FLN, the National Liberation Front.¹⁰ Only as he became mortally ill, however, did Fanon condense these ideas into his tensely wrought manifesto *Wretched of the Earth*, published just days before his death. On the day Fanon died, police in Paris, citing national security, confiscated the book’s stock from the city’s bookstores.

As the revolutionary’s soul rose from his body, Fanon’s intellectual transmogrification began. He became an icon, his life a religious parable, his writings a holy text. Fanon’s biographer David Macey described him as “the most famous spokesman of ... Third Worldism” (Macey 2012: 373), and Stuart Hall, the Anglo-Caribbean doyen of the Birmingham school, hailed *Wretched of the Earth* as “the bible of decolonization” (Hall 1996). In making these claims to Fanon’s fame, Macey and Hall implicitly reference the performative status of Fanon’s ideas. In a camouflaged manner, so did Fanon himself, explaining to the editor of *Black Skin, White Masks*, “I am trying to touch my reader affectively ... irrationally, almost sensually” (Macey 2012: 3245). Critics have gestured to Fanon’s “poetic prose” (Zeilig 2012), to “the inherently dramatic idiom of French left-Existentialism” (King 1992), and even to the “immensely complex and compelling force” with which “Fanon’s texts speak to us when we read their contents as speech acts in the moving body of a dramatic narrative” (Sekyi-Out 1996: 236). None of these interpretations, however, have opened the black box to explore the culture structures that actually animated Fanon’s text, much less the components of its performative power.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (2008[1952]: 89) represented himself as a primal, redemptive figure: “I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the origin of the world.” With *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon sifted the meaning of meanings into an anti-colonial shape. Transforming what Sartre (2004: liv) called the “age of conflagration,” Fanon evoked a mythical confrontation between good and evil redeemed by an eschatological struggle for social salvation. An intensely dramatic text, *Wretched of the Earth* was less about empirical description and theoretical generalization than about the sacred and profane. Fanon (2004[1963]: 2) declared, “de-colonialism is the

⁸ “The Marxism of the early 1950s had nothing to say about the lived experience of the black man. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty were of much more use to Fanon” Macey (2012: 9202).

⁹ The idea of creating a compound from a mixture suggests that, while providing background representations, none of these intellectual influences retained their original form in Fanon’s later thought. For example, while Fanon’s theory incorporated racial difference, as both independent cause and effect, he engaged in a fundamental critique of *négritude* for what he saw as its tendency to essentialize and romanticize blackness as more emotional and less rational, rather than asserting a fundamental universal humanity.

¹⁰ “Less than half of the material included in the book [*Wretched of the Earth*] was actually produced in 1961. The section on ‘national culture’ is an expanded version of the speech given by Fanon to *Presence africaine’s* Rome congress at Easter 1959. The final section on ‘colonial war and mental illness’ consists mainly of case-notes made in Blida and Tunis between 1954 and 1959, supplemented by a short essay which takes up and revises both Fanon’s 1952 essay on ‘The North-African syndrome’ and his one brief contribution to *Consciences maghrébines* ... The notorious first chapter on violence first appeared as a 50-page-long article published in *Les Temps modernes* in May 1961” (Macey 2012: 8715–8730).

encounter between two congenitally antagonistic forces.” He insisted, “challenging the colonial world is not a rational confrontation of viewpoints,” not a “discourse on the universal,” but rather “the impassioned claim by the colonized that their world is fundamentally different.”¹¹ In this “Manichean world,” the “colonist is not content with physically limiting the space of the colonized, i.e., with the help of his agents of law and order,” but “turns the colonized into a kind of quintessence of evil.” Colonizers see themselves as autonomous, active, rational, strong, caring, and fair-minded, and define the colonized as dependent, irrational, impulsive, impotent, aggressive, and filled with shame (Alexander 2006). Under colonialism, these sacred and profane symbolic qualities become isomorphic with vertically ordered social positions, not only metaphorically connected with economic, political, and cultural hierarchies but also metonymically aligned with skin color and spatial location, with whiteness and blackness, metropolis and periphery.

Fanon’s theory of anti-colonial struggle challenged neither these signifiers nor their Manichean split; it upended, rather, the social signifieds with which they were aligned. If colonizers were on top at time 1, at time 2, after the revolution, it would be the once-colonized peoples who would be independent and strong, cosmopolitan and proud, and the old European world left behind, exhausted, degraded, irrational, and humiliated.

To conceptualize this inversion, Fanon created a narrative that temporalized his morally weighted binaries. The abstract qualities of sacred and profane were given flesh and blood, becoming protagonists and antagonists in an apocalyptic confrontation, for “time must no longer be that of the moment or the next harvest but rather of the rest of the world” (Fanon 2004 [1963]: 135). For Fanon, decolonization “focuses on and fundamentally alters being, and transforms the spectator crushed to a nonessential state into a privileged actor, captured in a virtually grandiose fashion by the spotlight of History.” Ostensibly secular, Fanon’s narrative is deeply rooted in a Judeo-Christian structure. When he (2004 [1963]: 2) offers to “describe it accurately,” he draws from Matthew 19:30, suggesting that the anti-colonial struggle can “be summed up on the well-known words: ‘The last shall be first’.”

The vehicle that energizes this revolutionary plot, the event that prepares its narrative resolution, is righteous violence. Describing the “bare reality” of decolonization, Fanon exclaims (2004 [1963]: 3), it “reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives,” explaining “the last can be the first only after a murderous and decisive confrontation.” To “blow the colonial world to smithereens” is more than simply an effective tactic, however. It is also a “clear image within the grasp and imagination of every colonized subject,” not only physical but mythical violence (cf., Sorel 1915 [1908]). “This violent praxis is totalizing,” Fanon suggests, evoking the transformation of seriality into fusion from Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. It is because “each individual represents a violent link in the great chain” that “the armed struggle mobilizes the people, i.e., it pitches them in a single direction, from which there is no turning back” (50). Violence provides the emotional catharsis upon which narrative resolution depends, forcing a new moral understanding from the experience of pity and suffering: “Violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them and restores their self-confidence” (Fanon 2004 [1963]: 51).¹²

But if deconstructing the code and narrative animating Fanon’s text is necessary, it still is not sufficient to explain his theory’s dramatic power. No matter how original and animated, an

¹¹ Quoting here and below from Fanon 2004 [1963]: 6.

¹² Such a classical Aristotelian view points to the dramaturgical underpinnings of the psychoanalytic concept of catharsis upon which Fanon’s theory of violence draws.

intellectual text remains just that—a script that can inform social action, but not social action itself. To become performative, social theories must walk and talk. Only if they can be felicitously inserted into social scenes will they be able to fuse with the intellectual ambitions of peers and the existential hunger of lay audiences, an effort that facilitates, but also sometimes thwarts, efforts at critical mediation.

Well-funded and widely networked editorial groups in Paris gave Fanon access to the means of symbolic production, even as they provided intellectual mediation that primed the critical pump. In the 1950s, pieces by and about Fanon appeared in *Esprit*, the leftist Catholic journal, and *Les Temps modernes*.¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, at once the most powerful and also the most polarizing intellectual in France, staged the publication of *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon's decisive intellectual performance.¹⁴ In Sartre's acclaimed Preface to *Wretched of the Earth*, he represented Fanon as a hero: "He is not afraid of anything," Sartre (2004 [1963]: xlvii) admiringly declares. Proclaiming "the Third World discovers itself and speaks to itself through this voice," Sartre (2004 [1963]: xlvi) writes of Fanon's theory as if it had already fused with colonial readers, and he invites intellectually sophisticated and politically committed readers to do the same: "Fanon speaks loud and clear. We Europeans, we can hear him. The proof is you are holding this book ... Europeans, open this book, look inside" (Sartre 2004 [1963]: xlvii–viii). Sartre's Preface had such an extraordinary impact that, for decades following, it seemed to constitute an essential companion to Fanon's work.¹⁵

Wretched of the Earth became an international bestseller, its author so lionized that he appeared as the figurative protagonist of his own social theory. Macey (2012: 621) has it almost right: Fanon emerged as "an all-purpose revolutionary icon" who could "be transported anywhere and invoked in the name of any case." The observation evokes the reifying generality of Fanon's intellectual power, but Fanon's theory could become performative only in very particular times and places. The atmospherics, audience, and mediating cultural and political powers had to be right. Blinding corruption, stultifying immiseration, and crippling racial humiliation had to be in the air. So did fervid revolutionary movement and hallucinatory dreams about liberation. Finally, neither discourse nor mobilization, but only violence, could appear to provide the way out.

The presence of such conditions helps explain the extraordinary explosion of Fanon's deeply dramatic text on the 1960s intellectual and political scene, their absence the virtual disappearance of Fanon's intellectual force in the decades after.

Black Panther Party leaders described the encounter with *Wretched of the Earth* as epiphanic. The work "became essential reading for Black revolutionaries in America," Kathleen Cleaver recalled, "and profoundly influenced their thinking" (1997: 214). Describing

¹³ For *Les Temps modernes*, see the May 1961 publication of the draft of Fanon's critical chapter on violence (n. 10, above) and, e.g., Maurice Maschino, "L'An V de la révolution algérienne de Frantz Fanon," *Les Temps modernes*, February–March 1960.

¹⁴ While the elements of performance are deeply implicated in materiality, the exchange between Sartre and his colleagues with Fanon was much more about gift giving than utilitarian exchange. Fanon's writing had already affected the views Sartre and his colleagues developed about the anti-colonial struggle, which made them eager to put their networks and influence at Fanon's disposal, in turn. Beauvoir recounts the 3-day long encounter she and Sartre had with Fanon in Rome 5 months before his death. Sartre and Fanon, she writes, talked virtually nonstop. When the three parted, De Beauvoir shook Fanon's hand, and she recalled "touching the passion that burned within him," averring "he could communicate that fire" (Macey 2012: 8851).

¹⁵ "There was ... the danger that the preface would overshadow the text itself, and many reviews made it do just that ... It was as though Sartre's preface were taking on a life of its own ... Sartre's preface was, after all, a major selling point." (Macey 2012: loc 8931, 8954, 8983).

the fusion of text and audience, the black nationalist *Liberation Magazine* declared, “Every brother on a rooftop can quote Fanon” (Zolberg and Zolberg 1967: 50). Bobby Seale claimed to have read Fanon’s manifesto six times. “I knew Fanon was right and I knew he was running it down,” Seale later recalled, “but how do you put ideas like his over?” To answer this question, he introduced the text to Huey Newton.

One day I went over to [Newton’s] house and asked him if he had read Fanon [and] he said no ... So I brought Fanon over one day. That brother got to reading Fanon ... We would sit down with *Wretched of the Earth* and talk, go over another section or chapter of Fanon, and Huey would explain it in depth ... He knew it already. He’d get on the streets. We’d be walking down the street and get in some discussion with somebody, and throughout the process of this discussion and argument, Huey would be citing facts, citing that material, and giving perception to it. (Seale 1991, pp. 25–26).

A founding premise of the Black Panther Party was that the USA was host to a conflict, in the words of Eldridge Cleaver, between the “black colony” and “white mother country” (Cleaver 1969, p. 157). Stokely Carmichael (1967) referred to black people as “a colony within the U.S.” in a controversial 1967 speech in Havana. As the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) moved from civil rights to insurrection, its founder James Forman (1971) issued a pamphlet declaring “we are a colonized people in the United States,” and SNCC militants began holding “rap sessions” on Fanon (Rushdy 1999: 46). The Black Panthers’ highly public deployment of violence—carrying weapons, organizing military-style defense forces—was linked to Fanon as well. Kelley and Esch (2008) note that Fanon’s chapter *On Violence*, in *Wretched of the Earth*, was “the perpetual favorite among militants.” Kathleen Cleaver (1997: 214) recalled, “Fanon’s analysis seemed to explain and justify the spontaneous violence ravaging Black ghettos across the country and linked the incipient insurrections to the rise of a revolutionary movement.” Forman (1997: 106) wrote, “only violence can totally free a colonized people.” In his Havana speech, Carmichael (Kauffman 1968) announced, “we are preparing groups of urban guerillas for our defense in the cities,” proclaiming, “it is going to be a fight to the death.”

Fanon’s intellectual power reverberated far beyond the American scene. Che Guevara, the Cuban revolutionary who embodied guerilla war as the pathway to insurrection, took an extraordinary personal interest in Fanon. In late 1964, Guevara travelled to Algiers for an interview with Fanon’s widow Josie, staying on for 2 months,¹⁶ and later that year organized a Cuban translation and publication of *Wretched of the Earth*.¹⁷ There was “a remarkable correspondence between Che’s writing and Fanon’s,” Michael Lowy observes, citing “ideas about the importance of violent action by the oppressed, the anti-imperialist unity of the Third World, and the search for a new model of socialism” (Lowy 2007: 73). Indeed, Guevara’s “reading of Fanon” may have “inspired his project for participating in the armed struggle in Africa in 1965–1966” (ibid). Leaders of the Quebec Liberation Front (FLQ) and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) leaders poured over Fanon (Macey 2012: 738, 773). So did the Irish Republican Army (IRA) soldier Bobby Sands, in the H-Block of Belfast prison, where he found multiple copies of *Wretched of the Earth* on the shelves (Bhabha 2004: xxix).

The social conditions that primed audiences for Fanon’s explosive intellectual performance eventually dissipated, more quietly but almost as rapidly as they had earlier appeared. In the

¹⁶ The interview appeared in the December 26th issue of the magazine *Révolution Africaine* (James 2001 [1969]: 156).

¹⁷ See the section “Che reads *The Wretched of the Earth*” in Young 2003: 121–122.

developed world, subordinate racial groups turned out to be as much of the civil sphere as outside it. Not Black Panthers but the non-violent movement of Martin Luther King succeeded in expanding millions of working-class African-Americans' civil, political, and social rights, leaving behind a racial underclass bereft of political will and cultural resources to carry on the fight. Nor did the decolonizing process outside the West proceed in the manner Fanon had foreseen. Guerilla warfare was not the rule but the exception, most colonies achieving independence relatively peacefully via a political process. Their highly unequal position vis-à-vis their former colonial masters, however, did not significantly change. And the enlightenment universalism for which Fanon hoped, it turned out, could not be sustained after the heady post-emancipation years; instead, ethnic, religious, racial, and nationalistic ideologies permeated the scene.

In the wake of this radically altered social environment, the intellectual zeitgeist shifted from anti- to post-colonial. Even as it became part of the intellectual pantheon, the social impact of *Wretched of the Earth* faded. In the era of multicultural difference and cultural hybridity, academic interest shifted to Fanon's 1952 work on racial stigma, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Despite its more contemporary relevance, it was not nearly as fecund as the work that, a decade later, would make Fanon's anti-colonial fame.

Intellectuals are always doing things with words, trying to bring something into being, not simply offering descriptions of things already known. Intellectuals are, then, always performative in Austin's philosophical sense (Austin 1957). Only rarely, however, do they become performative sociologically as well. To become performative, intellectuals must create, not only smart ideas, but highly dramatic ones, ideas that allow dark times to be understood in a manner that signposts a journey from the darkness to the light. There must also be intellectual life after death. Ideas need to be carried by disciples and inserted into the practicalities of the social scene. Power and materiality are necessary but not sufficient, for, in the end, it is the audience that decides. Reception does not define the quality of ideas, but it decides their effect. Cultural pragmatics determines intellectual power.

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