

## Black Skin, Red Masks: Racism, Communism and the Quest of Subjectivity in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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### Abstract

This essay aims at proposing a study of Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952), where the author focuses on the difficult journey of black intellectuals in quest for a strong black identity in post-war America. The theoretical reflection in this paper is based, in a first phase, on the philosophical and political perspectives of thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Frantz Fanon, whose works and debates have articulated an important source to understand the quest of subjectivity and intellectual consciousness in the 1950s, a period marked not only by the emergence of civil rights movement and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but also the progressive replacement of Communism by alternative emancipatory currents such as existentialism, postcolonialism and (post-) structuralism. From this discussion, the essay indicates, how (post-) Marxist thinkers, like Etienne Balibar, investigate the limits of the a priori paradigms promoted by the traditional humanistic (natural law-positive law) and communist narratives (alienation-emancipation), which lack conceptual and historical efficacy when it comes to understand and respond to new (bio-capitalist) forms of discrimination, which constantly evolve according to the epoch and the place.

**Keywords:** American Fiction – Ralph Ellison – Racism – Marxism

### Introduction

#### Fiction and revolution: the novel in its historical context

Since the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of French utopian socialism and Marxism in the nineteenth century, fiction and revolution have been closely linked. Both are acts of transformation of an old world into a new one. History proved that artists and intellectuals have always been prosecuted under revolutionary political regimes (especially under Stalinism); the reason may be that an artist is more likely to be aware of the limits of his own creation, *of any human creation – politics included – to absolute reach objectivity*. In fact, artistic creations are the field of a paradoxical phenomenon: the man refuses the imperfect world he lives in, but at the same time does not want to escape it – or more likely, *cannot* escape. Therefore, the dialectical movement between reality and fiction, in a way, helps the writer (and the reader) to understand his existence better and cope with it.

After World War II, the situation of Communist parties in the United States was not the same as in Europe. In both Italy and France (and in some Eastern European countries), the Communists had been the main opposition force to Fascism by leading underground operations at home whereas most liberal leaders and the ruling class went into exile. In contrast, the behaviour of American Communists during the war did not give them the same prestige as their European comrades. Indeed, they had lost much of their reputation by cooperating largely with the bourgeois liberals; and particularly by going against the civil rights movement during the war period. This movement were regarded by many Communist leaders and intellectuals as a threat to the war effort and it did not go better with the beginning of the Cold War period.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the difficult context, the Communist Party had still, at that time, many Afro-American members. Since the 1930s, after the massive exodus from the South to the North, and the quick proletarianisation of many Afro-American communities,

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<sup>1</sup> With the beginning of the Cold War, the American Communists became extremely vulnerable. The Communist party's close ties with the Soviets had been dissolved by the Voorhis Act in 1943 in order to reduce the label of the American Communists as foreign agents. However, this Act eventually ended up being beneficial to many ex-members of the Party, since it did protect them against the American expansionist post-war policy that often charged them as enemy agents. The Party, abandoned by its powerful liberal allies, and confronted to the "Witch Hunt" promoted by senator McCarthy, the American Communists had no time to develop a clear programme of action. Moreover, Khrushchev's revelation about Stalin's terror and the invasion of Hungary were serious strikes to the left-wing movements all over the world and especially for the American Communist movement which collapsed in 1957.

the Party has played a major role in their struggles and emancipation not only on a collective level, by taking part in the organisation of unemployment councils, but also on an individual one, by bringing significant moral support and material help to many artists and intellectuals, which did a favour to their artistic ambitions and their social acceptance into intellectual circles.

However, just after the WWII, there was a major obstacle between the quest for emancipation in the Afro-American communities and many Communists grandiose call for internationalism. As I pointed out earlier, the emergence of the civil right movement was a demand for a more local and national demand from elementary democratic rights. Such requests were often regarded with patronising eyes by some Party leaders who were aiming for a more global scale type of socio-economic revolution. This tension is well illustrated by Wilson Record who, in the last chapter of *The Negro and the Communist Party*, offers a harsh critique of the American Communists, and lists a series of the Party's misbehaviour towards his community:

"The Communist Party of the United States, cast in the image of the mother organization, is a monolithic structure. (...) Its analysis of the Negro question, or of any other question, is never an independent one; and it is not an eclectic one, because it does not recognize the possible validity of any opposing point of view. (...) For the Party, analysis is a *function* of immediate program rather than its *cause*. (...) The real Negro question has remained essentially the same for decades: *it is the persistent issue of basic economic and political equality for our largest racially differentiated minority group*" (1951: 287).

Record attacks the behaviour of many orthodox Marxists whose ideological paradigm did not consider the specificities of the Afro-American struggle, which was often relegated as a sub-category of the main economic struggle.

It is in the middle of this very tense social-political landscape that Ralph Ellison wrote and published his magnum opus, *Invisible Man*, in 1953. The composition of the novel is very close to the picaresque genre and embraces various topics: from existentialism, the entry into adulthood, to the emergence of jazz as mass culture. It is worth mentioning that the style, based on a rich intertextuality, is often livened up by dreamlike and surrealist passages.

The novel can be read like a *Bildungsroman* where an unnamed protagonist narrates, in a voice similar to that of Dostoyevsky's underground man,<sup>1</sup> his eventful existential journey. Like a modern *Candide*,<sup>2</sup> the narrator, despite his attempts to win patronage and respect, earns only humiliation and disappointment in his quest for identity. In his slow descent to hell, he discovers the perversion and corruption of the leaders of the main institutions of the society: education (Dr. Bledsoe and Mr. Norton), industrial capitalism (Emerson) and political organisation (Brother Jack). He starts his memoirs from the moment he won a scholarship to attend a prestigious school in the South. The irony being that he ends up being involved in a 'battle royal' – a fight that involves more than two people – organised by the same people who gave him the study award. Then, after being unjustly expelled from college, he moves to New York, where he becomes involved in a political organization, called 'the Brotherhood' (which is an allegory of the Communist Party in the United States), in his effort to help the black community of Harlem. Nonetheless, he understands later on that he has been manipulated by the Brotherhood in order to get him involved, in spite of himself, in an apocalyptic destroying urban riot in Harlem.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, he faces the fact that he lives in an absurdly shifting world thanks to the tragic death of his friend, Tod Clifton, killed by a policeman.

Like his predecessor the novelist Richard Wright, Ellison depicts in his novel the problem of "black" isolation. But his goes even further, since the protagonist in *Invisible Man* is not a random Afro-American individual; he is also an artist and an intellectual. This artistic dimension brings its share anxiety and complexity to the modes of expression of the narrator, whose personality changes: according to the context, he "performs" different roles, using different "masks," in his quest for recognition and visibility in society (Sang Ong-Van-Cung, 2013: 40). He witnesses also the other characters's masquerades: he is destabilised by the hypocritical discourse of Dr. Bledsoe and Mr. Norton; he also attends the nihilist performance of the nationalist leader Ras the Exhorter. But one of the most striking episodes is Tod Clifton's public performance of peddling Sambo dolls: the act is an allegory of his manipulation by the Brotherhood, his message through

<sup>1</sup> See *Notes from Underground* (1864).

<sup>2</sup> See Voltaire's philosophical novella *Candide : ou l'Optimisme* (1759).

<sup>3</sup> The reader can see a clear analogy with the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943. The first riot was due to the rumour that a white shopkeeper had beaten a young Puerto Rican shoplifter. The shooting of an Afro-American soldier by a policeman was the cause of the second riot, where hundreds of people were arrested and six were killed.

his comical action is therefore that he prefers to live out of history, rather than being a slave of the Brotherhood doctrine. I will come back to this passage in the next section.

*Invisible Man* can also be read as a surrealist fiction. In *Shadow Act*, Ellison argues that realist and naturalist fictions were inadequate to portray the diversity of (Afro-) American life:

"[T]he very 'facts' which the naturalists assumed would make us free have lost the power to protect us from despair. (...) The diversity of American life with its extreme fluidity and openness seemed too vital and alive to be caught from more than the briefest instant in the tight well-made Jamesian novel" (103).

In other words, Ellison intends in his fiction to offer a mirror effect of the outside world, as one can find in realism, but to depict what is behind the obvious, visible and rational: a complex chaotic universe of diversity.

Inspired by W. E. B. Du Bois and the Harlem Renaissance movement, Ellison aims to establish alternative version to the social and cultural reality depicted by mainstream (White) intellectuals and writers: "[his] task then is always to challenge the apparent forms of reality – that is the fixed manners and values of the few, and to struggle with it until it surrenders its insight, its truth" (ibid: 106). The aim is then to shed a little light on the tensions with the social matrix where ethnical, gender and class identities circulate, which are illustrated in the novel by the use of colloquialism, irony and surrealism, show the reader the intrinsic heterogeneity of inter-individual interactions.

### **Towards a phenomenology of (social) visibility**

From the very title of the novel, the reader understands that the text will be dealing with an ambiguous condition: how can one be a man be invisible; especially, if one knows that the protagonist is a *black* man? In the first chapter, the narrator presents himself as an individual whose identity is split between two modes of (re)presenting himself to the world, and especially to the white members of the Brotherhood. In the following chapters, *Invisible Man*, being a social marginal, has to face what Jerry G. Watts calls the 'victim status syndrome', which is based on an oppressor-oppressed interrelationship:

"The victim status hinges on the desire of the victimized to obtain from the victimizer recognition of their victimized status and the willingness of the victimizer both to accept the victimized as their creation and to grant to the victimized the desired recognition. In the process, the humanity of the victimized is supposedly affirmed, but the superiority of the victimizer is not challenged. (...) Indeed, the greater the appeal or demand for redress from the oppressor, the greater the implied concession of the moral superiority of the oppressor" (1994: 17).

In other words, thanks to the relationship between the Brotherhood elite, the victimized individual obtains social acceptance and material benefits, but at the high cost of moral autonomy. Throughout the novel, the protagonist is so concerned about white recognition that eventually he ends up by being exhausted by the simulacra of performing with different masks. There are several examples in this performativity in the novel: for instance, at the beginning of the novel, the 'battle royal' passage depicts the paradoxical behaviour of the white dignitaries of a southern city: they invite the protagonist to deliver a speech and then get him involved in a humiliating fight with other black youths just for their entertainment. Another striking passage depicts how a war veteran advises *Invisible Man* to use a double discourse in order to get out of his naïve word vision:

"Come out of the fog, young man. And remember you don't have to be a complete fool in order to succeed. Play the game, but don't believe it - that much you own yourself. Even if it lands you in a strait jacket or a padded cell. Play the game, but play it your own way – part of the time at least. Play the game, but raise the ante, my boy. Learn how it operates, learn how you operate" (1995: 153-154).

It is the same struggle for recognition that is at the centre of Frantz Fanon's preoccupation about questions of black identity and self-definition in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). The French thinker from Martinique refers to Hegel's master-servant paradigm in his analysis of the black man condition in the colonial context. Fanon, basing his thought on the passage on 'Lordship and Bondage' in *The Phenomenology of the Mind*, concludes that identity is directly linked with recognition. However, the peculiarity of the hierarchical system that exists between a black man and a white man is what pushes Fanon to state that Hegel's dialectical model of the master and slave does not apply to the historical experience of the black individuals:

"The Negro wants to be like the master. Therefore, he is less independent than the Hegelian slave. In Hegel the slave turns away from the master and turns toward the object. Here the slave turns toward the master and abandons the object" (1967: 25).

The situation of the black slave is different from the white slave's because the black consciousness is a *dominated consciousness* (conscience dominée), where the black individual is fascinated, mystified, by the white; therefore, he tries desperately to seduce the latter in order to be recognized as "white" himself (see Duhamel 1984). In other words, the struggle is much more difficult for the black "slave" since the white master has imprinted his word vision in the black consciousness. Referring to his experience in France, Fanon asserts that "[t]he black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man" (1967: 110). The consequence is that in the post-colonized context, his rebellion against his master does not liberate himself, because the black has been alienated both physically and the psychologically: "The upheaval did not make a difference in the Negro. He went from one way of life to another, but not from one life to another" (ibid.: 220).

Feeling that he has been betrayed by all the sectors of society, the narrator faces two options in his understanding of a (black) individual's relationship with his fellow humans, two ways of developing a theory of his social insignificance, of his invisibility. On the one hand, he considers man as a subject *in* the world, where he does not have any superior position and his understanding of the phenomena of his life is limited to the contingent elements composing his existence – a position close to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy, which I will explain a bit later. On the other hand, the oppressed individual chose to seek shelter in a voluntary exile in reaction against a dehumanizing society; a radical escape into a self-imposed ostracism from society in a quest to find a position of an authentic identity. At the end of the novel, *Invisible Man* seems to be resigned to the latter of these two phenomenologies of his invisibility, and chooses to follow the example of his assassinated friend Tod Clifton who chose to make a parody of the notion of history:

"The stewards of something uncomfortable, burdensome, which they hated because, living outside the realm of history, there was no one to applaud their value and they themselves failed to understand it. What if Brother Jack was wrong? What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the hole? What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile and these boys his agents (...) For they were outside, in the dark with Sambo, the dancing paper doll; taking it on the lambo with my fallen brother Tod Clifton (Tod, Tod) running and dodging the forces of history instead of making a dominating stand" (1995: 441)

One cannot help noticing the similarity of this form of ontological revolt with the Sartrean – or even a Nietzschean – will to power. One can find in *Being and Nothingness*, the idea is that the absolute communion between the Being and the given, the authentic bond between the individual and the society, is always fragmented, interrupted, by the necessary inter-subjective communication: "[It is] the challenge to authenticity, to understand the existential postulates of the situation which determined the limits of man's freedom, his freedom to choose to be himself as he chose himself to be, and not merely as others allow him to be" (Gendzier 1973: 30). This Sartrean influence should not come as a surprise, especially if one knows the intellectual collaboration between Fanon and Sartre: Fanon was struck by *Anti-Semitism and Jew* (1943), where he found a lot of analogies between antisemitism and colonial racism, which he will use in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), to which Sartre will contribute by writing an extensive preface (see Balibar 2005, Mornet 2006). Nonetheless, one has to imagine that Fanon was still very suspicious of the potential possibilities of the Sartrean "will" (*volonté*) for a black *Being*. Is there any authentic way to get through the false conditions imposed by society to reach a true and lucid (black) consciousness? The real issue is focused on Sartre's concept of authenticity that Sartre takes from Heidegger:

"It is agreed that man may be defined as being having freedom within the limits of a situation, then it is easy to see that the exercise of this freedom may be considered as *authentic* or *inauthentic* according to the choices made in the situation. Authenticity, it is almost needless to say, consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate" (Sartre 1948: 90).

Rather than a quest for authenticity, based on a very Eurocentric notion of "lucid consciousness," it seems that Fanon – and Ellison at the same time – is looking for an ontological concepts – such as the notion of "négritude" or Du Bois "double consciousness" – that prepares, as Etienne Balibar points out that "Fanon's work seems like an *early reversal of the reversal* that had moved from a scientific analysis of 'race' to an analysis of 'racism.' (...) It is a way of bringing the challenge straight to the heart of the discriminatory discourse that, for Blacks, is never external, but introjected, constitutive of their 'personality'; it was a way to make heard not only a 'point of view' but also the 'trembling voices' of the oppressed" (2005: 25).

In the same way, the narrator of *Invisible Man* is exposed to the same internal dilemma: he is aware of the necessity of individual freedom outside of the corrupted society, but implicitly he knows that his existence as an "invisible" man does

not make sense without the human collective. Eventually, he becomes aware of the new possibilities of his life; as soon as he abandons the radical negation of personality imposed by the Brotherhood, he discovers new modes of performing freedom:

"I believed in hard work and progress and action, but now, after first being 'for' society and then 'against' it, I assign myself no rank or any limit, and such an attitude is very much against the trend of the times. But my world has become one of infinite possibilities' (1995 576).

Towards the end, the protagonist seems to be less inclined to the Sartrean position, and has a fresh look of his condition, which is closer to the first phenomenology of invisibility I have mentioned earlier. This incarnated position, enmeshed in the world, with an acceptance of its possibilities and its limits is closer to Merleau-Ponty's than to Sartre's world view.<sup>1</sup> As Merleau-Ponty states in *Sense and Non-Sense*:

"L'Être et le néant is first of all a demonstration that the subject is freedom, absence, and negativity and that, in this sense, there is nothing. But that also means that the subject is only nothingness, that he needs being to sustain himself, that he can only be thought of against a background of the world" (72-73)

Besides, Merleau-Ponty states that isolation and communication are not completely antagonistic concepts since one knows that existence is nothing with others. There is not such a thing as authentic individuality since one cannot really escape his lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*); a certain degree a human presence exists in every moment of our life. Therefore, Ellison's protagonist, even in his hole, is still in contact with society; he uses language to write his story since language is the phenomenal field used by the being to communicate with others. Merleau-Ponty writes in *Signs* (1960):

"Another characteristic of this half century's investigations is the recognition of a strange relationship between consciousness and its language, as between consciousness and its body. (...) In our day, language is of a piece with the writer; it is the writer himself. It is no longer the servant of significations but the act of signifying itself, and the writer or man speaking no longer has to control its voluntarily any more than living man has to premeditate the means or details of his gestures" (232).

It is therefore interesting to noticing that, when confronted with the absurdity of his existence, the narrator of *Invisible Man* feels despair and wants to flee from the oppressive society. But, more than just a failed student, a betrayed ex-Brother, he is, first and foremost, an artist. By writing his memoirs, his implicit project is to use literature as a channel to communicate with the society. Even if a society based on white hegemonic system, even if language – through speech – can be the vehicle used by the discrimination imposed by a (White) elite; there is a hope to change it because language overcomes ethnic, cultural or religious differences since it is one of the fundamental conditions of human existence. As Fanon states, in his very poetic way:

"And if I cry out, it will not be a black cry. No, from the point of view adopted here, there is no black problem. Or at any rate if there is one it concerns the whites only accidentally. It is a story that takes place in the darkness, and the sun that is carried within me must shine into the smallest crannies" (1967: 29).

Fanon, Merleau-Ponty and Ellison/*Invisible Man* share this common desire to communicate because they believe in humanity; they never abandoned the idea that individual experience of one can be understood by all. This movement back to a more primitive or inner world is emphasized in burning the symbols of his false identity: his college diploma, Clifton's doll, the paper with his brotherhood name, etc. But this is only a transit zone, as Michael Lynch asserts:

"He chose his temporary life underground primarily as a means of survival. But he concludes that he needs the world above as the natural element of his freedom, as the context in which he can be responsible to others, as the only place where he can fulfil himself through loving" (1990:184).

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to remind here that in spite of their philosophical and political collaborations – especially in the literary journal *Les Temps Modernes* – the process in order to get to the consciousness of the word follows different paths for Sartre or Merleau-Ponty: "The being relation [*rapport d'être*] in Sartre, who is a philosopher of the imaginary and of the unreal, is shaped by the negativity; rather, it is pure negativity: it is nothingness [*néantisation*]. The Sartrean consciousness is nothing but unhooking toward the being, a 'hole' (...). Quite on the contrary, the being relation, in Merleau-Ponty, who is more a philosopher of the perception, is fundamentally anchorage, inscription, incarnation. (...) Therefore, on the one hand, existence is struggling; on the other hand, it is cohesion" (Cayemaex 2003: 3, my translation).

### From Race to Racism: the limits of Communist and Humanist anthropological models

Maurice-Merleau Ponty's work is not only an interesting toolbox for a phenomenological analysis of the "invisibility" in *Invisible Man*, it also offers a great source for a critique of totalitarian Communist regimes that have generated forms of biological and cultural discrimination. Once very close to the French Communist Party, he was among the first Western intellectual to openly criticise the ideological line imposed by the Comintern, first in *Sense and Non-Sense* (1948) and then in *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1955), where he develops a critique of vulgar interpretations of Marx. Merleau-Ponty's essays help to grasp the political atmosphere of *Invisible Man*, because the same criticism of orthodox Marxist ideology can be found in the novel.

Whereas Sartre never stopped being a *compagnon de route* of the Communist Party, even trying to create a bridge between his existentialism and communism, despite the crimes related to it;<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, refuses to take side: he goes for a third position, a position that gives the possibility for new possibilities. He says that the solution to get of this conflict is to be found in a non-communist left movement:

"A-communism is a necessary condition for knowledge of the U.S.S.R because it confronts what we know of communist reality with communist ideology; and it is, at the same time and without paradox, the condition of modern critique of capitalism because it alone poses Marx's problems again in modern terms. (...) For us as non-communist left is this double position, posing social problems in terms of struggle and refusing the dictatorship of the proletariat" (1974: 225-226).

Merleau-Ponty praises for another reading of Marx: he accepts Marxist ideas about the liberation from capitalist alienation, but rejects the concept objective science, because "[a] Marxist conception of human society and of economic society in particular cannot subordinate it to permanent laws like those of classical physics, because it sees society heading toward a new arrangement in which the laws of classical economics will no longer apply" (1964:126). This position is close to what (post-) Marxist thinkers, like Etienne Balibar, try to do by highlighting that Marx's philosophy was not meant to be read as a doctrine, where "revolutionary practices take over all thought," but rather a "critical philosophy [that] is not just a reflection on the unexpected in history, but it has to think its own determination as an intellectual activity" (Balibar 2007: 115, 120).

Before going further, it is important to remind that Ellison was also associated with the Communist Party for a while; but, eventually, he took his distance because of its lack of respect for individual and artistic freedom and autonomy. This was partly due to its anti-intellectual bias imposed by the Comintern, the Party never completely trusted the writers. Ellison's suspicions about the party, extended to the legitimacy of proletarian fiction and social realism. As Lynch points out:

"Although both communist ideology and naturalism colored Ellison's polemical essays and fiction of the late thirties and early forties, his rather rapid evolution toward a more individual-oriented and a more affirmative vision indicated a break with his formative influences. (...) The prevailing darkness of naturalism, even with the element of hope provided by militant collectivism, did not suit Ellison for long. He became dissatisfied with the defeatism of the typical naturalistic story, in which impersonal forces overwhelm the individual" (1990: 65, 68).

Ellison's modernist ideas about literature and the role of the writer were still considered to be forms of individualistic elitism by some Marxist intellectuals who kept a social-economic approach to culture. Ellison regards these critiques as paternalistic discourses; he gives his response to these ossified views in his essay 'The World and the Jug' (1964: 107-143). Besides, as already mentioned, in *Invisible Man*, Ellison uses various references to jazz, folklore and colloquial voices to show that existence is always paradoxical and is also based on cultural realities that cannot be denied, even by the materialistic ideology of the Brotherhood. wants to show that Black artists are more than victims. By the gradual acceptance of all aspects of the existence of a discriminated individual, *Invisible Man*'s protagonist becomes aware of the deficiency of dogmatic Marxism o answer what he experiences. At the beginning of the novel, he feels ashamed of the poor southern black people; like for instance Jim Trueblood, who narrates in a very colloquial and naive manner an incestuous act with his daughter. Besides, the decision of eating yam on the street: while before it would have been embarrassing, this act is another symptom of the freedom newly gained (Ellison 1995: 68-70).

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<sup>1</sup> See Merleau-Ponty's critique of "Sartre and Ultrabolshevism," in 1974: 95-201.

Exposure to the limits of the Brotherhood's authoritarian ideology occurs throughout the narrator's story. He tells his continuously confrontation with Brother Jack's authoritarian discourse, who tries to convince him that individual feeling and ideas are not allowed since the leaders provide all the ideas:

"So you've heard it," he said. "Very well, so now hear this: We do not shape our policies to the mistaken and infantile notions of the man in the street. Our job is not to ask them what they think but to *tell* them!" (...)

"The leader. As leader of the Brotherhood, I am their leader."

"But are you sure you aren't their great white father?" I said watching him closely, aware of the hot silence and feeling tension race from my toes to my legs as I drew my feet quickly beneath me. "Wouldn't it be better if they called you Mase Jack?" (ibid.: 473).

The narrator progressively unveils the Brotherhood's cynical and murderous betrayal of the black people, when the leaders of the movement justify murder and violence by scientific necessity and historical materialism.

Violence is another important theme in Ellison's novel. After moving to New York, Invisible meets the Brotherhood, which seems to be a good way for many Afro-Americans to get out of the vicious circle of the victim status, since Marxism gives them tools to struggle for their emancipation. Besides, Marxist scientific approach provides logical answers to their philosophical worry: "the world was strange if you stopped to think about it; still it was a world that could be controlled by science, and the Brotherhood has both science and history under control" (1995: 381). However, Invisible Man discovers that the organization has a strict ideology that demands sacrifices and philosophical conformity. Ultimately, he breaks up with the Brotherhood when he recognizes its implicit responsibility in the murder of Tod Clifton and the launching of the riot.

The protagonist's final movement underground is very symbolic. It reminds Plato's Allegory of the Cave: by going down to the coal bin, it is as if he is going against the hegemonic rationalism of the Western civilization taken up by the Enlightenment. He challenges the idealist 'light' of the right-thinking elite and goes back to a more sensitive world. There is here a strong parallel with back to Etienne Balibar's analysis of the counter-Copernician revolution – or "reversal of reversal," to use his terms – in Fanon's theory of (post-)colonial racism:

"[a]gainst the sanitized representations of 'democratic society' that triumphed after the victory over the Nazis and that tended to mask the persistent reality of colonialism Fanon insisted not only on the fact that racism is a social structure (and that individuals are "racist" because societies are based on the absolute distinction between "masters" and "slaves") but also on the ambivalence of the psychological effects of this structural racism" (2005:25).

Balibar argues that alongside Fanon, in the same period, another major thinker, Hannah Arendt, is interested in the manner different types of discrimination – namely antisemitism and colonialism – after WWII proliferate, despite the promulgation of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" by the UN and the UNESCO declarations in 1950 and 1951 on the notion of "racism." Balibar highlights that Hannah Arendt's critique of those legal acts, promoted by the defenders of a republican universalism, is that the notion of "human" is too vague or rather too transcendental, and will always leave space for the exclusion of a category of people. This is why "[she] insists on the question of the 'stateless' or those individuals and groups who are deprived of their fundamental rights and [why] [t]he criterion of the 'right to rights' is therefore at the heart of her notion of political community" (Balibar 2005: 6). This is the same issue that the narrator of *Invisible Man* finds in the ideological line of the Brotherhood, Ellison finds in the Communist Party, and minority groups found in Marxist movements in the past, and even today.

### **Racism as a mode of thought**

Etienne Balibar's insistence about the necessity to rethink racism, and its relation to universalism, is refreshing in a critical environment that usually represent "racism" as a form of a priori ideological error that has missed the emancipatory message of the Enlightenment. How is it possible to still find racism in a global world that has been officially decolonised and that is supposed to have learned the lessons of Nazism? Etienne Balibar's argument is that it is precisely because of the exploitation and unfair division of wealth on a global scale, that racism has been "universalized" and has become "an actual world vision" (Balibar 1997b: 346). Racism has for a long time been as a form of nationalism defended exclusively by far-right movements, as an important part of the ideological apparatus those currents use in their quest to build a national community that would de facto exclude all those who are not part of it.

This is the classical narrative that progressive political parties and educational intuitions usually use to fight racism and discrimination in general: proposing the picture of a struggle that would oppose nationalism and universalism, as the groups

of ideological lessons, learned from the Enlightenment, Marx and beyond, that any progressive society should learn and defend.

But contemporary racism, in all its variations, cannot be understood – not even mentioning fought and solved – with such a simplistic dual model. To put this boldly, racism is closely bound to universalism, which has been shaped, constructed in a way that it leads to dividing, categorizing, discriminating practices. As Balibar points out:

“[T]his does not prove that *universalism is racism*, [but rather] that there is no clear *demarcation* between universalism and racism. (...) It is derisory to believe being able to fight racism in *the name of universality in general*. Racism is already in there. It is therefore *in there* [dans la place] that the struggle takes place: in order to transform what we understand by universalism” (1997b: 344, 355).

In conclusion, this contradiction that exists within universalism is applicable to Marxism if one considers it as variant that shares the same historical perspective, which implies that “class consciousness has never been separated from nationalism. (...) Class consciousness is itself filled with an identity feeling very close to racism: fetishism and the *origin of class*” (1997a: 369). What is important to highlight is that racism is deeply ingrained not only in the political history of class struggle, but it is crucial to the constitution of any “superior” group, call it community, class or even state. This ambiguity that is part of all European humanistic anthropologies, as I have already said, feed its paternalistic and disciplinary aspect from the colonial context to the EU treatment of refugees, passing by workerism of the workin class. It is therefore important to avoid any escapism and accept – in order to study and understand it – that “there is a relation of reciprocal determination between ‘class racism’ and ‘ethnic racism’ and *these two determinations are not independent*. Each produces its effect, to some extent, in the field of the other and under constraints imposed by the other” (Balibar 1991: 2014). It is therefore important for Marxism, as any other humanistic ideology, beyond its tendency to universal and objectivity to be able to reflect on itself in order to understand its internal contradictions and limits in order to avoid as much as possible any ossified position that would involve pontentially a class racism and, de facto, ethnic racism. In a nutshell, this is Balibar’s lesson.

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