

Homi Bhabha at the University of Padua: a conversation

Annalisa Oboe and Unipd students

ABSTRACT

Homi Bhabha visited the University of Padua on 6 June, 2018 and delivered a public lecture entitled “Migrations, Human Rights, Survival: The Role of the Humanities,” of which an excerpt appears in the present issue of *FES*. On that same occasion, Professor Bhabha was kind enough to accept an interview with my PhD and MA students in contemporary literatures and postcolonial studies. We all sat around the spectacular Gio Ponti table in the dining room of the Rectorate at Palazzo Bo, the University headquarters, and started an earnest, wide-ranging conversation, which juggled a series of ideas and comments we decided to share with our readers. What follows is a transcription of our dialogue. With deep gratitude for our guest’s generosity and thanks to all involved.¹

Keywords

intellectual connections, Frantz Fanon, migration, racism, contemporary politics, humanities, gender studies, Parsis

Student: This spring we attended the course on “Contemporary Anglophone Literatures and Postcolonial Studies” held by professor Annalisa Oboe, during which we read your work alongside the works of Edward Said and Frantz Fanon. We are interested in your own relationship, either personal or otherwise, with these great intellectual figures: could you tell us something?

Homi Bhabha: Sure, I had a living relationship with Edward Said and a long-standing intellectual relationship with Franz Fanon, which continues to this day. I was speaking at the MLA Presidential Plenary two years ago and I went back to Frantz Fanon in order to go forward to some of the work that I am doing now. I am trying to do some work on the question of “living death,” as I call it, in a number of different discourses. In the context of the MLA lecture I went back to Fanon in order to go forward, to James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates, and a number of contemporary African-American writers, but also writers who work on caste in India, the Dalit writers.

So my relationship with Fanon continues, because I am very interested in thinking about political, cultural and ethical agency as it emerges in difficult situations where you don’t expect to find it. I am thinking of those who are transfixed by the racial gaze and have no freedom to actually develop a sense of their autonomy or, indeed, in the recent migration crisis, of those who have to make choices where risk is predominant and where death is on your shoulders and yet you do it, you have to make a decision. I am interested in how those moments have

within a sense of ethics, a sense of dignity. But this is not the dignity as you read it in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is based on moral intuitionism – a dignity we all know because we are all human beings. We have dignity, we have inherited dignity, but we have also the second notion of birth, which is that we are all born into a moral universe that we know intuitively, in an unmediated fashion.

The reason for that, of course, in the drafting of the Universal Declaration, was that they did not want anybody to be able to appeal to historical relativism and say, “well, we did this in 1939 or in 1944,” or “we are doing it in 2018, but you know in that time the circumstances were different.” They wanted to get rid of it. But what they also wanted to get rid of are the forms of history, forms of time, that are very compressed and are very problematic. You’ve got to make certain decisions and these decisions are not simply irrational, nor instinctive. There is a moral balance in them. So, I am interested in that, and Fanon is particularly important to me, because with his interest in psychoanalysis he often talked about the human subject as an agent that has to contest these kinds of “temporalities of desperation” in order to construct a sense of the Self, of the Other, of relationality and so on.

Annalisa Oboe: In your work in progress on Fanon and Baldwin you speak of the kind of biopolitics that Fanon devises for us: not so much as ‘bare life’, in the Agambenian sense, but rather as the ‘burdened life’. What Fanon is actually trying to do in *Black Skin, White Masks* is to ‘unburden’ himself from the burdens of the past, slavery, colonial history, the racial gaze...

HB: Yeah, absolutely. That notion of the burdened life is what I’m trying to develop in a number of papers, not simply ‘bare life’ or not ‘mere existence’ in the Oriental sense, but the ‘burdened life’. Now, I want to try – and I’m trying in a number of ways, for the book that I’m writing – to think about the notion of the burdened life. It’s still a concept that I’m working through. But where I think you’ve hit the point is that for Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, and in different ways also in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the person of colour, the discriminated, the minority – you can see this also about the current migration – have so much imposed upon them. As he says, there is so much projection on the Self, that before one can begin to construct some ontological sense of oneself, one has to deal with this burden. But, on the other hand, the burden is also the burden of history, you can’t just wish it away. So, you have to find a way of taking it, using it, reversing it and then working through a question of identity.

Now, I’ll give you an example. There’s a part of the lecture I am going to deliver today, where I talk about the distinction between discrimination – the language of discrimination – and the language of denigration or the language of dishonor. And yesterday, the guy who was driving me in the car here in Padova, he’s Romanian – a young guy, twenty years old – so I was talking with him, asking what he was doing. His parents are Romanian, and he said, “I went to Romania, I tried to get a job, the first month they paid me 400 euro, the second month they paid me 200 euro, so I had to return to Italy.” So I answered, “well, that must be

disappointing, where do you prefer to live?" He said, "actually, my parents were Romanian, I prefer to live in Romania, although I've been brought up here since I was four," and he's now in his twenties. "Why, why do you prefer that?" He said, "because my experience in Italy is so racistly challenging." "You? I would have thought you were exactly from here, you don't look any different!" He said, "let me tell you," and this is what I mean about the burdened life, "I had a girlfriend, for three years, and for three years, every time I went to her home, every time I wanted to go on holiday, the parents would say "but you're a Romanian: people like you are murderous, people like you are rapists" in my face. After two years of being together, although she would have liked to be with me and I would have liked to be with her, I just decided I couldn't take it anymore." So, this is what I mean with 'burdened life'. How do you face this burdened life to produce a sense of agency?

St: May I just ask another question? You spoke about the situation of 'duress'. I believe you are hinting at either war or political struggle. Do you think that economic duress also has something to do with this equation?

HB: Absolutely, of course it's a condition of duress. I am not an economist, so I tend not to know the fine grain of the argument: I can largely acknowledge it but cannot enter into it. Let me tell you something that interests me about economic duress. This guy yesterday, this taxi driver – his family migrated for reasons of economic duress. Now, his family and himself have reached a certain economic level, they have jobs, they pay their taxes. Why still, irrespective of that, does social exclusion function? Not in terms of whether you're a good citizen or a bad citizen, but it functions on these aspects of cultural differences and their connotations. It seems to me that, for too long, we have thought "once you sort the economic problems out, then these other cultural problems will fall into place." They do, but for the super-rich or the super-privileged. My interest now – and I am thinking of the United States – regards the articulation of that issue in terms of polity and social community: the frustration or anxiety that comes out in these racist terms is not correlated with economics. For instance, people are not saying "I don't like X because I applied for a job and in fact this guy from Africa got the job." They don't say that. What they say is this: "X is a leech in our society." It doesn't matter if he is a citizen, it doesn't matter if he is making a contribution; "he shouldn't have got the job because I am somehow part of this indigenous race." I'm interested in why; why for instance people say that the victory of Trump was because there were all these neglected white people, who didn't have any jobs and are from the Rust Belt states. Not untrue: there is definitely something to be said about that. But whatever the condition of the white working class unemployed is, the condition of Mexicans, African Americans and some Asians (the situation of Asians is a bit different) is as bad, if not worse. Yet somehow, the political *milieu* that we have is such to move away from the political rationality of a kind to 'affect'.

I think one of the great problems of public discourse in ethics, morality, pedagogy is not

to take affect seriously. Political affect. There is work on affect generally, which I find problematic, but *political* affect is central; and stereotypes, which I have been writing about for a long time because they are much more complicated than people think they are, are central too.

So why does economic distress symptomatically present itself in these phenomenological ways? That is the question we have to understand, the one we have to ask ourselves; and it is not simply a question of a different skin colour, or of speaking a different brand of English. There is some profound kind of issue: and I think the issue is that we do not speak enough about affect in the political-institutional sense, not simply in the emotional sense.

St: It is just that. If you are actually considering politics, something else that comes to mind is the Italian Constitution. According to the Constitution we should be living in a Republic based on labour, and that labour should give us the means to live with dignity. There is the word 'dignity' in the Constitution. On the other hand, I speak with other students, my age or older, that can barely afford living because they are not paid adequately, but that is beside the point.

St: Since you mentioned American politics, we actually had something we wanted to ask you regarding that. It concerns your *Nation and Narration*: can we still identify a third space in contemporary America or has everything become a third space?

HB: That's a very good question. Now, please, let me just explain how I think that the notion of third space might be, or continues to be, relevant. Of course, I'm very fortunate that many of my concepts are in circulation but I cannot be often responsible for the way they are circulating. Let me say this: I think that, if there is a third space, the third space to think through now – remember, it's a conceptual space – is the following problem. I would take it back to the 2018 elections, but also to Brexit, maybe also to Italy now: I think there is a certain democratic exhaustion, a democratic exhaustion that to some extent is economic because, as you say, constitutional, legal rights offer you all kinds of things, but if you try to get them, the market doesn't provide them. And I think this democratic exhaustion has created a situation where we have what I call a "tit-for-tat democracy." Everybody wants to be part of this democratic conversation, but nobody has defined anymore what the rules of the game are, which means that political discourse is polarized – the 'enemy' of that third space if you like – is so polarized that there are no rules for the negotiation anymore.

AO: No political dialogue.

HB: No political dialogue. If I go to India, it's all about how the new Hindu fundamentalist nationalist party points to the Congress party: "when you were in Parliament you didn't this, you did this." If I go to America, most of the time Mr Trump during the campaign kept on saying to put Hillary Clinton in jail. When he was pointed out that he had done very corrupt things, he said, "if I was corrupt, why didn't you arrest me at that time? I was only playing by the rules of

the game.” I believe that what we see in these elections now brings together what we were talking about. In Brexit, some people said, the real flashpoint, the symptom, were immigrants and immigration. The campaign in the United States was formed so much on Mexican murderers, Muslim terrorists, lazy people – there was so much on that. So, I think that party politics has really changed now and we’re in a movement, we’re in a place of ‘movement politics’. Movement politics. The difference is that those constitutional rules, the rules of the game, have really been destroyed and when people say, “well, in the United States Hillary won the popular vote, it was a narrow margin,” or “Brexit is a narrow margin,” or again “the Indian elections were a narrow margin,” I say these are not margins, these are not narrow margins, these are not divisions. These are like seismic cracks in an earthquake. Of course, there’s a division of people, but in each camp there are further divisions. There’s a real lack of democratic confidence, or trust, what we might call exhaustion, on *each* side. And in that third space now, you begin to get this movement politics.

I mean, Steve Bannon, who has been advising Italian Salvini, recognizes it: he says, “we don’t care whether the Republicans become a little more rigorous on the market, or there is a little more deregulation. We don’t care if the Democrats spend a little more time looking at the white working class rather than the black. They don’t understand that now is the moment of movement politics, this is not the moment of a democratic discourse.” And the problem with movement politics is that you begin to have these figures emerging that Hannah Arendt once called “tribal nationalists.”

Tribal nationalism is about figures who invest or take in themselves social tensions. Social tensions are not supposed to be negotiated, social contradictions are not supposed to be parlayed in conversation or dialogue: they take it upon themselves. And they present themselves, the tyrants present themselves – I don’t like the word ‘tyrants’ – but these figures present themselves as representative of majoritarian victimage: “we are under threat” – and that’s when the ‘we’ gets identified with a certain kind of an American white majoritarian population; in India with the Hindus; in Turkey with Erdoğan, against all dissidents, against the courts; with Maduro in Venezuela. All these people have this tribal nationalism: we are under danger, we are threatened.

St: So once again, it becomes a blame game to see who is the best-suited scapegoat?

HB: Well, absolutely. And movement politics has a different temporality from democratic politics. It changes very quickly. The scapegoat is changing very quickly. Let me give you an example from my own experience: the election in November 2016. There’s no question that most informed people thought that one of the big issues would be Black Lives Matter. You had an unprecedented number of young black people killed. The police force itself was in disarray in Chicago, the deaths in Chicago, where there was a mare for the Obama administration, the death rate of young black people went up. We all told this would be a crying election issue.

Suddenly, after November 2016, we are told that the issue is not that: it's white lives that are in danger. And I do feel that these shifts, these quick shifts in perspective are to do with movement politics. If you just think about it, in an analogy with say 1931/1932 in Germany, the earliest – as Giorgio Agamben suggests too – the earliest signs of the holocaust were what looked like strange, but simple requests: that all doctors should submit the names and records of people who had lung diseases or heart diseases. Why should they submit that? Because this was the start of identifying the 'unhealthy', and it slowly settled on the Jewish stereotype. Why I am saying this? Because with movement politics, our notion of cause, determination, and effect gets much more blurred. We can't read it with the same clarity, we may have a word for it, we may have a name for it, we may have a sense of what it is not. But it makes the reading, the philology of the politics much more problematic.

AO: Absolutely. That recalls the confusion that we have here, that we are experiencing here in Italy, now.

St: Our classes focused on women writers in the postcolonial context and we dealt with both gender and postcolonial issues. Therefore, we would like to know whether and how gender studies have influenced you and your work.

HB: Well, I will say that my professional life has been created by women, which is actually true, including this invitation here. The reason why gender studies had a major effect on me was that I learnt many of the methods that I started working with, initially – psychoanalysis, discourse analysis – I learnt all that through feminist writers. The channel for me came from feminist writers. They were writing about cinema, psychoanalysis, the notion of the figura, the notion of the body. I have a very special debt to gender studies because that's how I actually began to think about problematizing the question of race, so mine is a very obvious debt. I literally learnt from the proponents of feminism in general, these were my teachers – not formally, informally. But this takes me back to your question about Said, who I knew very, very well. He was a personal friend, and of course I saw him initially very much as a mentor. But he always castigated me in a very loving and friendly way for being so theoretical: "Why do you wanna do this? What are all these terms? Why do you wanna talk about metonymy? Why do you wanna talk about psychic desire? Get real!" And he had a point, but I had a different destiny, my purpose was different. The main difference between us you can see is that, for him, the notion of Self-and-Other has a polarizing aspect. That was very much the architecture of his work. I was very much more in the gender studies tradition of thinking about how interstitial and small differences could create a shift in questions of identity or value, or political strategy, or agency. He was very much within the tradition of a certain kind of dialectical contradiction. I was much more – and so was the work I started doing then, and even now – about dialectical ambivalence. Edward Said used to get very irritated with me, for my interest in

ambivalence: “Why don’t you tell these people they’re shits, they’re bad?” Maybe we have to look at the relationship. He was much more into a certain kind of oppositional confrontation, I was more like Fanon, and indeed even Gramsci: more into questions of relationality, how do these different elements relate to each other. And of course, part of the work I’ve been doing lately is on history as montage, and the question of montage is very much part of this third space. Montage is not just two things, montage is the third space of the *tertium quid* that emerges from the confrontation of two positions, two images or two perspectives. So, I think, to answer your question, absolutely. And I’ve come back to your question about Said.

St: Thank you. In what way does your intellectual work relate to the Mahindra Humanities Centre at Harvard?

HB: The Humanities Centre at Harvard started off, I don’t know, sometime in the 1980s I suppose, but it was called something different, it was called “The Centre for Literary and Cultural Analysis,” or something like that, and I only took it over I think 9 or 10 years ago. I took it over because I felt that the Humanities needed a platform in a time when the professional schools and STEM were basically the disciplinary choices of many – choices that seemed to have with them possibilities and opportunities that people didn’t have in the Humanities.

When Harvard offered this appointment to me, I took it because I wanted students, the faculty also, and the world more generally, to understand how the Humanities disseminate into all kinds of areas of work. One thing the Humanities teach you, I think, is to do something very simple, which is to read very carefully. And reading very carefully, whether it is in the law, whether it is in psychoanalysis, whether reading is used, more metaphorically, to listening to somebody, is absolutely central to the democratic dialogue and democratic interlocution. Attentive reading in the Humanities is not simply a philological issue: it is an ethical issue. It is the respect that I owe those whom I speak to, those whom I read, those whom I disagree with. It teaches you ethical attentiveness in a context of interaction – I don’t say a context of ‘tolerance’, I am not keen on tolerance, tolerance is too passive for me – but ethical attentiveness in the context of wanting to be an interlocutor, having the will to intervene, the will to question, the will to interpret. So, it is an ethics of intervention, it is not simply an ethics of “you hold your views, I hold mine and then we can go in our different ways.” That is one of the very important issues with the Humanities.

The other very important issue is – of course it is changing – that, generally, in scientific experimentation (which is the equivalent of humanistic interpretation), the responsibility of judgment and the relationship of knowledge to the world often happen at the end of a process; to get to the end of the experiment is very important. Then of course there’s reflection on “did you use animals in a way you shouldn’t have, did you use women in a way you shouldn’t have, etc.” Of course, scientists think about all these things and the procedures and practices become better over time, but the emphasis is very much on getting to the end of the experiment

and that's why you often see revealed after, even in major experiments, how placebo has been given to some people without them knowing, and all these kinds of moral tribulations. But in humanistic interpretation, you have to take a judgment all the time on what you are doing, you can't go from one sentence to another without weighing meaning, position, the effective word in the domain of the political and the domain of the community. It is a continual agonistic struggle with the ethical and moral imagination.

Another important issue with the contemporary Humanities is that the more we question the national framework and the more we try and work outside of one unitary disciplinary framework, the more we find ourselves at the crossroads of knowledge foundation. And that's the third space. And that is, I think, extremely important, because that's not only important intellectually, but it is important institutionally: increasingly, senior administration have to take the challenge of "how do I tenure this person whose work is in the middle of this, whose work is a network? How do I formulate a seminar or a curriculum which is in that context? How do I begin to measure excellence when you have these new and emergent disciplines?" And I think the Humanities are the midwives of that.

St: Before we conclude, I would like to ask you a personal question. How much has your personal experience as an intellectual and as an Indian and a Parsi migrant influenced your life?

HB: Well... how long do you have? Let me just start with the more unusual issue, because some of it is predictable. The more unusual issue is what it means to be a Parsi. That is not something people really think about. What does it mean to be a Parsi in Bombay? It is a very local situation as far as I am concerned. I think that both the advantages and disadvantages of the diaspora were actually apparent retrospectively to me, just growing up as a Parsi in Bombay. The Parsi is a very small community, they were a community that somehow was interstitial, they sort of fitted in between the British, the Muslims, the Hindus... they didn't have the same religious prescriptions. And because they could circulate through the society in various ways, they were also very strategic: as a community, they knew where they could stay and, as a minority, they have never been seriously persecuted in India, in any substantial way. Partly, it is due to their own understanding of minority trajectories and strategies and to their sense of tact, which created a tremendous sense of trust in the country as a whole. But the fact is that you always have that element of difference – not big differences, which are much easier to deal with. I would say, not the Saidian measure of difference, but a complicated, disseminated, fragmented kind of difference; and Parsis experienced that, you know. We Parsis never had a great Renaissance, we never had a great 19th century. If you think about Indian traditions, classical traditions, they go way back; if you think about Muslim traditions, they go way back. But, and I think Foucault once said that, when we relate to our past, most of us relate to about three hundred years, post-enlightenment. And most of the communities

had great novelists, great musicians, great books... but Parsis never did. So Parsis never had that. To me it felt both as a freedom and a burden. There was an exilic sense for a young person growing up, going to college... You know, when I went to Oxford I had to redo my undergraduate degree because I refused to go to Oxford after schooling: I wanted to be an undergraduate in my own city, in Bombay. And so, I did one B.A. there, and then I had to do a second one because they wouldn't recognize it in the UK. So, I wanted to stay on because, in a way, I wanted that in-between experience. Parsis are very much of that kind.

But there are many advantages to it, too. Our community was very cosmopolite. There were very traditional families, but they were less elite. I came from the absolute elite of the Parsi community. In my family, some of them were fluent in English, others were not, but all of them felt that I should cross as many intellectual and cultural frontiers as I could. They were very wealthy Parsis – the Parsis were the first 'European-style bourgeoisie' in India. There was no other group that saw itself as a bourgeoisie in the way in which the Parsis saw that: civic responsibility, philanthropy, building up the professions, building up a sense of professional probity and ethics. Many of these bourgeois ideas were embedded in the Parsis... that tiny, tiny community – today there are less than one hundred thousand Parsis in the world, 80,000 people. But it did give you a kind of confidence that you could negotiate with a hybridity that was powerful and not disempowering. The rest is less interesting [*laughing*].

Note

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