

**ON THE NATIONAL MIDDLE CLASS**

**Ranjith Gunawardene**

**When Language is Power**

In 'Black skin and White Masks' Fanon observed that language is power. In many ex-colonised countries the language of the coloniser is still confined to the privileged national middle class. The masses of the people are denied the opportunities of learning the colonisers' language. Language is also used as a way of exploiting the ignorance of the masses and to keep their privileged positions unchallenged. The intellectual equipment, the revolutionary ideology necessary to challenge effectively the power elites, are at all cost hidden from the masses. It is by learning the language of the coloniser that the masses will discover the radical, revolutionary ideology inherent in the Western tradition. Language awakens the awareness of the masses through an exposure to new experiences, deepens their consciousness by making them aware of the revolutionary movements in the outside world. New ideas, new experiences make them aware of their own revolutionary potentialities. It is precisely for this reason that the national middle class uses the most deceptive and cunning methods to keep away this explosive instrument from the masses.

So long as language is the property of the few, knowledge too can be used to exploit the masses. The national middle class 'draws economic rent on knowledge'. Time and again

they speak about the importance of learning the coloniser's language. But it is not with any seriousness of purpose or intention that they deliver these long sermons on the usefulness of mastering the language – specially for higher education. They feign and simulate a grave concern, and work out various spurious and useless "language projects" at the level of the school and the university.

**Hypocritical Talk**

When the masses voice their demands for further knowledge, to expand their intellectual horizons, the national middle class always responds with answers which easily satisfy the masses. The national middle class in a very subtle way obstructs the translation of ideas and experiences into the national language. Their hidden hostility is obvious enough but the tactics they use to denigrate such ventures are extremely sly and surreptitious.

When the demands become too heavy by it resorts to cheap demagogic tactics. In a cynical manner characteristic of any privileged caste they begin to talk about the greatness of the national heritage, the uniqueness of traditional culture. They begin to denounce the West and condemn everything taken from the West. These violent diatribes against the evil, corrupting influences of the West are often couched in very effective and appealing phrases. They advocate a return to the nation's pristine and pure traditions. Fanon saw through this vulgar cant and hypocritical talk.

In "The Wretched of the Earth" he puts his own observations in very clear terms, and calls off the bluff of the national middle class. He wrote "I am ready to concede that on the plane of factuality being the past existence of an Aztec civilization does not change anything very much in the diet of the Mexican peasant of today. I admit that all the proofs of a wonderful Songhai civilization will not change the fact that today the Songhais are under-fed and illiterate, thrown between sky and water with empty heads and empty eyes".

He comments further on this theme. "From the chauvinism of the Senegalese to the tribalism of the Yolofs is not a big step. For, in fact, everywhere that the national bourgeoisie has failed to break through to the people as a whole, to enlighten them and to consider all problems in the first place with regard to them – a failure due to bourgeoisie's attitude of mistrust and to the haziness of its political tenets – every where where that national bourgeoisie has shown itself incapable of extending its vision of the world sufficiently, we observe a falling back towards old tribal attitudes".

**National Culture**

The comments Fanon makes on national culture will help to focus attention on a problem which has confused the minds of the masses. "The nation gathers together the various indispensable elements necessary for a creation of a culture, those elements which alone can give it credibility, validity, life and creative life. In the same way it is its national character that will make such a culture

*Continued from page 19*

open to other cultures and which will enable it to influence and permeate other cultures". In a speech given in Rome in 1959 Fanon resolved this problem which has confused and misled the masses. "If man is known by his act, then we will say that the most urgent thing today for the intellectual is to build up his nation. If this building up is true, that is if it interprets the manifest will of the people and reveals the eager African people, then the building of a nation is of necessity accompanied by the discovery and encouragement of Universalizing values. Far from keeping aloof from other nations, therefore, it is national liberation which leads the nation to play its part in the stage of history. It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows, and this two-fold emerging is ultimately the source of all culture".

ECONOMIC REVIEW JULY 1975