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“Living In An Open Parentheses:” A Cabralian Theory for the Postcolonial.

Revolutionaries invented a ‘people’ before inventing its future.

Jacques Ranciere.

Introduction: A Revolutionary Praxis

Although Cabral was aware of other revolutionary experiences and their theoretical contributions, he rarely drew upon them formally, tending instead to build around the unique revolutionary conditions in his own movement’s struggle for liberation and independence.

Ronald H. Chilcote.

Born in Guinea, raised in Cape Verde (by a mother from the former and a father from the latter country), educated as an agronomist in the dictatorial Lisbon of Salazar, instrumental in resisting Portuguese colonialism from west to south-west Africa, Amilcar Cabral’s standing as an African revolutionary has never been in question. However, it may be forgotten now, or, more accurately, overlooked, that Cabral did a great deal more than co-found, with his half-brother Luis Cabral, Aristedes Pereira, and Rafael Barbosa, the Partido Africano de Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC) in Bissau in September 1956,ⁱ a significant feat within itself. Cabral was also co-founder of the Movimento Popular Libertacao de Angola (MPLA) in 1956 with Agostino Neto; and, he worked alongside Eduardo Mondlane (founder of FRELIMO), Neto and Eduardo dos

Santos to produce a movement that would liberate Angola and Mozambique, the latter of which he had much less contact with if not influence upon.

From a small country, or, two small countries, to be more precise, equally in the service of both, it is salient that Cabral has never been identified by postcolonial critics as a singular or looming figure. Cabral is always understood locationally, in relation to the statesmanship of Kwame Nkrumah or the revolutionary intensity of Patrice Lumumba; and then, Cabral is only regarded as belonging to a second tier of anti-colonial leaders. According to Ronald H. Chilcote, “In the decades following World War II and the breakup of the Empire in Africa, Cabral was perhaps overshadowed by other revolutionaries such as Lumumba and Nkrumah.”ⁱⁱ

Not only “overshadowed” by his fellow-Africans Lumumba and Nkrumah, but also shaded by his other anti-colonial contemporaries – Ernesto Che Guevara, Mao Zedong, and, of course, Frantz Fanon; all of whom, like Cabral, were deeply as committed to material transformation as to culture. Today, while these contemporaries are widely referenced and routinely invoked, Cabral has dropped off the list of postcoloniality’s key thinkers. The effect of Cabral’s fall into disuse is difficult to gauge, but it is certainly of consequence to – and in – the late-postcolonial moment that his work, his revolutionary praxis and theory, may itself be forgotten.

It is this aspect of his thought, the way in which Cabral understood “theory” and its resonance within our moment, with which this presentation is concerned. At stake is not so much the role of postcolonial theory, certainly too overdetermined a discussion, but how Cabral’s political functions – his work as leader of anti-colonial (Portuguese) liberation movements – were girded by a complicated, (non-)derivative approach to

theory. African revolutionaries, from Tanzania's Julius Nyerere (committed to an African socialism) to Angola's Neto and Samora Machel of Mozambique (who espoused a more orthodox socialism), advocated and practiced ideological models that conformed to prevailing theoretical thinking.

At issue in this reading of Cabral is the way in which the anti-colonial intellectual, schooled in both a periphery and a metropolis ruled by the Salazar regime, negotiated a distinct relationship to theory in a historical moment when the borrowing from and sometimes too easy invocation of major theorists was the order of the anti- and, later, postcolonial day. Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, and Mao, provided conceptual inspiration and political vision that played a key role in shaping the anti- and postcolonial imaginary. For Cabral, all of these thinkers, in one form or another, were vital to his work from Cape Verde to Angola and Guinea. However, and this is where Cabral speaks pointedly to our conjuncture, it is not simply that he believed, as he did in *Cape Verdeness*, in an Africanist theorizing (Cabral's cryptic, almost jingoistic, motto was to "Make Cape Verdeans aware of Cape Verde). It is, rather, that his understanding of what kind of political work theory can do is instructive for our thinking of postcoloniality: for Cabral theory's efficacy resides in its capacity to "extend," to make critical, the temporality of politics. For Cabral, theory was a key resource in thinking not only beyond the current conjuncture, such as the anti-colonial struggle, but in imagining the kind of interrogations – the commitment to asking the politically pertinent questions – the temporality beyond (the postcolonial nation-state) might demand.

There is in Cabral, this presentation suggests, a nascent, persistent strain of dissatisfaction with (any) existing political and theoretical. The determination to exceed

theoretical “derivation,” that which Chilcote names “other revolutionary experiences and their theoretical contributions,” forms the very core of Cabral’s anti-colonial philosophy: “Pensar pelas nossas próprias cabeças, partindo da nossa própria realidade.” Rendered in English, there can be no mistaking the nativist force that informs such a standpoint: “To think with our own heads, from our own reality.” However, as much as Cabral claims and insists upon the agentiality of the African Other in this proclamation of philosophical independence (the centrality of “our reality”),ⁱⁱⁱ he is also insisting upon the significance of intellectual process: “thinking with our own heads” is as much a call for conceptual sovereignty as it is a commitment to the anti-colonial political imaginary. However, in this loaded phrasing, which can (with good reason) be read as “Africanist,” another theoretical injunction can be identified: the existence of dual, and simultaneous, historical charges.

This duality, or ambivalence, we might even say, is a vital characteristic of Cabral’s thinking. It is often difficult to identify this ambivalence because it is located, and frequently rhetorically overpowered by, a tendency toward more direct political articulation. However, there is sometimes within this proclivity an intimation, a hint, of something beyond the “routine” as in when the postcolonial future imagined by Cabral contains within a reminder to his PAIGC colleagues of the temporality beyond: “We must always that people do not fight for ideals or for the things on other people’s minds. People fight for practical things: for peace, for living better in peace, and for their children’s future. Liberty, fraternity and equality continue to be empty words for people if they do not mean a real improvement in the conditions of their lives.” As “practical,” grounded, and goal-oriented an articulation as this is, there is nevertheless an implicit – if

reluctant – link between practice and theory, between the conceptualization of the leadership and the everyday, quotidian (fully explicable) desires of the populace, desires that are fully endorsed by Cabral. This “admonishment” by Cabral, by virtue of the duality that marks his thinking, for this reason houses within it the element of what we might term the esoteric: the theorizing, if only reduced to the Enlightenment mundane triumvirate of “liberty, fraternity and equality,” of another life: “peace” can only be achieved if it can be articulated as just political desire, if it can be theorized into the postcolonial imaginary. Theorizing, differently phrased, is constitutive of Cabral’s thinking; the “practical” is always founded upon something other than the tangible.

In order to engage Cabral’s theory he is located here, to borrow a phrase from a novelist whose work catalogues our disenchantment with the postcolonial, the Somalian exile Nurrudin Farah, in an “open parentheses.”^{iv} Positioned in that conceptual space, Cabral’s work shows how it is exposed to a renewed opening in its both its anteriority and its posteriority: where the temporal markings, the anti-colonial past where Cabral worked and the late-postcolonial, often dystopic present that engenders Farah’s fiction (located in that moment which would have been Cabral’s “future”) which we inhabit surrounded by its failings, are subjected to a Cabralian critique. That is to say, where the efficacy of theory – its potential usefulness, or the political work it cannot do – enables a thinking that is at once tangential and contingent (the experience of circumscribed living that characterizes the parentheses) and in discursive excess – the thinking beyond the temporal closures. This form of engagement with and through Cabral, the anti-colonial revolutionary who is simultaneously forgotten – even on the occasion of his 80th birthday, 12 September 2004 – and figured one-dimensionally – as the man of action, not as

theorist a lá Fanon or Lenin – allows for a critique of postcoloniality as a unique theoretical experience. (Among the reasons for Cabral’s un-elevated status, to phrase his standing, or lack thereof, awkwardly, is the fact that he wrote in a metropolitan language, worked in a context, and fought against a second tier colonial power: Portugal at no point ranked with Britain or France or Spain as an empire so revolutionaries situated in that culture, with the possible exception of the Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire, have been subjected to a particular kind of neglect within orbit of postcolonial thinking.)

Without ascribing to our historical conjuncture a hubristic status (the too often, if not inaccurately, invoked mantra of the “crisis of postcolonialism”), such a thinking of Cabral animates, in Giorgio Agamben’s terms, the necessity for that most demanding of political and theoretical disjunctures: “The relation of abandonment.”^v This relation, Agamben goes on to argue, is of significant import: it is “so ambiguous that nothing could be harder than breaking from it” (Agamben, 109). The historical charge here is both to “break” with the prevailing, under-researched representation of Cabral and to construct, out of his work (which was often conceived as a handbook for revolution) a theory with contemporary purchase. It is, because of this dual demand, to extract from those key moments in his theory, and through a dialogic with other thinkers of the political, a theory located in “open parentheses.” It is to open Cabral’s work to our moment; it is to, we might even suggest, open Cabral’s work such as his key text, Unity and Struggle, and his several other publications, to itself. Moreover, poetically phrased, it is to “abandon” Cabral fully, if only momentarily, to theory, to re-conceive him “in theory” – not, of course, in Aijaz Ahmad’s pejorative use of the term^{vi} but provide a delineation of Cabral’s theorization of the postcolonial.

“Beyond The Seizure of Power.”

Cabral developed not only the theory and tactics of wars of liberation from colonial rule, but also was one who looked beyond the seizure of power.

Tetteh Kofi.

Sovereign states in Latin America, which came to postcoloniality in the nineteenth-century, and post-War Asia and sub-Saharan Africa have lived too long, and disenchantedly, in the that moment “beyond the seizure of power;” Third World populaces have for too long been subjected to those regimes who, after assuming power, have act as what Fanon names the “national bourgeoisie” or Latin American scholars label the “comprador class.” Cabral, murdered just months before the PAIGC declared Guinea independent (24th September 1973), understood the nature of political circumscription and how to think outside, or in excess, of it. In Farah’s terms, Cabral recognized the condition of “open parentheses.” The PAIGC leader conceived his work in a temporality that was historically marked and overburdened at both ends; on the anterior extreme by the realities of colonialism and at the posterior end by the imagining of its termination; these temporalities coexisted within Cabral’s parentheses. Identified with and born into colonial societies, Guinea and Cape Verde, Cabral lived in a parentheses where the past was historically omnipresent – the latter of which was a collection of islands largely deserted until Portuguese colonialists started inter-marrying with African slaves – and the future imaginable but still out of reach. Cabral, for this reason, lived in an open historical parentheses: his work, indeed, his world, opened up from his temporal location, the mid-twentieth century, in both directions – from the pre-colonial past the dim vistas of the postcolonial future could be glimpsed; because of his historical siting, Cabral could never

be locked exclusively into his temporal conjuncture. In this way the young poet Amilcar Cabral might have been slightly misguided when he wrote in “Island” in 1945 in Praia (the capital of Cape Verde), just before leaving to study agronomy in Lisbon (Cabral was a love poet, not of great eloquence, in his Cape Verdean youth):

Island

Your hills and valleys

haven't felt the passage of time.

It was precisely because this African archipelago was so indelibly marked by the “passage of time,” changed so radically because of the “passage of time,” and understood its temporal relation to modernity and pre-modernity so intently, that those “hills and valleys” metaphorically grasped the porousness of their parentheses – their openness to the workings of time and their transformation because of it.

The Cape Verdean islands exist bracketed by their relative isolation, yet umbilically connected to Africa and colonialism; as an island, they were (before colonialism) outside the African past yet representative, in their hybrid populace, of the continent's colonial present and symbolic of its postcolonial future, that moment when the settler population (or, populations, in the case of Cape Verde) and the “natives” (insofar as any Cape Verdean could claim the status of indiginee) would negotiate their joint future from their own peculiar, and variously precarious, temporal locations; the Cape Verdean times articulated, as that of many societies, as culture and race, all of which bound some of them to a liminal, Mediterranean, Europe, others to an Africa in the process of decolonization. All Cape Verdeans, however, recognized that they were always occupying an incomplete historical “closed-offness” – that experience of living at

once in and at the edge of other temporalities; an intense temporality that bordered, and was in effect made possible by, other temporalities that now informed, and indeed formed, this parenthetical anti-/postcoloniality. The archipelago, physically engulfed by the Atlantic ocean and within easy reach of the African continent, the Lusophone archipelago which stood outside the continent but was intimately connected to the mainland through its relation to Guinea-Bissau (a nation which Cabral's half-brother, Luis Cabral, would lead in its first postcolonial instantiation), metaphorized as few other colonial locales can, the experience of permeable borders: the condition of living simultaneously with a bifurcated view out onto vastness of the past and the future, of being locked into a moment without, importantly, being locked out of broader historical movements. (Paradoxically, of course, so intimate was the connection to Guinea that Cabral's assassination, on 20th January 1973, the infamous "Night of the Long Knives," by Inocencio Kani, a guerilla war veteran former PAIGC navy commander, was engineered by no less an African "revolutionary" than Ahmed Sekou Toure, president of Guinea-Conakry.)^{vii}

Because of its distinct location, more than most other anti- and postcolonial experiences, Cape Verde provided Cabral's work with the unique opportunity to think a crucial "break," in Jacques Ranciere's sense of the term, with postcolonial discourse. Cape Verde, constitutes, within Ranciere's formulation, a "history of events that break the 'normal' course of time, a history of events, inscriptions, forms of subjectivization, of promises, memories, repetitions, anticipations, anachronisms, and so on."^{viii} From the parenthetical temporality of Cape Verde, where every historical formation, experience, and expectation is both old and new, what kind of "subjectivation" is possible? How are

memories produced, protected from the ravages of colonialism and postcolonialism? What “anticipations” sustain the populace? What “repetitions” manifest themselves in everyday life in Praia, the nation’s capital? Which “anachronisms” are constitutive of national history? And, beyond Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau, can any anti- or postcolonial history be said to be “normal?” Or, is the rupture that was colonialism too radical, and, paradoxically, therefore too normative, to be understood as a “break” because it represents such a disarticulation from the past and contains within it such an unimagined future?

Under these circumstances, for Cabral the political task was always to, in his terms, “an act of building History:” the “act” of engaging the enormous consequence of the “break” Ranciere identified while fully aware that the “break” marked a temporal cleft that could not be sutured by the imagined futurity that existed in the moment “beyond,” after the putative end of colonialism. The moment “beyond” that Kofi names coincides with the act of “future-making” inscribed within Ranciere’s critique of revolutionaries: that those who struggle against colonialism or any form of oppression construct, figuratively and literally constitute, a “people” before elaborating – “inventing” – “its future.” It is into this philosophical aporia, out of the experience of parenthetical history, that Cabral steps, it is to this philosophical absence or void that Cabral’s theory addresses itself: the interrogative work required to make the “future” that Ranciere imagines as lost amidst the clutter of revolutionary thinking. It is, arguably, only a parenthetical history that could have produced a Cabral, a thinker bounded but not blinkered by clear, if permeable, temporal markings, a revolutionary for whom the future demanded a conceptualization before it actually arrived.

It is for this reason that there is always a “dissensus,” a philosophical “break,” in Cabral’s work between his praxeological injunctives and his theoretical openness – the revolutionary engaged in the political work of overthrowing a dictatorial regime coexists generatively with the theorist who is, in the phrasing of that insurgent Irish poet, WB Yeats, skeptical of “certain certainties.” Acting as a revolutionary for Cabral is frequently interrogated by the possibilities, not always immediately accessible to the political actor, of theory. Parenthetical history produces a discomfiture with temporal certainty, to say nothing of a distrust of historical absoluteness, the sense that temporalities or modes of struggle can be definitively closed off or that praxis and theory exist in discrete relation to each other. Addressing this parenthetical condition, Cabral, in one of his most eloquent formulations, offers his theorization as a caution against praxis: “If it is true that a revolution can fail though it is based on perfectly conceived theories – nobody has yet made a successful revolution without a revolutionary theory.”

This is not only a singular articulation, and memorable at that, but a loaded estimation of revolutionary theory. In this salient, deft enunciation, Cabral sets himself – as a revolutionary thinker advocating the virtues and necessity of theory – in relation to philosophers such as Marx, Lenin and Mao, themselves nothing but proponents of “revolutionary theory,” Cabral also makes contingent his more abundant, and somewhat prosaic, expressions about the fundamentality of praxis. There is an understanding here by Cabral about revolutionary failure without proposing the abolition of theory – theory is not, he insists, either perfect or useless. It is not even conditional: it is an absolute prerequisite for revolutionary struggle: no revolution without theory. For the parenthetical theorist, living in an open parenthesis makes particular demands: it requires an intense

familiarity with, a thinking within, its “own reality” as well as an awareness what filters through, what makes its way into, and, importantly, what cannot be seen but must be imagined from the location of a specific context. For Cabral’s work, the reality that obtains within the parentheses is deeply inflected by the ideas – Ranciere’s “subjectivations, promises, memories, anticipations,” that lend their conceptual shape to the (making of) the parentheses. The parentheses are a product as much of the (circumscribed) inside as they are of the constitutive outside.

Cabral’s theorization of the anti-colonial “anticipating” its way toward the postcolonial enables the thinking of the current conjuncture as a chronometric temporality. Chronometrics constitutes a precise time, in the sense that Jorge Luis Borges’s protagonist “Funes the Memorious”^{ix} knows exactly what time it is, without the benefit of a timepiece, in which past, present and future’s discrete relation to each other can be discerned but that historical moment in which temporality allows for a critical contemporaneity that is in excess of itself. For Borges and Cabral, the anticolonial or postcolonial present is never, in this parenthetical thinking, sufficient in, of, or for itself: it always has to be thought as a discrete openness, as an awareness of those historicities that border it, on either temporal extreme. The past or the future is understood, in this representation, not as a burden, as a temporality that is overdetermined by historical location. Rather, all temporalities, and temporal conjunctures are approached as a historical interrogation that make critical demands on the location and temporality within the parentheses. It is, provocatively phrased, to say that it is not enough “think only with your own heads” or only within or for our “own time.” There is, within the singular

intellect or temporality, an inherent insufficiency – a critical deficiency is innate to any thinking alone.

Cabral's theory, as Kofi so lucidly grasps, always operated with a conceptual excessiveness: the looking beyond grounded not so much in a dissatisfaction with the present (parentheses), but rooted in and routed through the recognition, the Rancierian "anticipation" that "beyond the seizure of power" – itself far so far outside the experience of "living within" – lay a set of difficulties, a dissensus or a radical break with the present, that would require not only a praxeological commitment, but a theory inveterately determined to think beyond itself. In fact, if such a commitment were not inscribed within this theory, then the very conditions of "real improvement" to which Cabral dedicated himself, the PAIGC and MPLA, would be inconceivable. It is only through a demanding, excessive theory, that Cabral could "break" the strictures of the parentheses, that he could overcome the "provincialism" of Portuguese colonialism, and struggle for and as an African who worked, initially, and formatively, within the ambit of constraint. It is only through imagining what might not be possible that Cabral is able to assign centrality to theory: to understand that the failure of revolutionary theory is a condition of political life, not a reason to abdicate to the circumscription and inscription that marks, and limits, the anti- and postcolonial life within the parentheses.

It is, in fact, because of this very inscription that Farah's protagonists find themselves in a Somalia completely locked into and against itself: civil war, that bloody struggle of the self against the self, that extreme enclosure of the political that makes no movement outside possible, that over-identification with the self imagining (to risk a redundancy) that militates against any intervention, any interrogation, either from

without, or, worse, within. It is precisely against the bloody solidity, or the blood-stained strength, of the parentheses – where the parentheses functions as an absolute barrier against the without, where there is no, or so the fallacious reasoning goes, constitutive outside – that motivates Cabral’s repeated return to theory. This is the “break,” that liberation from (anti- or postcolonial) History into parenthetical history, that Ranciere’s philosophical reading reveals in Cabral’s theory: the increasing permeability of the parentheses, the opening up that requires a de-constitution of the over-inscribed inside: the deliberate act of living beyond the parentheses: the negation of the “seizure of power” that produced Somalia, Rwanda, and even the “Night of the Long Knives,” through its intensive theorization from a within that is dialogically linked to a complex of withouts. The anti-colonial struggle, that act of making a “‘people’,” may have depended excessively on the revolution within – or, more accurately, conducted and sustained from within – but the moment after, as Cabral knew, much like Fanon did in his critique of the “national bourgeoisie,” required a conception of the “beyond.” Cabral understood that the perpetually elusive postcolonial future demanded a recognition of the limitations produced by an uncritical occupation of the parentheses – which is to say, in Cabral’s terms, only theory could ensure his and Ranciere’s “future.” Cabral’s attention and commitment to theory was the consequence of a prescience borne out of a dissensual, dissatisfied relationship to both the past and the present. Cabral’s theory constitutes a “break” in – and within the paradigm – of chronometric thinking. The “beyond” can only be achieved if the parentheses are not only deconstituted, but comprehensively disarticulated from the “lived-in,” parenthetical past and present. The “beyond” is only achievable if there is a commitment to living with-out parenthetical history.

Note.

ⁱ See Jock McCullough's In The Twilight of Revolution (Boston: Routledge and Paul, 1983) for a key study of Cabral's role in the liberation movement in Cape Verde and Guinea.

ⁱⁱ Ronald H. Chilcote, Amilcar Cabral's Revolutionary Theory and Practice: A Critical Guide, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1991, 14.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Charles McCollester's essay "The African Revolution: Theory and Practice: The Political Thought of Amilcar Cabral" (Monthly Review, 24, March 1973) for Cabral as African thinker.

^{iv} Nurrudin Farah, Links, New York: Riverhead Books, 2003, 329.

^v Giorgio Agambem, Homo Sacer, Stanford University Press, 1998, 109.

^{vi} Aijaz Ahmad's book, In Theory is a critique, occasionally barbed, of the kinds of postcolonial theory produced by Third World scholars (he reserves a special vitriol for Edward Said's writings) in the West. Ahmad is intensely critical of the language of this theory and its remove from the kinds of politics required by Third World populations. I am not using the phrase "in theory" in this sense, though it does serve to convey some of the critical caution necessary to locate Cabral as a "praxeological" theorist.

^{vii} See, among other works, Jean Mettas and Dan Sperber's "Assassinat d'un combatant" (Le Heuvel Observateur 89, February 4, 47, 1973) and Anatoli Nikanorov's Amilcar Cabral (Lisbon: Combatentes do Povo, Edições, Sociais, 1975), for a discussion of the assassination.

^{viii} Jacques Ranciere, "The thinking of dissensus: politics and aesthetics," 4.

^{ix} Jorge Luis Borges, "Funes the Memorious," Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings, New York: New Directions Books, 1964.