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# The image of the veil in social theory

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**Abstract**
Social theory draws energy not just from the concepts it articulates but also from the images it invokes. This article explores the image of the veil in social theory. Unlike the mask, which suggests a binary account of human conduct (what is covered can be uncovered), the veil summons a wide range of human experiences. Of special importance is the veil's association with religion. In radical social thought, some writers ironize this association by "unveiling" religion as fraudulent (a move indistinguishable from unmasking it.) Baron d'Holbach and Marx offer classic examples of this stratagem. But other writers, notably Du Bois and Fanon, take a more nuanced and more theoretically productive approach to both religion and the veil. Refusing to debunk religion, these authors treat the veil—symbol and material culture—as a resource to theorize about social conflict. Proceeding in three stages, I, first, contrast the meanings of mask and unmasking with more supple veil imagery; second, identify anti-religious unveiling that is tantamount to unmasking; and, third, examine social theories of the veil that clarify the stakes of social adversity and political struggle. Du Bois's and Fanon's contributions to veil imagery receive special attention.

**Keywords** Du Bois and Fanon · Images and social theory · Mask and unmasking · Religion and social theory · Veil and unveiling · Veils of color

Without the play of metaphor, simile, personification, synecdoche, and other figures of speech, could social and political thought exist? Perhaps it could but such thought would be as vibrant as a comatose patient. Extract features of language that arouse mood, anticipate menace, direct us to paradox, or help us to confront the enduring strangeness of human life, and not much would be left: dangling numbers, graphic shapes, skeletal propositions.

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This article examines the image of the veil in social theory. The chief argument advanced is that while the mask is a stereotyped image, and unmasking a deflating one, the veil is a versatile image rich in descriptive potential to theorize both the human condition and social adversity.

Now it might appear that a discussion of veils in social theory is simply another way of talking about masks. If that were true, unveiling and unmasking would amount to the same performances: exposing hypocrisy, duplicity, and illusion. But this is not true or, more accurately, is true only in part. While invoking the mask typically calls for its removal—Friedrich Nietzsche ([1886] 2008), Oscar Wilde ([1885] 2008), and Erving Goffman (1967) furnish major exceptions to this rule—discussion of the veil may call for something quite different or, indeed, call for nothing at all. Similarly, while unmasking is always a political and ideological weapon (we unmask our enemies, never our friends) unveiling is polemical only contingently.

In his *Institutes of Oratory* (c. 95 AD), the Roman rhetorician Quintilian remarks that "writers have given special names to all the figures, but variously and as it pleased them" (9.3.54). I plead guilty to this criticism. The word "image" is the best term I can find to depict a cluster of tropes, devices, and analogies that authors employ to energize an argument. Image has the additional advantage of summoning something visual: Leviathan, vampiric capital, the iron cage.[1] An image works well in social theory when it stimulates the imagination to make discoveries (Swedberg 2014, pp. 92, 192–193) and when it shows "enough productive potential" to "help us make some sense of the variety of social phenomena to which it is to be applied" (Turner 2010, p. 101).[2] Drama and game are the classic examples of successful tropes. An image works poorly in social theory when it lacks generative power ("liquid modernity"), when it is hyperbolic ("dark times"), and when it is binary.[3] An example of the last is the image of the mask: a mask is put on; a mask is pulled off. With that oscillation, the image is spent.

I begin by exploring veil versatility; proceed to investigate anti-religious unveiling in radical social theory; and continue with two longer discussions of the veil in the writings of Du Bois and Fanon. The veil's creative possibilities for social theory are nowhere better explored than in the work of these two writers. Unlike unmasking theorists in the Marxist tradition, Du Bois and Fanon are attentive to religion's manifold potential to guide human action. For Fanon, the veil symbolizes a norm of female propriety but also of self-possession and resistance to the intrusion of outsiders. For Du Bois, the veil stands for all that separates the races from each other. It is a marker of opacity and of loss.

[1] "Iron cage" is Talcott Parsons's translation of Max Weber's "*stahlhartes Gehãuse*" (shell as hard as steel), summoned in the climax to *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism* (Weber [1904–05] 2002, p. 121). Weber's own image is more complex than Parsons's translation implies. Steel is modern, whereas iron is ancient. A shell enables mobility, whereas a cage confines its agent. I discuss these and other peculiarities of *stahlhartes Gehãuse* in Baehr 2001.

[2] Daniel Rigney (2001, pp. 204–205) identifies six criteria for appraising the theoretical worth of a metaphor.

[3] The limitations of "liquid modernity" as an image are examined in Turner 2010, pp. 101–103. "Dark times" is associated with Hannah Arendt's (1968) book of this title. Over the past thirty years, the term has been applied copiously to life under every American administration. But if life, say, under George W. Bush was "dark," what was life like under Stalin in the thirties? Darker? Not that darkness is always an exaggerated or lachrymose term. In some contexts, it may prompt disquieting reflection: "You fragment of life, what did you amount to? 'How great a darkness shrouds our days!' [quoting Lucan, *Pharsalia* IX:13–14.] Blessed is he who even then will have no regrets about his life's fragment" (Herder [1774] 2004, p. 97).

## The versatility of veil imagery

The human being is a covered animal. We cover our bodies with clothes, makeup, tattoos, perfume, and jewelry. We cover our motives with fine phrases. We cover our society with custom, "the greatest of weavers" (Carlyle [1834] 1987, p. 48). Humans are truth tellers, willing to confront ideology and lies, even under frightening conditions. But humans are also dissemblers happy to expose the faults of others, while keeping their own faults concealed. Masks and veils are garments. Since antiquity, they have also enjoyed the distinction of being images of human conduct. Poets, historians, novelists, and social theorists have found much use for them.

Masks and veils are not identical images. Mask derives from the Latin *persona* (the Greek πρόσωπον). Originally an acoustical device that drove the voice through one exit to make it ring out clearly in an open-air auditorium, a theatrical mask had two other purposes in the ancient world. The first was to dramatize the nature of the character that appears on stage. The second was to focus audience attention on the speech of the actor rather than on idiosyncratic and potentially distracting facial gestures (Nietzsche [1882] 1974, pp. 134–135; Müller [1888] 1987), pp. 33–34). Over several centuries, *persona* mutated from a wood or terra cotta object into a legal personality (Arendt 1963, pp. 102–103). "Natural man" then stood side by side with an entirely artificial being: a bearer of rights and obligations, a persona that would eventually attach to ecclesiastical orders, guilds, towns, universities, trade unions, professions, and other collective actors and corporations (Mauss [1938] 1985).

Yet if the person became a legal concept in the West and, after the Reformation, a moral one too (Hollis 1985), the mask became a byword for much that is laughable or detestable about humanity. Since the early modern period, wherever satirists and moralists have inveighed against hypocrisy, dissimulation, and play-acting, the mask has been a favored rhetorical cudgel to do so. Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne, Cervantes, La Rochefoucauld, Molière, Pascal, La Bruyère, Swift, Pope, and Rousseau—all denounce the mask as an emblem of ignominy.

Today, this denunciation, or *unmasking*, takes vernacular and theoretical forms. In the vernacular, unmasking is mostly directed towards individual malfeasance. To unmask individuals is to expose them as liars, cheats, hypocrites, or spies (official liars and cheats). Unmasking in the vernacular further entails the exposure of conspiracies, real or imagined. Social media seethes with such exposure.

By contrast, the unmasking practiced by theorists from Marx to Adorno to Bourdieu is rigorously impersonal. People may be sincerely mistaken about their real interests. And the keys to social explanation are structures, fields, and networks, not machinating cabals. The specialism of radical social theory is the unmasking of *ideas*, and this offers something more significant than the denunciation of individuals: it sets forth a map of the social world and an organon of its reform. Reading that map requires esoteric skills, namely, the application of techniques—inversion, reduction, positioning, deflation—that enable its adherents not just to see but *to see through* ideas and to re-describe them as ideology, misrecognition, and illusion.[4] Ubiquitously, unmasking writers claim to expose social domination sculpted into body and mind. Revealing such domination, whether as economic exploitation, symbolic violence, or distorted communication, is a necessary

[4] For a description and critique of these techniques, and of unmasking in general, see Baehr 2019a.

though not sufficient condition of emancipation (human flourishing). To the unmasker, "things are not what they seem. They reveal their true meaning only when decoded in accordance with the knowledge of the initiated—at which point they make complete sense and everything falls into place in a universal scheme" (Judt 2008, p. 26).

Now while veils may metaphorically double as masks, as we see in the next section, they have several connotations that masks lack. The same is true of unveiling, as is clear from ordinary language. To unveil a party platform, prior to a General Election, is to reveal its provisions. The party concerned does the unveiling. Conversely, to unmask a party platform is to expose its provisions as bogus or dangerous. Unmasking is the work of the opposition. Moreover, unlike unmasking's supposition of duplicitous concealment, unveiling may merely suggest scientific discovery, as in the webpage of the Canada Cancer Society that "unveils the latest cancer research."[5]

Veils are also more transparent than masks, at least figuratively.[6] The stiffness of aristocratic etiquette obliges everyone to hide personal foibles, says Alexis de Tocqueville ([1840] 2004, p. 713). In contrast, the *moeurs* of democratic peoples are less formal and more sincere. American manners "constitute something like a thin and poorly woven veil, through which each person's true feeling and individual ideas can easily be seen." The veil's permeability also permits Immanuel Kant's mocking observation, in "The Contest of the Faculties" ([1798] 1970, p. 187), that the British crown is an absolute monarchy "hiding under a very transparent veil (*Schleier*) of secrecy."[7]A veiled threat is an all too obvious one.

The foregoing suggests that the veil provides writers with a wide repertoire of imaginative possibilities. Little wonder, then, that novelists and poets are drawn to it. In *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon. A Journey Across Yugoslavia*, the British writer Rebecca West, stopping in Herzegovina, pauses to decipher what she calls the "Mostar costume." She is referring to a kind of niqab that, over the head, has the appearance of a large beak and that, below the knees, drags on the ground. This is an example of material culture: the attire of Muslim women in a particular place. Rebecca West is struck by the garment's lack of utility. It is bulky and must be broiling in hot weather; it impedes the carrying of children; and it is surely inconvenient in wet conditions or on rough terrain. What, then, is the costume's meaning? "The dark visor gives [the woman] the beak of a bird of prey, and the flash of gold thread within the collar suggests private and ensnaring delights." But the garment is also an imposition of men, Rebecca West ([1941] 2007, p. 292) infers. Hiding a woman's face is an act of violence; the veil is a symbol of a desire of man "to affront the breath of life in her nostrils," an act of moral as well as physical suffocation.

[5] http://www.cancer.ca/en/about-us/news/national/2017/march/story3/?region=on. Beyond the acts of covering a person or an object, the OED records among the following figurative variations on *veil*: to cloak or cover in darkness (night); to obscure something as in a mist, cloud; to hide or conceal something from the knowledge of others, disguising it deliberately; to express obliquely a menace of some kind (a veiled threat); to mute, soften, tone down the taste, sound, etc. of something.

[6] "… the veil of color had always been porous. The subtle and not-so-subtle advantages of light skin were a social reality, however varied and complex the manifestations, South and North," Lewis [1993] 2009, p. 62.

[7] The semantic affinity between veils and secrecy persists to modern times. VEIL was the CIA code word, in the last years of the Reagan administration, for the covert action "compartment"—compartmentalization being a means of sequestering sensitive information by special protocols that limit access and handling. See Woodward 1987.

This is a frightening (and fanciful?) interprettion of the veil's meaning. But, then again, the veil can have an utterly different symbolic value, as evident in the first two quatrains of W.B. Yeats's *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* (1890).

> I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree, And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made; Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee, And live alone in the bee-loud glade.
> And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow, Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings; There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow, And evening full of the linnet's wings.[8]

No mask could evoke such a bucolic state. Nor could it capture the simplicity, unity, and innocence that Jacob Burckhardt ([1860] 1990, p. 98) lyrically ascribes to medieval life. In that era, writes the Swiss historian, "both sides of human consciousness—that which was turned within as that which was turned without—lay dreaming or half-awake beneath a common veil."

> Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation—only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all things of the world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognized himself as such.

A death mask, such as the ones fabricated for Max Weber and Vladimir Lenin, are material objects, venerable remembrances of persons once lively. Veils, on the other hand, evoke the very image of death, as they do in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's In Memoriam: "What hope of answer, or redress/Behind the veil, behind the veil" (lvi, pp. 27–28). Masks as metaphor typically hide infamy, real or alleged. Veils cloak infamy as well, but they also conceal much that convention deems worthy of praise. Hence the bon mot of Jean de La Bruyère ([1688] 1885, p. 341) a seventeenth-century French moralist, that a "veil of modesty covers merit, and a mask of hypocrisy covers wickedness."[9] Just over three centuries later, in a different idiom, the veil appears once more as something meritorious. In John Rawls's (1971) celebrated thought experiment in moral philosophy, standing behind the "veil of ignorance" allows all people of good faith to establish impersonal and rational principles to guide the fair distribution of social resources.

[8] Although Richard Ellmann (1948) subtitles his critical study of Yeats, *The Man and the Masks*, Yeats's own memoir of earlier life is called *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922). In the Preface (p. v) to it, Yeats says that the book's title derives from the remark by Stéphane Mallarmé, the nineteenth-century French symbolist poet, "that his epoch was troubled by the trembling of the veil of the Temple." The religious allusion is plain.

[9] This usage allows ironic adaptation. Writing about the British Soviet spy Kim Philby, his duped friend and MI6 colleague Nicholas Elliott remarks: "Outwardly [Kim] was a kindly man. Inwardly, he must have been cold, calculating and cruel—traits which he cleverly concealed from his friends and colleagues … behind a veil of false modesty" (quoted in Macintyre 2004, pp. 289–90).

Veils and masks have different relations to truth. Removing the mask serves, almost ubiquitously, to reveal falsehood, whereas removing the veil may reveal a higher verity.[10] Augustine recalls that the sermons of Ambrose in Milan were capable of translating the literal into the spiritual, thus "removing the mystical veil" from a seemingly perverse text such as 2 Corinthians 3.6: "The letter kills, the spirit gives life" (Augustine [AD 397–400] 1991, *Confessions* VI. iii. [6]).[11] Similarly, in the verse that caps the conclusion to Part I of *Pilgrim's Progress*, the hero Christian challenges his readers to: "Put by the Curtains, look within my Vail/Turn up my Metaphors and do not fail:/There, if thou seekest them, such things to find/As will be helpful to an Honest mind." Admittedly, the narrator gamely concedes, such readers might find "dross" in his story; but Christian urges them to seek the gold instead and cautions against hasty constructions of the dream he has recounted: "By mis-interpreting, evil ensues" (Bunyan [1678] 2008, p. 164), he warns.

A secular example of discovery in or through the veil is the frontispiece to Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie*: "an allegorical composition in which female figures representing Reason and Philosophy unveil the figure of Truth, positioned in the upper center of the composition. A radiant light emanates from her, while to the left Imagination prepares to adorn her with a garland of flowers."[12] Truth reappears, still gendered, in a different idiom, two centuries later, in *La Nature se dévoilant à la Science* (1899). The allegorical sculpture by the Art Nouveauist Louis-Ernest Barrias depicts Nature as a woman unveiling her face and naked breasts to the inspection of knowledge.[13] Truth may also be gilded. Writing about the journalist and novelist Alphonse Karr's (1808–1890) talent for giving " truth the charm of paradox," Alexandre Dumas ([1852] 1904) observes: "This truth, bare and undraped when treated by others, is always, on leaving the hands of Alphonse Karr, clad in a veil of gold."[14]

In these descriptions of truth, veiled and unveiled, clad and naked, we are to gather that truth is something to which all rational people aspire. Yet the whole truth can be alarming. The veil suggests why. In George Eliot's novella *The Lifted Veil*, readers meet a man possessed of a terrifying ability: he sees too much. Some mysterious illness has struck him with the power of foreknowledge. The protagonist narrator, Latimer, foresees even his own death. Here the veil is represented as a protection against a surfeit of knowledge. Without the veil, Latimer is left vulnerable to that "unhappy gift of insight" into the souls of others. This "microscopic vision" transforms all that is pleasing, all wit and kind deeds, into something else entirely: frivolity, suppressed egoism, "meanness, vague capricious memories, and indolent make-shift thoughts, from which human words and deeds emerge like leaflets covering a fermenting heap" (Eliot [1859] 1999, p. 14). And in his attraction to Bertha, whom he later marries, Latimer experiences a "double-consciousness" within him, "like two parallel streams

[10] More precisely, removing the mask serves to reveal the truth of falsehood.

[11] In a previous chapter, Augustine grieves the "thick mist shutting me off from the brightness of your face, my God" (*Confessions* II. iii. [8]). I use the Chadwick translation of Augustine 1991. Fogs and mists are a common substitute for veils in sacerdotal literature.

[12] https://libraries.mit.edu/exhibits/diderots-encyclopedia-exhibit-preview/introduction/. I owe this reference to John Levi Martin.

[13] The sculpture is housed in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nature_Unveiling_Herself_Before_Science

[14] [1852] 1908, unpaginated.

that never mingle their waters and blend into a common hue" (p. 21).[15] Drawn to her sensuality, as others might be, he is repulsed by the hardness his preternatural powers detect in her character. Cursed by his vision, Latimer attempts "to draw the shroud of concealment more closely around him." He fails, sees Bertha in her true colors, and dies wretched in a condition that has revealed everyone, including himself, in their "naked skinless complication." Transparency—the unmasking ideal of radical social theorists from Marx to Jürgen Habermas—is a curse.

The suppleness of veil symbolism attracted several nineteenth-century European authors, each with a particular purpose in mind. Politics is a common theme; I return to it in the next section. Sex is another. The piety of Francesca, the "veiled supplicant" in *The Town of Lucca*, excites Heinrich Heine ([1831] 2006, pp. 161–162) to confess that he would gladly become Catholic for one night if it would enable him to lie in Francesca's arms.[16] And in Guy de Maupassant's *Bel-Ami*, sexuality caresses hypocrisy. Describing an erotically charged meal shared by four of the protagonists, the narrator describes the imaginary foreplay:

> They had now reached the stage of artful suggestiveness, of words lifting veils like a hand lifting a skirt, the stage of plays on meaning, cleverly disguised improprieties and every kind of unblushing hypocrisy, a covert language revealing naked images, generating in the mind's eye a fleeting vision of all that cannot be said, and enabling sophisticated society to indulge in a subtle, mysterious sort of love, a kind of impure contact of the mind, by the simultaneous evocation—as disturbing and sensual as a sexual embrace—of a secretly and shamefully desired intertwining of bodies (Maupassant [1885] 2001, p. 65; similarly, pp. 153, 174, 228).

## Religion's enemies

While veil imagery taps into aspects of social life that masks do not reach, the conflation of unveiling and unmasking is common; indeed, it is a leitmotif of political radicalism. Religion is a prominent target.

The Enlightenment writer Baron d'Holbach, a contributor to Denis Diderot's multivolume *Encyclopédie* (1751–1772), called his critique of religion *Christianity Unveiled, or an examination of the principles and effects of the Christian religion* (*Le christianisme dévoilé, ou Examen des principes et des effets de la religion chrétienne*)

[15] On Latimer's "double consciousness," see also pp. 35, 42. The expression was common in Eliot's milieu. Helen Small, the editor of the Oxford edition I am using, describes the origins of this concept in early British physiological psychology, notably the work of Sir Henry Holland (1788–1873). Eliot also used the term to describe herself, as the sociologist Herbert Spencer attests in his autobiography (details in Eliot [1859] 1999, pp. 94–95). Modern sociologists are more familiar with Du Bois's rendering of double-consciousness, on which see below.

[16] The mask in masquerade is also erotically charged. Tolstoy ([1904] 2004, p. 615) describes its allure to the corpulent Emperor Nicholas I whose "senile sensuality" is aroused by a masked woman. Not that it is the mask itself that briefly fascinates him; it is the person it conceals, a woman with a "beautiful figure" who speaks through the mask in a "tender voice." Figure and voice belong to a twenty-year old Swedish virgin, whom Nicholas proceeds to ravish in his private apartment.

of 1761. The God that Christianity inherited from the Jews, says d'Holbach, is a monster that "ordains robbery, persecution, and carnage." God blesses war and promotes savagery.

> Let us then conclude that the Christian religion has no right to boast of procuring advantages either to policy or to morality. Let us tear aside the veil with which it envelops itself. Let us penetrate back to its sources. Let us pursue its course; we shall find that, founded on imposture, ignorance, and credulity, it can never be useful but to men who wish to deceive their fellow creatures. We shall find, that it will never cease to generate the greatest evils among mankind, and that instead of producing the felicity it promises, it is formed to cover the earth with outrages, and deluge it in blood; that it will plunge the human race in delirium and vice, and blind their eyes to their truest interests and plainest duties.[17]

From d'Holbach onwards, veil and mask work together in cultural criticism to condemn religious tradition and social convention on the one hand, and to assert freedom and authenticity on the other. Shelley's lines from *Prometheus Unbound* ([1820] IV: 190–196) are immortal:

> The painted veil, by those who were, called life,
> Which mimicked, as with colours idly spread,
> All men believed and hoped, is torn aside—
> The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains
> Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed—but man:
> Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless,
> Exempt from awe, worship, degree …

Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx were two more fervent unveilers of religion. For Feuerbach, God is a distorted projection of humanity's own powers and needs. Because Christianity, and other religions, mystify the material basis of human existence, it is necessary for scientific thought "to discover, 'to unveil existence'… to *see* correctly."[18] That was Marx's ambition too, except that seeing through religion shows something more than an asocial human essence. Feuerbach fails to grasp that "the 'religious sentiment' is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual whom he analyzes belongs to a particular form of society" (Marx [1845] 1975, p. 423). That society will not outlive capitalism:

> The religious reflections of the real word can vanish only when the practical relations of everyday life between man and man, and man and nature, generally

[17] D'Holbach 1819 http://www.ftarchives.net/holbach/unveiled/cucontents.htm The quote appears at the end of chapter 1. It is notable that d'Holbach does not present unveiling as a general concept; we are not yet in the realm of modern social theory. Unveiled (*dévoilé*) only appears once in his text, and that is in the title. "Veil" appears twice: in the quotation above and in Chapter VII ("Of the Mysteries of the Christian Religion").

[18] Feuerbach [1841] 1881, p. x "To unveil existence" is Marian Evans's (George Eliot's) plausible translation of "Dasein zu enthüllen." *Enthüllen* might also be translated as reveal, expose and uncover.

> present themselves to him in a transparent and rational form. The veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life process, i.e. the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control (Marx [1864] 1992, pp. 172-173).[19]

Needless to say, unveiling—in the style of Baron d'Holbach, Feuerbach, and Marx—was not universally welcome in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In some quarters, it was roundly opposed. Edmund Burke's ([1790] 1990, pp. 153, 171, 182) attack on the luminary myth of the Enlightenment—its metaphors of light and illumination—is the best known of these rebuttals. Those who worship "naked reason" and tear off "the decent drapery of life" are themselves blind to humanity's dependence on cultural forms.[20] The result is the catastrophe of the French Revolution. Burke's younger contemporary, the political essayist William Hazlitt, took a different view while playing polemically with the same image. A state in crisis, including a revolutionary state, will find actors to protect it by any means. Robespierre was that actor. "The Brissotins [or Girondists; another revolutionary faction], who were fine gentlemen, would have been entangled in the 'drapery of moral imagination': Robespierre, to give no hold to his adversary, fought the battle naked and threw away both shame and fear" (Hazlitt [1828–30] 1991a, p. 98).[21]

When critics of religion unveil it, they are essentially unmasking religion as untruth and imposture. Yet, rhetorically, the image of the veil has one obvious advantage over the mask for radical critics. In Western traditions, unlike their African and Asian counterparts, masks are mostly bereft of religious symbolism. By contrast, veils are fundamental to the material culture of monotheism. They appear in women's hair, head and body coverings: the tichel of Orthodox Jews, the hijab, niqab, and burqa of Muslims, and the coif of women who "take the veil" (become nuns), following St. Paul's injunction to conceal their hair (1 Corinthians 11.4–16).[22] In Christian iconography, the Virgin Mary is always depicted with a head covering.[23] To unveil religion by ironizing its material culture is, simultaneously, to debase its moral authority.

Veils have carried religious meaning since antiquity. The temple of the Egyptian goddess Isis, Plutarch's *Moralia* (354c) records, carried the inscription: "I am everything that has been, that is, and that ever shall be: no human

[19] Veil is a favored motif of concealment, as in Marx's ([1867] 1992, pp. 90–91) contrast between the integrity of the British factory inspectorate and the makeshift improvisations of their German contemporaries. "The social statistics of Germany and the rest of Continental Western Europe are, in comparison with those of England, quite wretched. But they raise the veil just enough to let us catch a glimpse of Medusa's head behind it."

[20] Although the conservative defense of veiling and drapery function "as an implicit attack on the metaphors of light and transparency" (Muller 1997, p. 21), it bears noting that leftist writers have their own critique of transparency that owes almost nothing to veil imagery. This critique, in several modalities, is documented in Geroulanos (2017) and Jay (1993).

[21] Although he often mocked the conservative Burke, the radical Hazlitt was one of those rare spirits capable of seeing the best qualities of those he opposed. "It has always been with me a test of the sense and candor of any one belonging to the opposite party, whether he allowed [i.e., acknowledged] Burke to be a great man" (Hazlitt [1807] 1991b, p. 54).

[22] It is not unknown for men to cover. An example is the Tuareg, a Berber tribe that frequents the Sahara. Men over sixteen wear the *litham* in the presence of women, parents-in-law, old people, and strangers. On this tradition, see Murphy 1964. Judith Adler brought to this example to my attention.

[23] More generally, hair-scarves of various kinds have covered the public heads of women in Europe and the Near East since before the Christian era. It is modern women who are exceptions to this sartorial code.

mortal has discovered me behind my veil." Revelation, as in the Christian Book of Revelation, translates the Greek "apocalypse" (ἀποκάλυψις), meaning unveiling or uncovering, a portentous disclosure of grand events.[24] In the Koran, the veil is the screen through which the Creator speaks: "It is not granted to any mortal that God should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger to reveal by His command what He will" (Sura [= chapter] 42: Consultation). The Koran's favoured veil association, however, is with darkness, "faces covered with veils cut from the darkening night," (Sura 10: Jonah), and the God who "draws the veil of night over the day" (Sura 13: Thunder). The burqa and niqab worn by Muslim women are typically black.[25]

Veils are dark, too, in the Wisdom of Solomon (17:3), a Jewish text written in Greek, dated to the second century BCE: "Unrighteous men" who suppose their sins are secret live "under a dark veil of forgetfulness." In general, Judaism (like Islam and Christianity) has little use for mask symbolism or mask artifacts—a rare exception is the festival of Purim that recalls the Book of Esther. By contrast, the Hebrew Bible pulses with images of God's troubled relation to Man that depict fig leaves, goat skins, coats, shawls, veils, and, ubiquitously, "garments." In *Genesis*, God's inheritance—represented as a divine garment—begins its transmission to many generations of Jews with Adam and Eve, through to Noah and his progeny and beyond.[26] Every Jewish and Christian child knows the story of Joseph and his striped coat (*ketonet passim*). Garments in these stories emit odors; they throw off divine light; they envelop; they are fought over by scheming mothers and brothers. Masks carry no such associations.[27]

Nathaniel Hawthorne adapted biblical allegory in his early nineteenth century Gothic parable, *The Minster's Black Veil*. It relates the story of a Puritan clergyman, Mr. Hooper, who, to the consternation of his wife and congregation, suddenly dons a crape covering that reveals only his mouth and chin. He wears it night and day. His baffled parishioners become increasingly suspicious. Has the Reverend committed a shameful act for which he is now publicly, yet opaquely, atoning? Readers never find out. At a funeral, Hooper turns the tables on those who silently accuse him of concealing a dark secret. In the sermon, he reminds those in attendance that the "dreadful hour" is approaching that will "snatch the veil from their faces." For all men and women are sinful and their sinfulness, forgotten or obfuscated, separates them from the Lord (Hawthorne [1832] 2017, p. 38).

[24] See Corcoran 2000, pp. 63–65 on the history and multiple meanings of this term.

[25] More rarely powder blue, as in Afghanistan. Pashtun women in both Afghanistan and Pakistan wear the *sadar*, a garment that covers women from head to foot. On the significance of veiling as protection against overexposure, see Black 2011, p. 37.

[26] The covering of Noah's nakedness by his sons, Shem and Japheth, who walk backwards so as not to see him, is described in Gen. 9.20–24. The covering or הַשִּׂמְלָה is translated in King James as "garment." I follow https://biblehub.com/hebrew/8071.htm

[27] I am drawing on Norman J. Cohen's *Masking and Unmasking Ourselves. Interpreting Biblical Texts on Clothing and Identity* (2012). The title of the book is infelicitous, however, because of the paucity of mask imagery in the Hebrew Bible. Unmasking is a modern concept; it is anachronistic to apply it to biblical interpretation.

## Veils of color: Du Bois

For materialist critics from Baron d'Holbach to Richard Dawkins, religion is the primal source of humanity's duping and self-duping, an essentially repressive force and a symptom of alienation—the "God Delusion." Veils and masks alike signal falsehood. W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon take a different approach to that of radical atheists. Both writers are attentive to religion's manifold potential to guide human action. Both appraise the veil—as metaphor and as material culture—as a means by which people come to understand their social condition and resist oppression.

Scholars broadly concur that Du Bois was not an orthodox Christian believer, meaning a believer who cleaved to one of Christianity's many denominations. Yet there is also wide agreement that Du Bois was shaped by religious upbringing, that religious idioms pervade his work, and that he was inspired by a Christian sense of mission (Blum 2007).[28] "Du Bois accepted—as a basic metaphor, if nothing else—the traditional Black identification with the Children of Israel and their search for the Promised Land" (Brodwin 1972, p. 312). *The Souls of Black Folk* carries a Christian message in its very title. So do four of the book's chapter titles including the first: "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." Biblical cadences and motifs—the Shadow of Death, the awakening—pervade the work. Almost two decades later, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* ([1920] 1999) opens with Du Bois's "Credo." It proceeds to offer several poetic prayers to God, along with comparisons of the ill-treated Negro with the crucified Christ.[29] Du Bois's objective is not to debunk religion as a ruinous deception or delusion. It is, instead, to plumb the depths of Judaism and Christianity to expose, allegorically, the plight of the Negro before but mostly after abolition.

That the veil is an important image in *Souls* is well known. It dwarfs in textual salience the far more famous concept of double-consciousness. Whereas the term double-consciousness is employed just once,[30] veil appears forty times (and veiled, veiling and unveiling an additional eight). As if determined to stress the veil's numinosity Du Bois repeatedly capitalizes the first letter: 85 % of the uses of the noun—thirty-four of the forty—have it printed as Veil.

Nonetheless, double-consciousness and veil work in tandem. The famous passage in which the two terms appear bears re-quoting for its centrality to the work as a whole:

[28] A writer may lack religious faith but recognize faith as authentic. Neither Max Weber nor Emile Durkheim disdains religion. Nor do they call it, as Marx did, an illusion. Both sociologists refigure religious concepts (charisma, the sacred). "It is true that I am absolutely unmusical religiously and have no need or ability to erect any psychic edifices of a religious character within me. But a thorough self-examination has told me that I am neither antireligious *nor irreligious*" (emphasis in original). Max Weber, letter of February 9, 1909, to Ferdinand Tönnies, cited in Marianne Weber [1926] 1988, p. 324.

[29] "I believe in God, who made of one blood all nations that on earth do dwell. I believe that all men, black and brown and white, are brothers.… I believe in the Devil and his angels. ... I believe in the Prince of Peace" (Du Bois [1920] 1999, p. 1).

[30] But "double" appears often, as in double self (mentioned once), double life (twice), double thoughts (once), double words (once), double aims (three times), double movement (once), double system of justice (once), double ideals (once), double duties (once), double social classes (once), and double faced (once). "Self-consciousness," to which double consciousness is opposed, appears three times.

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,[31]—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself though the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.… The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity close roughly in his face. (*Souls*, pp. 364-365)

If "double consciousness" indexes a peculiar kind of mental and emotional damage inflicted on black people, and secondarily on whites, the Veil underscores the manifold partitions that separate black and white people in America.[32] The black is both a manifest problem to white society and an invisible feature of it, either " viewed opaquely behind the Veil or unseen because of an impenetrable cloud of social projections" (Morris 2015, p. 177). White domination produces a social category that, free of slavery, is still considered by society in the South to be a sub-class of people. Social segregation, economic penury, and political exclusion are buttressed by violence or the threat of it wherever blacks overstep boundaries that whites enforce through law, opinion, and the police.

Aware of the plurality of black people and the divisions among them, Du Bois called his book *The Souls of Black Folk*—not the Soul of Black Folk or The Soul of Black Folks. In keeping with this perspective, he elucidates the variety of economic strata that make up black life. An "aristocracy" of ministers, teachers, physicians, mechanics, and independent farmers (p. 489) co-exists with gradations of landed poverty that make up most of the southern black experience, trapped within the crop-lien system (p. 480). Yet, for all these distinctions, the race barrier is all but impregnable. Blacks and whites are strangers to one another, living in polar worlds of exclusion (p. 429), "within and without the Veil of Color" (p. 502; cf. p. 360).[33]

No community binds the races together, no intellectual life, and no church. Even under slavery, domestic servants had more contact with white people than their Emancipated brethren have today. "The white man, as well as the Negro, is bound

[31] Brent Hayes Edwards (in Du Bois [1903] 2007, p. 209) points out that, "in African American folk culture, it is believed that children born with a caul (a membrane from the placenta covering the infant's face at birth) are gifted with prophetic and psychic abilities."

[32] On five types of black-white separation, see *Souls*, chapter IX ("Of the Sons of Master and Man"), pp. 475–492.

[33] Veiling was also a personal reflex. Writing of the younger Du Bois, David Levering Lewis ([1993] 2009, p. 99) observes that the "veil had become part of his raison d'être," a "buffer between himself and others that allowed a lonely young intellectual to glorify his own race in order to better combat the glorification of race by others."

and barred by the color line" (p. 489). Yet only blacks, as Negros and Americans, are victims of "a double system of justice" that errs on the white side "by undue leniency" and errs on the black side "by undue severity" (p. 485). Disfigured by the white world outside them, scarred within by the legacy of slavery and the current realities of Jim Crow, the souls of Black Folk are bifurcated. They lead "a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes," an existence "within and without the Veil" (p. 359) that "must give rise to double words [sic] and double ideals [that] tempt the mind to pretense or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism" (p. 502).

In the course of human history, knowledge is lost as well as gained. Accordingly, most modern readers of *Souls* face an early stumbling block of comprehension. Unversed in the religious traditions in which *Souls* is saturated we are likely to miss what Du Bois's literate contemporaries grasped immediately. We think of a veil as a covering of the face; today, we associate it with the full face covering of pious or tribal Muslim women. But the veil that Du Bois calls to our attention in demarcating America's color line is not the equivalent to a niqab and burqa. Instead it trades on at least two biblical motifs and puns on a third.

In the first place, the veil is like a curtain dropped between two entities, casting its "awful shadow" (p. 407) and imposing a separation whose breach is fraught with danger and opportunity for both parties. Here Du Bois loosely alludes to the veil or curtain (פרוכת) of the holy temple tabernacle, separating holy from holier (a holy anteroom from the "Holy of Holies" containing the Ark of the Covenant).[34] Rent (torn) by God at the moment of Jesus's death, it makes God newly accessible to humanity (Matthew 27.51; Mark 15.38; Luke 23.45; compare with Numbers 4.5). This image is captured by such phrases as "both sides [of the] Veil" (p. 421) and the prospect that "some one will some day lift the Veil" (p. 513). At a further remove, the Veil is a partition, a "somber veil of color" (p. 487).

The veil is a barrier as much as a curtain. The perplexing afterthought that follows the white's perception of the Negro as a *tertium quid*—an indeterminate species located somewhere between man and cattle, foreordained to amble harmlessly "within the Veil" of its natural boundaries—is the idea that such a creature may turn violent by becoming fully human after all. That menacing prospect warrants, in white "self-defense," the fabrication of "walls so high" and "a veil so thick" that such miscreants "shall not even think of breaking through" (pp. 424–425). The "wail of prisoned souls within the Veil, and the mounting fury of shackled men" will fall on deaf ears so long as ignorance and brutality prevail (p. 426). But that grievous condition need not last forever. Intelligent and wide-ranging education can free the inmates, just as God in "His good time" shall "rend the Veil and the prisoned shall go free" (p. 545).

A second biblical theme rehearsed by Du Bois is that of opacity, the difficulty of viewing things in their proper light. In a moment of despair, the author sees "the world thus darkly through the Veil" (p. 510) gesturing towards 1 Corinthians 13.12 where St. Paul reminds his congregation: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then [i.e. soon] face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known." During the days of early Christianity, mirrors were made of metal, not glass, and metal has a tendency to oxidize. As the oxidization increases, so the reflection of the face and other objects is increasingly obscured. Readers will notice that, literally, one does not

[34] I owe this point to a *Theory and Society* reviewer.

see through a mirror but rather looks into it, which is perhaps why the English Standard Version substitutes "in" for "through."[35] (Other commentators have claimed that the glass is in fact a window.) To see obscurely in a mirror suggests that it is not only others that one is unable properly to envision, but also oneself because one's understanding is distorted, in this case by history and by experience; the simile supports Du Bois's concept of double consciousness.

It is not their nature but their social state that deprives black people from understanding themselves and others. White people often conclude differently; the failures of Emancipation support a convenient conclusion that "the backward races of to-day are of proven inefficiency and not worth saving" (p. 544). If it were Nature that dictated the Negro's degraded condition, then a cultivated, self-developing man such as Du Bois could not exist. But here he is, sitting "with Shakespeare" who "winces not." Having crossed the color line, Du Bois walks arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas and calls to Aristotle and Aurelius who come "graciously with no scorn nor condescension." Wedded to "Truth, I dwell above the Veil" (p. 438). Perched high on Pisgah, Du Bois surveys the Promised Land (p. 438).[36]

As well as the images of the torn veil and dark glass described in Christian scripture, Du Bois puns bitterly on the Psalmic verse (KJV, 23.4) that strives to comfort the believer—"Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me"—and on the voice of Isaiah (25.7) "And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the vail that is spread over all nations."[37] The occasion of the pun, in which vale or valley is concatenated with the Veil (or vail), is the death of Du Bois's child; more specifically Du Bois's experience of witnessing his son die of an illness. The boy was born "within the Veil"—"a Negro and a Negro's son". And "the shadow of the Veil" soon fell upon him (p. 507). I hear now that Voice at midnight calling me from

[35] Here is John Wesley's commentary: "*Now we see*—Even the things that surround us. But by means of a glass—Or mirror, which reflects only their imperfect forms, in a dim, faint, obscure manner; so that our thoughts about them are puzzling and intricate, and everything is a kind of riddle to us. *But then*—We shall see, not a faint reflection, but the objects themselves. *Face to face*—Distinctly. *Now I know in part*—Even when God himself reveals things to me, great part of them is still kept under the veil. *But then I shall know even as also I am known*—In a clear, full, comprehensive manner; in some measure like God, who penetrates the center of every object, and sees at one glance through my soul and all things." http://www.christnotes.org/commentary.php?com=wes&b=46&c=13

[36] "And Moses went up from the plains of Moab unto the mountain of Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, that is over against Jericho. And the LORD shewed him all the land of Gilead, unto Dan. And all Naphtali, and the land of Ephraim, and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah, unto the utmost sea. And the south, and the plain of the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, unto Zoar" (Deuteronomy 34.1–3, KJV)

[37] A *Theory and Society* reviewer cautions against lumping Judaic and Christian traditions together. The same reviewer wisely points out that, in English translations of the Hebrew bible, *veil* conveys at least two Hebrew terms: פרוכת (as in the veil that separates the holy from the holier) and מסכה (a veil that is spread over nations). Similarly, the *Encyclopedia Judaica* states that "In the Bible there are several terms usually translated as veil. However, the exact connotation for these terms is not known, and they may refer to other garments used to cover the face as well. The term צָעִיף is used of Rebecca (Gen. 24.65) and Tamar (Gen. 38.14, 19). Other terms used in the Bible for veil—though the meaning is not always certain—are צַמָּה (Isa. 47.2; Song 4.1, 3; 6.7); רְדִיד (Isa. 3.23; Song 5.7) and רְעָלָה (Isa. 3.19); cf. Shab. 6.6, where Arab women are said to go out רְעוּלוֹת (veiled), which implies that Jewish women did not. The מַסְוֶה worn by Moses after descending from Mt. Sinai to screen his radiant face (Ex. 34.29–35) was some kind of mask; the leper had to cover his upper lip (Lev. 13.45), by pulling his head-cover over his face (cf. MK 24a)." https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/veil Not conversant with Hebrew, Du Bois used the terms available to him in the King James Bible translation.

dull and dreamless trance,—crying 'The Shadow of Death! The Shadow of Death!" The boy died before race prejudice had done its worst; "the Veil, though it shadowed him, had not yet darkened half his sun" (pp. 508–509). A meditation on the life and death of an adult black man, Alexander Crummell, also prompts Du Bois to mix two different images summoned by a similar word. In Crummell's hard life, dedicated to his ministry, he crossed many "vales," notably the "Valley of Humiliation" and ultimately "the Valley of the Shadow of Death." For four-score years did he do so, wandering "in this same world of mine, within the Veil" (p. 513).

The previous survey of the Veil is indicative, not exhaustive. Bifurcated thought, emotion, and worlds; opacity; separation from self and others; exclusion; division; violence; mortification: these and more are what the Veil summons in *Souls*. The mask would not have served Du Bois nearly as well. For the Veil is not a mask worn by the powerful to be unveiled by the critical interpreter. It is a luckless condition borne by the subjugated. This is why the Veil is the corollary of double-consciousness. It was left to Du Bois's friend, Paul Laurence Dunbar, to add mask imagery to Du Bois's veil, though again—and unlike Marxist attributions—it is the mask of the oppressed rather than the oppressor that is exposed in these famous lines:

> We wear the mask that grins and lies,
> It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, -
> This debt we pay to human guile;
> With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
> And mouth with myriad subtleties.[38]

## Algeria veiled and unveiled: Frantz Fanon

It has puzzled two generations of readers that, in *Black Skin, White Masks* ([1952] 2008), its anti-colonial writer, Frantz Fanon, explicitly invokes the mask in the title of his book but never expressly returns to it.[39] The onus falls on the reader, not the author, to explicate the metaphor. Similarly, Richard Wright's *The Color Curtain*—his book centered on the Bandung conference of post-colonial nations in 1955—leaves the curtain hanging; aside from the title, it is mentioned only once in the context of "a young, morally sensitive white Christian" who is trying to "penetrate the color curtain" (Wright [1956] 2008, p. 585). As expressed, the statement is banal. But Wright was not a banal writer and so we must suppose that the title he gives the work aims to prompt our own literary exertion: not just to peer behind the curtain but to imagine how it falls, on whom and when, and who is best suited to lift it.

Mask signaling in place of mask specification is a common literary device. An example is the "All the world's a stage" passage from Shakespeare's *As You Like it* (Act

[38] This is the first stanza of "We Wear the Mask" (1896), https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44203/we-wear-the-mask

[39] "Masked" appears once in the main text of the book ([1952] 2008, p.177) but Fanon is quoting the term, in a critical context, from an article in *Presénce africaine* by Jacques Howlett.

II, Scene VII). Parts, acts, and stage are all bountifully in evidence; masks are absent. Similarly, Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy, novels, and plays are rich in mask insinuation (on this see Bukala 1976). This is especially evident in Sartre's descriptions of bad faith, that is, the pretense that choice is predetermined rather than free within the limits of specific historical situations. Yet Sartre hardly ever employs mask imagery. On the few occasions he does (as in Sartre [1946] 2007, p. 27), the usage is casual rather than theoretical. In contrast, Sartre ([1943] 1956) devotes considerable philosophical attention to describe "the look," for instance, in Chapter 1, Book 3 of *Being and Nothingness*.

There is nothing enigmatic about Fanon's treatment of the veil in "Algeria Unveiled," chapter 1 of *A Dying Colonialism* ([1959] 1965). On the contrary, the essay sets out directly and in detail the significance of the veil as a material object with symbolic power for Algerians fighting against French colonialism.

Du Bois was able to play on veil imagery in Judaic and Christian traditions only because this imagery encodes material objects and social practices. In Fanon's study of the veil in Algeria, this materiality is even more evident. Algerian women are physically covered. Fanon's method is to recount the practical uses of this covering in the anti-colonial struggle, but also to document the shifting meanings attributed to it by occupiers and Muslim natives. In effect, we see in the Algerian case a crafted alternation, more porous than separable, between object and image, thing and representation, cloth and symbol.

Fanon's theme is the veil's role in the liberation struggle of Algerian nationalist forces against French colonization. "The way people clothe themselves," he begins, "constitutes the most distinctive form of a society's uniqueness, that is to say the one that is the most immediately perceptible" (p. 35). And no item of female clothing is more salient in the Arab world than those coverings that obscure women's faces and, as with the haïk, the shape of their bodies. Whether white or black, the veil demarcates women's spatial place in society and defines a version of femininity very different from the European type.[40]

It is common for foreigners from Western lands to construe the veil as a sign of male domination. But the French authorities, Fanon argues, brought to their rule a more convoluted anthropological theory. The patrilineal pattern of Algerian society, the administration claimed, was superficial. Beneath that façade lay a more formative matrilineal foundation. Modernize women, and the rest of society will follow. That includes, of course, the society of men whose resistance to colonial rule would crumble as their women assimilated to European *moeurs*. It was in this context that a vigorous campaign against the veil—what Fanon (p. 48) calls "total war"—took shape. As conceived by the French authorities, the veil was the primary sign of all that was primitive, cruel, and benighted about Algerian life. Civilization demanded the veil's abolition. Its shock troops were social researchers, social workers, and members of charitable organizations. All affirmed the elemental right of the cloistered Arab woman to be freed from domestic imprisonment and public invisibility.

[40] On white veils typically worn among Moroccan women, see Fanon ([1959] 1965 p. 36, n. 3). He says that as a protest against the exiling of Mohammed V by the French in August 1953, Moroccan women donned black veils. This "combat measure" was intended to exert "symbolic pressure on the occupier, and hence to make a logical choice of one's own symbols."

Yet, for all their military and cultural power, the French authorities could not control the veil's meanings or its uses. From the social standpoint of the colonists, the veil signals collective backwardness, inertia, and the grip of Islam (p. 41), in short, a traditional barrier to cultural assimilation. The veil also casts a spell on the imagination of the occupiers. Fanon speculates that the veil indulges a fantasy of unseen beauty, of mystery. Unveiling will reveal all. Whereas the Arab man does not see the veiled woman as an object of desire, the Western man sees her as little else. More menacingly, Fanon claims, veiling provokes rapine aggression by the western man, "a rending of the veil" that constitutes "a double deflowering" (p. 45).[41]

Such in a nutshell is the significance of the veil for the colonizers. For the colonized, the veil's meaning is quite different. Under the disapproving eye of the occupier it is an object of shame and humiliation before becoming a site of resistance. And the resistance is dynamic. Initially, it entails coercing women not to unveil. "To the colonialist offensive against the veil, the colonized opposes the cult of the veil" (p. 47). Fanon's attitude to this reactive cult or attachment is ambivalent.

On the hand, he grants that a colonized people will use any convenient object as a weapon against colonial aggression. Veiling is further bound up with norms of male and family honor. In itself, Fanon suggests, veiling is not harmful to women. He describes it sexually as a "fertile kernel that a restricted but coherent existence represents" (p. 66). When a woman first discards the veil, she is disoriented. The woman "quickly has to invent new dimensions for her body, new means of muscular control. She has to create for herself an attitude of unveiled-woman-outside" (p. 59).

On the other hand, as a forceful act of control over women, the taboo against unveiling is problematic. Worse, Fanon argues, it is repressive. Women are subject to a dual despotism from the colonizer and from the colonized alike. Their plight is transformed, however, once women are drawn into the anti-colonial struggle, and particularly when they change from being caregivers of men to fighters in their own right. The veil then assumes a quite different significance. Fanon traces a shift in the status of women to a growing sense of failure among militants. Up to 1955 combat was exclusively a male preserve. But once it seemed that resistance was weakening and the French would triumph, it became imperative to find new ways, new vehicles—new persons—to fight back.

This moment marked the empowerment of women. It entailed their adoption of a new, warrior role that confounded the French authorities. Initially, women used the haïk as a cloak of concealment. Under it they would carry weapons, money, and other resources of war. But soon the revolutionary movement hit upon the most ingenious camouflage of all: the disguise of unveiling. An Algerian woman fighter who unveiled looked modern, European, integrated into colonial society. Her militancy was less conspicuous, except as a conspicuous rejection of native ways. Unveiling also configured her identity. "The Algerian woman who walks stark naked into the European city relearns her body, re-

[41] Readers coming fresh to "Algerian Unveiled" should be forewarned that the essay is, to put it generously, short on evidence. Fanon's remarks on the sexual dreamscape of male colonists are entirely unsubstantiated. So are his assured interpretations of the minds of Muslim women. It is no mere cavil to ask of an author: How do you know?

establishes it in a totally revolutionary fashion. This new dialectic of the body and of the world is primary in the case of one revolutionary woman" (p. 59).

Algerian men are, understandably, discomfited by this shift from women as members of the household to agents of revolution. Husbands and fathers of unveiled women fighters are especially ill at ease. But as they grasp the implications of the revolution, and the women's heroic part in it, their suspiciousness dissolves. The colonial powers, for their part, are not fooled for long. Their informants, and their torture tables, soon discover that unveiled women are among their greatest enemies. Some of them are even bona fide European women. And so women lose what little protection they had by being unveiled. As a result, they re-adopt the haïk (p. 61). Their bodies, previously pared down, now billow again under the cloth covering. And in that return to tradition is another message for French rulers: that Algerian women will liberate themselves on their own terms and not "at the invitation of France and of General de Gaulle" (p. 65).

Fanon (p. 63) sums up the veil's trajectory of struggle in these lines:

> In the beginning, the veil was a mechanism of resistance, but its value for the social group remained very strong. The veil was worn because tradition demanded a rigid separation of the sexes, but also because the occupier *was bent on unveiling religion* [italics in the original]. In a second phase, the mutation occurred with the Revolution and under special circumstances. The veil was abandoned in the course of revolutionary action. What had been used to block the psychological or political offensives of the occupier became a means, an instrument. The veil helped the Algerian woman to meet the new problems created by the struggle.

## Concluding reflections

Offering a comparative perspective, I explored some modalities of the veil in social theory and literature. I suggested that the veil is a more flexible image than the mask, and, for that reason, a more theoretically productive one. I end with four related reflections.[42]

First, an image may be fertile in its possibilities but whether it actually gives birth to an imaginative idea or a conventional one depends on the author that carries it. Du Bois was a gifted writer who blended poetry and sociology is an inimitable way.[43] He was not the only black writer to invoke the veil. Frederick Douglass identifies the veil with hypocrisy—a long established usage—and treats the veil and the mask interchangeably. "What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer:

[42] Elsewhere, Daniel Gordon and I consider aspects of the veil controversy in France, and the role of social theorists in legislating its prohibition in the public space, see Baehr and Gordon 2013. In the present reflections, however, I put this subject to one side.

[43] His style approximates what Andrew Abbott (2016, pp.77–121) calls "lyrical sociology."

> your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour. (Douglass 1852, unpaginated)

A few years' earlier, speaking in London, Douglass promised: "I am going back, determined to be honest with America. I am going to the United States in a few days, but I go there to do, as I have done here, to unmask her pretensions to republicanism, and expose her hypocritical professions of Christianity; to denounce her high claims to civilization, and proclaim in her ears the wrongs of those who cry day and night to Heaven, 'How long! how long! O Lord God of Sabaoth!' (Loud cheers.)"[44]

Frederick Douglass was, unlike Du Bois, a committed Christian. In *Souls*, he is hailed "the greatest of American Negro leaders," the man who stood for "assimilation *through* self-assertion, and on no other terms" (p. 397). All the same, Douglass's association of veil with hypocrisy is conventional. For Du Bois, by contrast, the charge of hypocrisy is the least of the veil's illuminations. It hardly figures in *Souls*.

I said just now that whether a potentially fertile image gives rise to an imaginative idea depends on the writer's creative powers to elaborate it. Images are not automata. Nor are images magic wands; there appear to be constraints built into what they can and cannot do. A striking example of this constraint is manifest in Yukio Mishima's ([1949] 2017) quasi autobiographical novel *Confessions of a Mask*, a strange and disturbing book. Set in the nineteen thirties and forties, in Japan, it is the coming of age story of Kochan, a homosexual boy who fantasizes about blood, relishes cruelty, and takes pleasure in the prospect of his own annihilation by American ordinance. As he grows from boy to young man, Kochan tries to trick himself into loving a girl called Sonoko; Kochan is aware that he is practicing this deception not just on others but also on himself (pp. 96–97, 102, 134). The protagonist "wants to deceive" himself, and in the novel he manages to achieve this psychological ruse. Or does he? The reader is never sure. Now, the act of consciously manipulating one's own deception seems something impossible to pull off; and the act of "deliberately unmasking my falseness to myself" (p. 102) seems just as unlikely.

Yet as the reader contemplates Kochan's introspection, one starts to believe that the unlikely might exist after all. Indeed, Mishima's book can be read as a substantial contribution to the theory of self-deception.[45] And yet here is the rub: the mask, summoned in the book's title, never rises to the complexity of the book's descriptions. It hangs over the novel in bathos and banality. Mask and masquerade emerge in utterly conventional forms—as dissimulation, camouflage, façade, and forgery—contradicting the book's daring and possibly profound psychology. That suggests to me that some images impose integral

[44] "Farewell Speech to the British People, at London Tavern, London, England, March 30, 1847," http://www.yale.edu/glc/archive/1086.htm, para. 15. See also para. 36 on the abolitionist and social reformer, William Lloyd Garrison. He is hated, says Douglass, for the good he does on both sides of the Atlantic. Because Garrison "fearlessly unmasked hypocrisy, and branded impiety in language in which impiety deserves to be characterized, he has thereby brought down upon himself the fierce execrations of a religious party in this land."

[45] For contrasting accounts of self-deception, see Fingarette [1969] 2000 and Morson 2013. For the claim that self-deception is an inherently incoherent idea, see Mele 2000.

limitations on an author and that, specifically, the limitations of the mask appear to be far more constrictive than those of the veil.[46]

A third lesson of the veil concerns the significance of religion to social life. In an era when academics are proud of their atheistic bona fides, yet increasingly innocent of religious tradition, how will they be able to understand persons for whom religion matters? Social theory is secular by its very nature. It explains this world, not the other world. That is as it should be. But repeatedly in the history of social thought, we see the offense that religion poses to foundational theorists. God is the first pillar that unmaskers from d'Holbach to Dawkins must topple—through ridicule, parody, dialectical inversion, and science—before their own vision of enlightenment can hope to prevail. "And so the theorist said to the benighted: 'Do you still cling to your innocence? Curse God, listen to me and live'" (Job 2. 9–10; modified).

Yet demeaning religious traditions as illusions—the materialist unmasking reflex—is reckless and wasteful. Religions are a basis for personal and political action, as both Du Bois and Fanon recognized. Religions also furnish a store of insights and images, not to mention a store of wisdom, available for the discriminating reader. William James (1985 [1902], pp. 48–50) depicts religion as an expansion of human experience, "an absolute addition to the Subject's range of life. It gives him a new sphere of power." That being the case, religion is something for us to "respect" for "its value for life at large." Religion is not merely a mask that covers pre-existing interests; it unleashes new possibilities of action. It alters the course of life. It is a "momentous option."[47]

Emile Durkheim goes further; the French sociologist is emphatic about religion's essential veracity. As a "system of ideas by means of which individuals imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it," religion "is true with a truth that is eternal." It is living proof that "there exists outside us something greater than us and with which we commune" (Durkheim [1912] 1995, p. 227, cf. p. 429). Significantly, Durkheim uses the metaphor of *veil,* not mask, to describe religious practice.[48]

Veil imagery is, finally, epistemologically suggestive. Most images invoked in the social sciences are ways of imagining how a society works, whether in whole or in part. For almost two centuries, society has been likened to a living system, a machine, a war, a legal order, a discourse, a game, and a theater (Rigney 2001). All such metaphors function as a social ontology. But veil gestures towards knowledge and, especially, its limitations. To imagine an entity as veiled is to adopt a cautionary stance towards it. The stance says: The social world is opaque and our knowledge of it refractory and uncertain. In *Democracy in America* Tocqueville ([1840] 2004. p. 559), remarks that knowledge of humanity is bounded by the very nature of the being we wish to know.[49] "Man is sufficiently exposed … to see

[46] To be clear, I am referring to the mask's limitations as a literary trope, both in the novel and in social theory. In contrast, the *material culture* of the masks (and this includes paintings, sculptures, models, and photographs) is immensely rich. For studies of their symbolic complexity, see the very different treatments of Lévi-Strauss ([1975]1982) and Belting ([2013] 2017).

[47] Incredulity is bad theory. Debunking what we find meaningless because it fails to make sense to our own frame of meaning is "stupid," says the pragmatist philosopher. Debunking creates rather than comprehends "alien lives." "Hence the falsity of our judgments, so far as they presume to decide in an absolute way on the value of other persons' conditions or ideals," (James [1999] 2000, p. 267). On the anti-humanist thrust of unmasking, see Abbott 2016, p. 287.

[48] As in Durkheim [1912] 1995, pp. 78, 264, 431.

[49] Veils appear thirteen times in *Democracy in America*. Masks do not appear at all. On the contrasting approaches to religion of Marx (unmasking) and Tocqueville (anti-unmasking), see Baehr 2019b.

something of himself, yet sufficiently veiled that the rest remains shrouded in impenetrable darkness, into which he makes repeated forays in the vain hope of understanding himself fully." Richard Swedberg (2009, p. 106) offers a sociological perspective on this and related statements of Tocqueville's: Since God's creation can be perceived only "through a veil," we are unable to establish "direct and exact causation" in most cases. The theorist has only probability to work with.

But the epistemological implications of the veil go further than science. The limits of our knowledge apply also to our ability to understand each other, and especially groups unlike our own. Du Bois urged blacks and whites to lift the veils of separation, but I doubt if he thought this would ever be fully possible. A transparent social universe, the unmasking ideal, is naïve. We are what our history, our upbringing, our character, our experience, and our choices have made us and continue to make us. None of this is clear. We are opaque not just to others but to ourselves.

A well-chosen image is not enough to make a theory powerful, but no powerful theory is bereft of a well-chosen image. We read with our imagination as much as with our eyes. Metaphors and other figures of speech help us imagine what we are unable to see. I hope to have shown that the veil is one such figure.

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