

Examining the Dynamics of Decolonisation in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*

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SAMUEL SINGLER, MAY 3 2016

"How they're as good as they are now is a mystery to me, after a hundred years of systematic denial that they're human." (Lee, 2015: 252).

Frantz Fanon, a psychiatrist who played an active role in the Algerian war of independence from French colonial rule, remains a key thinker on decolonisation and Third World independence struggles. *The Wretched of the Earth* deeply influenced African and African American social movements and has been widely praised, but it is most certainly not a work free of controversy (Fairchild, 1994: 191). Fanon's view of the necessity of violence as part of the anticolonial struggle has been a particular topic of contention for critics, commonly leading to accusations of 'barbarism and terrorism' (Smith, 1973: 32). The aim of this essay is to engage in careful examination of *The Wretched of the Earth*, in order to analyse and clarify Fanon's key theses on decolonisation. This analysis will focus on Fanon's conceptions of the internal contradictions and Manichean character of colonial society, the role of rural peasants, the urban working class and political leadership in the anticolonial struggle, and, importantly, the role of violence as a necessary part of decolonisation and the construction of a postcolonial national culture and identity. This essay will ultimately argue that despite the centrality of violence to Fanon's theses on decolonisation, he does not advocate arbitrary violence, but rather recognises the dangers, physical and psychological, of violence without a cause. Fanon's theses on decolonisation, while not entirely free of limitations and ambiguities, continue to provide valuable insights into the psychological and political effects of oppression and dehumanisation, still relevant to considerations of Western involvement around the world today.

According to Fanon, the colonial world can be understood as the encounter between two forces, those of the colonial settler and the native population, defined and sustained by violence (2001: 28). Colonial rule is imposed by European states in order to exploit the resources of the colonised area, and indeed, for Fanon, 'Europe is literally the creation of the Third World' (Ibid.: 81). Unlike in developed capitalist societies, where the economic exploitation of the masses is veiled by a hegemonic superstructure upheld by institutions such as organised religion and the education system, exploitation in the colonies is naked and thus necessarily upheld by violent means of oppression, constructing a Manichean world based on an immediately clear distinction between coloniser and colonised. A central aspect of the oppression of the native people is their dehumanisation and the attempt to destroy their national culture (Fairchild, 1994: 192). This is achieved by the use of language that degrades the natives to the status of animals, the application of racist 'scientific' theories of the inferiority of the native population, and concentrated attacks on indigenous cultural practice (Fanon, 2001: 32-33, 244; 2004: 43). The colonisers are thus 'committed to destroying the people's originality' by presenting cultural practices, which are 'in fact the assertion of a distinct identity, concern with keeping intact a few shreds of national existence', as 'religious, magical, fanatical behaviour' (Fanon, 2004: 43-44, 46). The dehumanisation of the native serves a dual purpose. First, it allows the colonisers to escape the apparent contradictions between Western values of democracy and equality on the one hand, and the undemocratic and extremely violent oppression of the native population on the other (Rabaka, 2010: 115). Second, the internalisation of dehumanising and violent colonial relations destroys the natives' 'sense of selfhood' (Gibson, 2003: 107) allowing for continued colonial exploitation due to 'a belief in fatality [which] removes all blame from the oppressor' (Fanon, 2001: 42). However, despite the myriad tools used to dehumanise the natives, they are never fully convinced of their inferiority, 'and it is precisely at the moment [the native] realizes his humanity that he begins to

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sharpen the weapons with which he will secure [the native population's] victory' (Ibid.: 33). In other words, the necessarily violent imposition and sustenance of colonial rule simultaneously sow the seeds of its own destruction.

Paradoxically, it is the constant excessive use of force by the colonisers that proves they are not entirely in control, and subsequently prevents the complete dehumanisation of the natives (Gibson, 2003: 109). In fact, the oppressive colonial machinery, while on the one hand constraining the native population and enforcing colonial rule, is exactly what gives rise to the aggression and resistance of the natives on the other. As Fanon dramatically puts it, 'the symbols of social order ... are at one and the same time inhibitory and stimulating: for they do not convey the message "Don't dare to budge"; rather, they cry out "Get ready to attack"' (2001: 41). However, due to the internalisation of the dehumanising relations of colonialism, the aggression of the natives is not immediately directed at the colonisers. Instead, early outlets for pent-up aggression include native cultural practices and especially internal conflicts between native individuals and tribes, which are exacerbated by the colonisers seeking to strengthen their rule by exploiting those divides (Sartre, 2001: 16). It becomes clear, then, that while Fanon's theses on decolonisation seem to be materially deterministic to the extent that the internal contradictions of colonialism inevitably give rise to potentially anticolonial resistance and aggression, he departs from this determinism in according a role to human agency in successfully focusing that aggression back at the colonisers (Fanon, 2001: 46, 108; Forsythe, 1973: 162).

These core aspects of Fanon's analysis, namely his arguments concerning the internal contradictions of colonial rule and the role of human agency in its overthrow, reveal his intellectual debt to Marx (Martin, 1970: 385). However, he often departs from traditional Marxist analysis, preventing most commentators from labelling him a clear-cut Marxist (Forsythe, 1973: 160). In his analysis, Fanon does utilise Marxist class categorisation, based on the relationship to the means of production, but recognises that such categorisation cannot be separated from considerations of race and racism, which are integral aspects of colonial society (Fairchild, 1994: 193). Furthermore, although Fanon uses Marxist criteria to define social class, he analyses their political behaviour, and thus determines their role in the anticolonial struggle, by analysing their economic prosperity, size and extent of assimilation into the colonial system (Caute, 1970: 75). This causes Fanon to break away from Marx by asserting that it is the rural peasantry, not the urban proletariat, who form the revolutionary class (Fanon, 2001: 47). In the colonial system, the urban working class is the part of the native society most 'necessary and irreplaceable if the colonial machine is to run smoothly', leading to a 'privileged position' in the colonial system (Ibid.: 86). It follows that, as opposed to the rural peasantry who have nothing to lose in the case of a violent anticolonial revolution, the urban proletariat has an interest in negotiation and compromise with the settlers, which will never lead to complete independence or the successful construction of a national identity. In fact, failing to integrate the rural population into the anticolonial struggle will simply lead to one form of exploitation being supplanted by another, as a new national bourgeoisie will simply emulate the role of the colonial bourgeoisie (Fanon, 2001: 132-134). This in turn reinforces national inferiority and economic dependency to the former colonial power (Fairchild, 1994: 196). Nevertheless, despite the aggression, resistance and thus revolutionary character of the rural peasantry, Fanon acknowledges the need for carefully organising the anticolonial struggle, and doubts the ability of the peasantry to organise themselves. Hence, Fanon called for the revolutionary political leaders from the towns, disillusioned with the unwillingness of the urban populations to take part in violent resistance, to realise the revolutionary potential of the peasantry. This is done by joining them in the countryside in order to lead the anticolonial struggle by unifying and politically educating the rural population (Fanon, 2001: 100-101; Perinbam, 1973: 437-438). An important factor in organising the anticolonial resistance, in order to overcome internal conflicts between the natives, is the unification of the people under a revolutionary national identity. A central aspect in constructing that identity, in turn, is the use of violence.

As we will recall, it is the violence of the colonial system itself that fosters the aggression and resistance of the native people. In a dialectical fashion, the extreme violence of the settler, upon which the entire colonial world is built, proves to the natives that violence is the only language understood by the settler, and is thus of utmost importance in the anticolonial struggle (Fanon, 2001: 66). Similarly, the target and extent of non-violent colonial oppression, as in the case of the French settlers' attempts to suppress and destroy an important aspect of Algerian culture, the use of the veil by native women, will direct the focus of non-violent native resistance into those same areas (Fanon, 2004: 50). In the early stages of resistance, then, the unifying national identity of the native population becomes defined in complete contradistinction to the colonial settlers, and the use of anticolonial violence leads to the immediate

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identification of its perpetrator as part of the national struggle: 'the process of identification is automatic' (Fanon, 2001: 54). A further implication of this dialectic of violence, which serves as a tool in the construction of the national identity, is that escalating colonial violence in reaction to native uprisings only serves to strengthen, not disrupt, the unity of the native people (Ibid.: 56). It becomes clear that, according to Fanon, whereas colonial violence is oppressive and self-perpetuating in that it seeks to maintain the oppressive structures of colonialism, anticolonial violence is constructive and valuable as it seeks to remove those oppressive structures, aiming for the emancipation of the people as well as the construction of a new national identity (Gibson, 2003: 115). Nevertheless, some natives subscribe to Engels' view that 'violence depends upon the production of armaments' (as quoted in Fanon, 2001: 50), and adopt a fatalistic stance in the face of the massive military power of the colonisers. However, Fanon argues that the escalation of colonial violence is constrained by the economic considerations of the colonisers, who can afford to neither slaughter the entire native population nor uphold the extremely oppressive colonial system in the face of constantly increasing native resistance (Martin, 1970: 392). Furthermore, the international context of decolonisation in other countries may also restrict the colonisers' response to the natives' national struggle (Fanon, 2001: 55). Violent anticolonial resistance thus retains its viability and therefore its value in unifying a people against the properly identified enemy, namely the settler, and 'liberat[ing] the native from despair and inaction' (Gibson, 2003: 118). This is not to say that violence, for Fanon, should be an end in itself, or indeed that violence alone is enough to construct a truly independent national culture. In fact, Fanon was acutely aware of the dangers and limitations of the unconstrained and arbitrary use of violence.

Indeed, Fanon's description of the adverse psychological effects of violence on some of his patients in Algeria makes it abundantly clear that he 'abhors violence even while recognizing it as a necessary evil in some cases' (Martin, 1970: 383). Violence only has value as part of the anticolonial struggle in paving the way to self-realisation, and even in that context violence is psychologically taxing. For Fanon, 'all killing is by definition de-humanizing' (Caute: 1970: 87). It follows that in the long run, violence without a cause is psychologically unsustainable, and must thus always be a means to higher ends, not an end in itself. In the absence of such clear objectives, the native population will become discouraged in their struggle against colonial oppression, and more likely to accept petty concessions from the colonial settlers, given out only in return for continued violent subjugation of the native people (Fanon, 2001: 112). In order for the native population to persist in their struggle, the 'people must know where they are going, and why' (Ibid.: 156). Furthermore, anticolonial violence alone can only construct a national identity defined in contradistinction to the colonial settlers, and therefore fails to prove the truly independent existence of the natives from the colonial system (Gibson, 2003: 123).

What is needed, then, is a truly independent national identity and culture, in the construction of which the intellectuals and political leaders of the anticolonial movement play a crucial role. Such a national identity and culture is constructed, firstly, by looking to the past and reclaiming the native's history from the immobility to which it is condemned by the colonial system, and, second, by looking to the future in order to find a new and independent path to development (Fanon, 2001: 40, 252-255). For Fanon, the new identity and culture must be national, not, for instance, racial or continental, in order to be useful and sustainable (Ibid.: 174-176). It is important to note, furthermore, that instead of rejecting any and all European values outright, this new independent national identity should attempt to incorporate positive insights without forgetting 'Europe's crimes' or seeking to emulate the European experience (Ibid.: 254; Rabaka, 2010: 200-201).

Fanon's vision of the new independent national culture is clearly problematic. For instance, in his insistence on the construction of a national, not regional or racial, identity, Fanon seems to overlook the fact that African nations were largely the somewhat arbitrary product of European colonisation, often internally divided tribally and linguistically (Caute, 1970: 80-81). Furthermore, perhaps due to his own intimate involvement in the Algerian struggle for independence, it is often unclear whether Fanon is describing how decolonisation actually works, or how it ought to (Ibid.: 68; Perinbam, 1973: 441, 444). Fanon has also been accused of overlooking the importance of structural and economic constraints and 'consequently [overrating] the possibilities of change' (Burke, 1976: 128). This became perhaps even more apparent with the neoliberal turn after the 1970s, during which newly independent countries were seemingly unable to escape 'neocolonial structures of commercial exploitation' (Harvey, 2005: 56). However, despite these limitations the value of Fanon's theses on decolonisation is clear. Indeed, even those who criticise the accuracy of his analysis recognise the value of its inspirational rhetoric (Burke, 1976: 127). Fanon's analysis of the role and

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effects of violence in a colonial setting proves especially insightful, and continues to be relevant in considerations of Western involvement in areas such as the Middle East, where indeed there seems to be a relationship between perceived Western domination of the native population and their organised, violent resistance (Sidanius et al., 2015: 3, 12).

In conclusion, it becomes clear that Fanon's key theses on decolonisation, while not entirely unproblematic, included various insights that retain their value today. Far from an 'apologia for violence' (Coser, 1967: 211), Fanon describes violence within a colonial setting in a dialectical fashion, certainly not advocating wanton violence. Rather, he acknowledges the use of anticolonial violence as a necessary evil and important component in the native population's quest towards self-realisation and the construction of a national identity truly free from colonial influence. It is Fanon's insights into this dialectic of violence, and his warnings of the dangers of replacing one system of exploitation by another, that we should keep in mind when evaluating contemporary Western involvement around the world and the extent to which formerly colonial countries are truly independent even after formal decolonisation.

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