

December 2018

“A New Way of Thinking”: Frantz Fanon’s True Opinion on Violence

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Recommended Citation

Renko, Caroline D.. "A New Way of Thinking": Frantz Fanon’s True Opinion on Violence." *The Downtown Review*. Vol. 5. Iss. 1 (2018) .

Available at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/tdr/vol5/iss1/1>

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The phenomenon of decolonization in Algeria forever changed Fanon's description of violence. Being a black man in the Free French Forces fighting against the Axis Powers during World War II prompted Fanon to write *Black Skin, White Masks*, but it was his lived experience as a psychologist during the liberation war in Algeria that birthed *The Wretched of the Earth*. Usually read in the social sciences pertaining to critical race theory and imperialism, Fanon's use of his lived experience and psychological analysis to write on the mechanisms of racism, colonization, language, and freedom earned him recognition in philosophy, specifically phenomenology.

In an attempt to clear Fanon's name on account of his opinion on the role of violence in decolonizing a nation, this paper focuses on two important chapters in his last book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. By closely reading his articulation of the war and the wounds brought on by mental illness at such a time, only then will one be able to understand Fanon's true opinion concerning violence. For too long, he has been seen and used as a proponent for inciting violence, but this is a misconception that has been perpetuated by the devaluation of the importance of his descriptions of the lives affected by the war.

In part, the misconception about Fanon's work praising violence is due to the lack of attention to the contradictory nature of *Wretched*. The first chapter, titled "On Violence," provides a theory of violence that brings about liberation. As pointed out by Emma Kuby, whose article focuses on Sartre having misread Fanon, most critics tend to concentrate on this one chapter alone, establishing all their rhetoric of him as an "apostle of violence" from it. As a result, most scholars tend to ignore the last chapter, "Colonial War and Mental Disorders," and understandably so, since it rattles their understanding of Fanon as an advocate for violence in liberating the colonized from their oppressor. It is at this point, after giving special attention to the neglected part of Fanon's work, that the contradictory nature of the book and his ideology become evident. It is therefore my goal in this paper to explicitly show the change of tone in Fanon's writing on violence from his first chapter to his last and to also offer insight on why this division exists. By exploring the implications of mental illness in the last chapter, Fanon's image as an instigator of violence will finally be laid to rest.

Fanon and the Algerian War

Before delving into Fanon's discourse on violence found in *Wretched*, providing background on his life and the brutality of the French during the Algerian War of liberation is pivotal. Born in 1927 in Martinique, Fanon was raised in a middle-class family, which meant he was educated and even taught by Aime Cesaire, who heavily influenced his work. At the age of 18, Fanon left Martinique to join the Free French Forces in the fight against the Nazis during

World War II. It was during this time that Fanon experienced racism and harassment in its true form from the French soldiers who did not view him as an equal because of his black skin (Mbembe 9).

Fanon's experience serving in France prompted his publication of *Black Skin* in 1951. After the war, Fanon returned to Martinique, but he quickly left for France, where he continued his education, studying medicine and philosophy. Not being able to stand the amount of French racism he encountered on account of his blackness, he eventually accepted a position at a psychiatric hospital in Algeria, where he had once been stationed while in the French Free Forces (Mbembe 8). Having moved to Algeria in 1953, Fanon became a witness to the beginning of the Algerian war, which occurred the following year.

Historians recognize November 1, 1954 as the beginning of the liberation war, after the National Liberation Front (FLN) set in motion a series of attacks targeting French colonial police in the capital city of Algiers (Kuby 62; Mbembe 10). The French underestimated the power of the FLN; as a result, the attacks escalated, leaving the French army desperate in their fight against an organization they did not understand. This desperation led the army into using torture methods in order to weaken the resistance, which only fueled the war and prompted the FLN to target French Algerian civilians. It was these barbaric instances of torture by the French that Fanon refers to as acts of "genocide" against the Algerian people (126). Being a member of the FLN and the director of a French hospital amidst this turmoil gave him a unique perspective on violence that I shall further explore. Although Fanon eventually resigned from his post, leaving Algeria for Tunis in 1956, he was still able to support the FLN from afar.

Whilst brief, the history of the war in Algeria is helpful in understanding Fanon's work. This paper will now shift to examine the account of violence as it is given in the first chapter of *Wretched*.

"On Violence"

Fanon is most noted for claiming that "[a]t the individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them and restores their self-confidence" (51). At first glance, this claim rings true to the interpretations of his work given by authors such as Robert Fulford and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who both resent Fanon's work, but there is more to this claim. To further explore the quote, violence is a "cleansing force" for Fanon after having affirmed that decolonization is always a violent phenomenon. He describes this decolonization as a movement of bringing about change, which can only be done by the colonized taking charge of their land. The settlers are never willing to view the oppressed as subjects, meaning freedom must be taken by force.

Fanon does not arrive at this idea of violence simply by his own volition, but because of the way the oppressors rule the natives. Since the colonial world is “divided into two parts: Native and Colonizer sectors” (Fanon 3, 5), the colonizers are able to govern with brutal force in order to keep the natives in their position of poverty and obedience. It is through the unbalanced relationship of the two that Fanon sees it fit for the colonized to reciprocate the violence they have been exposed to their whole lives.

It is at this point that the distinction between colonial violence and the emancipatory violence of the colonized is needed. Colonial violence, according to Fanon, has 3 dimensions; it is “inaugural, empirical and absurd” (Mbembe 12). This violence is inaugural in the sense that it is used by the settlers to build the colonial state and maintain their power in what Fanon called “a politics of hate” (89). The state is everything but civil as it separates the settlers from the oppressed, which leads into the second dimension where the empirical aspects of this violence are exposed.

Acts of dividing the state into sectors, raiding the communities of the oppressed frequently, and forcing labor are some of the many examples of how colonial violence is empirical according to Fanon (7, 56). This violence can be observed even by an outsider looking in at the colonized state, which gives it its empirical nature. Fanon gives descriptions of the colonizer's sector as being strongly built, brightly lit and abundant in joy, while the use of barbed wire fences keeps the colonized in their isolated camps after being displaced from their rightful land (4). The physical violence that he describes is also closely related to the third dimension of colonial violence, namely absurdity. With physical trauma comes psychological harm, which takes with it the natives' sense of subjectivity. Being exposed to constant aggression, racism, and humiliation breaks the psyche of the natives. With the aim of leaving the oppressed hopeless for the future and without an identity, this destructive violence also incites a great amount of internal rage for the natives. However, by not being able to express his anger, the colonized man is yet exposed to more suffering, leading him to seek an outlet by attacking his own neighbor. Eventually, the colonized man reaches a point of no return where he forcefully grabs the baton from his colonizer's hand and unleashes upon him the same brutal beatings only the colonizer has been known to give.

Fanon describes the point of no return mentioned above as the moment when the colonized “run out of patience” (34); they grow impatient as they realize that the quality of life of the colonizers rightfully belongs to them. The colonized man then re-directs his pent-up rage from his neighbor and in fact joins forces with that neighbor to attack the colonizer. “Each individual” Fanon writes, “represents a violent link in a great chain of a great violent organism,” illustrating the power of the colonized when they realize that violence is the only way to take

back their land, their sanity, their history, and finally their identity (50).

This violence differs profoundly from that which the colonizer engages in, and Fanon justifies this difference by noting that the violence of the oppressed is geared towards a greater task: its goal is to liberate (44). By engaging the oppressor with his own methods of colonization, the natives are able to gain back their voices. For Fanon, however, the use of violence is not only for getting the attention of the colonizer; its goal is also to produce “life that can only materialize from the decomposing cadaver of the colonizer” (50). The death of the colonizer brings life to the masses. If there had only been one reason why Fanon was deported from Algeria, this claim would have been it.

In addition to liberating the individual, Fanon also asserts that the violence of the colonized is instrumental in building a new nation after the war. Violence as it is practiced by the colonizer aims to separate individuals in its strategy of control. The former, however, gives the natives an objective: unity with a “common cause, of national destiny, of collective history” (Fanon 51). This war of liberation can only be won by force, through violence and by the death of the colonizer. This gives the native at the “individual level” his self-confidence with his inferiority complex dissolving. It stands, then, that violence is the solution to all the adversities of the colonized, and violence is the weapon that allows for decolonization —“the substitution of one ‘species’ of mankind by another”— to finally occur (Fanon 1).

So far in my exposition of Fanon’s view on violence, I have confirmed all the cries of the critics who shun him for his dangerous rhetoric. The turning point comes next, when Fanon’s tone in his writing takes on a different form, one of a psychiatrist attempting to heal the wounds of the violence inflicted on “the other” by both parties in the war of liberation.

“Colonial War and Mental Disorders”

In the very beginning of this chapter, Fanon gives a disclaimer of sorts: “Perhaps the reader will find these notes on psychiatry out of place or untimely in a book like this. There is absolutely nothing we can do about that” (181). What this illustrates is Fanon’s awareness of the contradictory nature of his book. Following the previous chapters concerning violence and its necessity in the war of liberation, one would expect Fanon to begin by giving an account of a liberated native who overcomes his struggles, having been tortured by the French soldiers, but one would be mistaken (Kuby 66).

Writing in the fashion of a medical professional, Fanon gives a multitude of his cases which he divides into 4 sections. With each section, he explains his patients’ afflictions and his experiences with them, detailing, in some instances, private conversations he had with them and how these men, women, and even

children came to be in such troubling conditions. His first case is of a man he names B, who suffered from impotence following a sexual assault of his wife by numerous French soldiers. As a member of the FLN, B was a taxi driver who used his job to pass out the organization's propaganda leaflets and on occasion to transport high ranking members of the group. Because of this, B's wife was taken by the French colonial police when they raided his home while he was away. Fanon talks about how this incident scarred B to the extent where he had to seek help (185–187). In another section, he gives an account of two Algerian boys aged 13 and 14 who killed their French friend because “the Europeans want to kill all the Arabs,” said the 13-year-old, “so one day we decided to kill him” (Fanon 199). The two boys described the French boy as their best friend, with no animosity towards him but what his people stood for.

Fanon continues on throughout the chapter, detailing the case studies of patients; from FLN torture victims, to French officers who tortured FLN members, no one is spared in his descriptions of the reactive disorders of what violence does to those who dare to incite it. On the surface, it is hard to imagine why he would include such horrific narratives after having argued for violence as a “cleansing force” (Fanon 51). This illustrates why Fanon's critics tend to treat this chapter as a mere footnote that does not necessarily need to be analyzed with as much vigor as they do with “On Violence,” but Fanon includes this chapter with the intent to lead the reader into questioning the decolonization theory, with violence on the forefront, that is presented at the beginning and throughout the book. Allow me to explain.

“A New Way of Thinking”

As a member of the FLN, Fanon wrote for *El Moudjahid*, their anti-colonialist newspaper, to gain more support from the natives in Algeria. During this time, he wrote extensively explaining why the FLN had to be violent in its methods against the colonial regime. *Wretched*, however, was written in 1961, shortly before the end of the war in Algeria. This time, in what was to be his last book, Fanon was not writing for the Algerians, but for the “Third World leaders engaged in processes of decolonization worldwide” (Kuby 64). From all these observations, it occurs to me that Fanon does not give an account of violence as a tool for these “Third World leaders,” to liberate their people. *The Wretched of the Earth* is a warning, not a tool, a warning of the damages which result from an ideology that views violence as the only way to restore one's identity and self-confidence.

When Fanon included cases of French soldiers losing their minds over their torturing of the Algerian people, he was sincerely showing that violence is violent; whether it was inflicted by the FLN or the French colonial police, they all

ended up in the same place: in the care of a psychiatric physician. In other words, there is no difference between the emancipatory violence of the colonized and that of the colonizer; it is the same entity. If one type of violence cannot be justified, the other certainly cannot be seen as emancipatory since they both result in the same wounds that will never be healed, even with time.

How is violence emancipatory when it drives two teenagers to kill a friend simply because he is French? How can one unite with his nation when he cannot be at peace with his own wife because of the atrocities unleashed on his family? How can a nation rebuild itself when it is still bleeding from the invisible force that is mental illness? These are questions Fanon seems to be asking the colonized when he writes his last chapter.

In his conclusion, Fanon proclaims that “[i]f we want to respond to the expectations of our peoples, we must look elsewhere besides Europe ...we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man” (239). We must ask ourselves, then, what is the European man well known for? According to the young Algerian boy “he kills Arabs.” For Fanon, any colonized person can insert his nationality into this young man’s words and they remain true. What Fanon advocates for, then, is not violence but something else: “a new way of thinking.” And whatever it may be, it cannot be violence alone.

Conclusion

Fanon has been misread for decades because scholars and non-scholars alike fail to see the relevance of the lived experience of those mentioned in his last chapter. Although not an academic well read on Fanon, a Canadian author by the name of Robert Fulford describes Fanon as “a poisonous thinker who refuses to die,” implying that Fanon is to blame for “a relationship between Arabness and violence” (Fulford 2002). Fulford and others like him participate in a violence of sorts when they dangerously misread Fanon as an advocate for crippling violence.

Whether he was calling for nonviolence, it is not apparent, but he asserts at the end that violence is not the cure to the inferiority complex of the colonized man; it is not a cleansing force, nor is it the only path to liberation. This paper set out to clear Fanon’s name as an “apostle of violence” by paying attention to the descriptions entrusted to us in his last chapter concerning “Colonial War and Mental Disorders.” By also providing a brief history of the Algerian war, the reader was also given the context of the conditions in which Fanon was living.

It was not my goal to support or refute Fanon in any way (that is a topic for another paper), but I hope to finally lay to rest the damaging rhetoric about Fanon’s work. In another sense, this paper is also directed towards those who embrace Fanon since they use him to justify their violence. All things considered, if *The Wretched of the Earth* is a warning as I have suggested, the freedom

enacted by violence is merely an illusion; instead, "a new way of thinking" must be employed if true emancipation is desired.

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