

Being Different: Fanon's Tryst with Revolutionary Decolonization

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Abstract: Ever since the latter decades of the twentieth century, Frantz Fanon has figured prominently within the discursive domains of postcolonial and decolonial scholarship. His theorization of the praxis of decolonization, besides serving as a major inspirational force behind the African anti-colonial movements of the 1950s and 1960s, indeed also provides fascinating insights into the psychological ramifications of colonial subjection. By drawing on Fanon's two most powerful works, *Black Skins, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, this paper attempts to reread his engagement with revolutionary decolonization in terms of an affirmation of difference. It is arranged into four separate thematic sections: the first dealing with the Négritude inheritance in Fanon's thought, the second with his propagation of 'cathartic' violence as a legitimate modality for decolonization, the third with his faith in the revolutionary potential of the Third World peasantry, and the fourth with his vision of a post-racial world order. The paper thus argues that Fanon should be credited with an intellectual foresight that enabled him to not only challenge the imposition of 'Western' universalisms but also to demand from Europe the recognition that civilizational/cultural difference is indeed worthy of true respect.

Keywords: Frantz Fanon, decolonization, Third World, colonialism, violence, peasantry, Négritude

To read Fanon is to read difference. To read Fanon is to understand the difference. And to read Fanon... is also... to reconcile the difference. A 'black' man from Martinique, Frantz Fanon was revolutionary not merely in thought but also praxis. To confine his ideas into a bolthole of intellectualism would amount to rendering his vision of human emancipation invisible. French by birth but a 'Negro' by colour, his entire life was about a struggle to liquidate differences, be it those borne out by race or those by colonial domination. His politics was not political, it was humanitarian; his battle was not for glory, but for respect. Yes he talked of violence... yes he talked of armed rebellion, yet only because he was never ready to compromise on justice. Even the slightest

engagement with his most influential work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, I believe, will make this evident.

But, at the same time, it is critical to remember that while Fanon did ultimately end up as an incisive theorist of decolonization, throughout his life he also continued to remain an acerbic critic of racial discrimination. Naturally, it was only out of his desperate urge to make sense of a world divided in 'black' and 'white' that Fanon could finally come to grasp the logic of colonial Manichaeism. His journey from *Black Skins, White Masks* to *The Wretched of the Earth*, therefore, reveals nothing less than the journey of a man who learned to militate against the arbitrary impositions of artificial barriers between men, yearning to foster a sense of brotherhood amongst all of mankind.

The Négritude Influence

Now, when it comes to influences, Fanon's writings indicate the traces of four distinct theoretical frameworks, which include phenomenological philosophy, Hegelian dialectics, Marxist class analysis, and most importantly, *Césairean Négritude*.¹ Mind you though, it was not as if he uncritically accepted all of their central tenets; in fact, Fanon had reservations against much of what he drew his ideas from. Nonetheless, the deep impact that the Négritude Movement came to have on Fanon does necessitate a brief treatment here.

Rabaka, in this case, I find, is extremely accurate when he refers to W.E.B. Du Bois as the pioneer of Négritude discourses, for it was only he who first brought black identity to the sociological fore.² Although Fanon never mentions him directly, Fanonian prose is highly reflective of several of his concepts, especially those of 'double consciousness' and 'second sight'. For Du Bois, Rabaka writes, 'double consciousness' signifies 'the psychological condition and social state where blacks....engage and judge their life-worlds and life-struggles [by] exclusively utilizing the white world's anti-black racist culture and conceptions of civilization.'³ To put it more simply, 'double consciousness' comes into being when the 'black' man is forced to see himself through the eyes of the 'white' man. Fanon, of course, being no stranger to such an experience, had little qualms when it came to voicing out the sheer crisis that it engendered in the 'black' man's identity.⁴

While, on one hand, Du Bois' 'double consciousness', thus strikes a note of pessimism, on the other, his idea of the Negro's 'second sight' seems to provide a silver lining. 'Second sight' embodies the capacity of black people to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of both African (non-white) and American (white) cultures, such that, even when faced with tremendous difficulties, they can still retain the best of each. Rabaka too believes that it is *this* power of 'second-sight' that 'enables them to begin the dialectical process(es) of revolutionary decolonization and human liberation by critically calling into question double-consciousness.'⁵ And Fanon was one endowed with this ability.

But besides Du Bois, the man who resonates most in the Fanonian corpus is none other than *Aimé Césaire*, the progenitor of 'black consciousness' and

Fanon's one-time political educator. For *Césaire*, Négritude represented 'a violent affirmation' not only of black people's identity but also of their unique humanity, historicity, and cultural specificity; in fact, it marked nothing less than a change of attitude itself, where the Negro abandoned the apologetic stance towards his own culture and began to take pride in it.⁶ This infusion of the term 'Negro' – a word originally intended to ascribe attributes like inferiority and depravity to blackness – with inspiring positive connotations, in time, became Fanon's most effective weapon in bringing about a politico-cultural revolution in Algeria. Significantly, even its impact on him was no less strong.⁷

Now, a question might arise as to why I iterate the Négritude issue so much when dealing with a person whose legacy predominantly rests on his analysis of decolonization. Here I submit to you that both are connected far more intrinsically than it initially appears. A close examination of *The Wretched* will reveal how Négritude continues to serve a productive and creative function in ensuring the success of the decolonizing endeavour; Fanon, after all, himself hints towards the persistence of the Du Boisian 'double consciousness' amongst the colonized populace.⁸ But not only that. Any reading of history too, I contend, will make it visible that 'white' men have rarely colonized 'white' men. The reason Fanon's assertions in *Black Skins* and *The Wretched* eventually merge is simply because colonialism has always consisted of a racial dynamic.

Violence as the Mode of Revolutionary Decolonization

As we shift our focus from his critical theory of race to his idea of revolutionary decolonization, one cannot ignore the fact that, in the case of the latter, Fanon indeed appears more driven and more determined to eke out a solution. Working as a psychiatrist in Algeria, and being allied with the *Front de Libération Nationale*, must have surely deepened his understanding of the colonial situation along with providing a fillip to his political activism. Hence, we find in *The Wretched* a sustained emphasis on the methodology of decolonization – a methodology that stresses violence as the mode and the peasantry as the vanguard of the revolution. Needless to say, this demands discussion.

So, why did Fanon choose violence? As anybody would aver, acts of violence tend to fall outside the boundary of morality, and violence itself is often dismissed as pathological. But then, I feel, it is vital to realize that what is rational *need not* always be moral. And Fanon here was acting (or writing) out of rationality. If the very essence of colonialism had been violence if the colonial rule had been kept alive through violence if the agents of the colonial state only understood the language of force, what other choice did the colonized have than to assert them with aggression? Note here, Fanon never says that violence is inherent in the vocabulary of the natives; rather, he points out that it is the colonizer who 'brings violence into the homes and minds of the colonized subject.'⁹ When colonialism has constantly sought

violent and systematic destruction of the native's body, psyche, and culture, it should not come as a surprise when that violence changes direction.

Also, Fanon advocating violence *does not* mean Fanon eulogizing violence; his words must be understood from within a specific spatiotemporal context (of the Algerian liberation war). Once the colonized (who in Algeria is always a 'black' man) has been denied recognition of his 'humanness', his skin has become the determinant of his character, and he finds himself 'sealed into that crushing objecthood'¹⁰, violence, says Fanon, becomes the *only* medium through which he can restore agency to his 'self'.¹¹ Furthermore, being a psychiatrist, he also talks about how, at the individual level, violence also acts as a cleansing force, emboldening and restoring the self-confidence of the colonized man.¹²

This indicates that Fanon is not concerned with violence *per se* but rather with the subjective transformation of the oppressed as a result of taking part in it. In consequence, of course, this 'reconstructive-recuperative violence'¹³ develops an instrumental significance, necessary to generate a revolutionary consciousness among the colonized. As Omar observes, Fanon's focus in *The Wretched* lies primarily on analyzing the liberating or cathartic effect of this reactive belligerence. Moreover, he adds, 'what Fanon seems to suggest, in sum, is that by becoming subjects of violence, the dehumanized and colonized [also] become *subjects* for the first time.'¹⁴ [emphasis mine] That is, they are now able to move from their zone of non-being to that of being, no more having to exist merely as passive objects of colonial domination.

All in all, therefore, we find that Fanon's insistence on violence (even if considered immoral from a conventional point of view) had its particular logic and arose mainly out of his strong desire to seek deserved justice, while also allowing for a form of psychic redemption. But then, what made Fanon put his faith in the largely uneducated peasant masses of Algeria when it came to carrying out this violent decolonizing process?

The peasantry as The Vanguard of Revolutionary Decolonization

Now, in the Marxist paradigm, the peasantry has usually been viewed in a very disparaging manner, as almost incapable of displaying *any* revolutionary behaviour. For Marx, after all, revolution meant 'the proletarian revolution', with the proletariat constituting the only revolutionary class. However, it is at this point that Fanon begs to differ; contradicting the conventional Marxist viewpoint, he loudly proclaims that 'in the colonial countries [it is] only the peasantry [which] is revolutionary.'¹⁵

This particular proclamation, I believe, is the clearest proof of the ingenious nature of Fanon's thought. Why? Because, despite being inspired by Marxism, Fanon, here, remains attentive to the peculiarities of the colonial situation (especially in the context of Algeria), *modifying* Marxist theory according to the needs of the largely agrarian Third World. As Hudis points out, Fanon realized that due to the lack of thoroughgoing industrialization, the Algerian working class, unlike its Western counterpart, was too dispersed,

divided, and weak to execute a revolution. On the other hand, the Algerian peasants, who formed the bulk of the population, being left untouched by the capitalist ethos, displayed far stronger socialization amongst themselves, such that it enabled them to act far more cohesively.¹⁶ Therefore, it is quite natural that Fanon came to believe that the peasantry would 'always respond to the call to revolt'.¹⁷

But Fanon, as a man, was way too judicious to place this amount of confidence in the peasantry based on just one single aspect; after all, it is not as if he was unaware of their weaknesses. Hence, I posit that there were two other major reasons why he appeared so favourable towards the peasants – first, because they were *capable* of indulging in real violence, and second because Fanon harboured extreme mistrust when it came to the programmes of the nationalist bourgeoisie.

In *The Wretched*, therefore, he looks upon the peasantry with admirable hope, cognizant of the potential that peasant anger has in sparking off outbursts of popular unrest. Even though it is true that peasant violence can never be synonymous with revolution, one can hardly say that it has never served as the precipitant factor behind such upheavals. Noting that the peasants possess 'bloodthirsty instincts'¹⁸, Fanon even goes on to announce that they are the *only ones* who have *always* thought of their liberation in terms of a violent national struggle, ready to sacrifice themselves with an indestructible pride.¹⁹ And as colonialism was not a thinking machine, nor a body with reasoning faculties, perhaps the only way it could indeed be faced was with this form of an armed insurrection.

But alongside this, what also catches the eye is the extent of Fanon's belief that the colonial bourgeoisie would never try their hands at his preferred method of decolonization. This point is highlighted very cogently by Hiddleston who contends that for Fanon, the Algerian bourgeoisie always appeared to perceive '...liberation from within the terms of the colonial system'.²⁰ Them having already inherited much of its insights, Fanon argued, the bourgeoisie could only try to free themselves through a process of assimilation to the ruling system, rather than by seeking to overturn that system itself. Worse, as Rabaka mentions, these people were even 'willing to side with the white supremacist colonialists if it meant that they could trade places or, at the least, share the spoils'²¹ with them. Fanon of course, having the foresight that he did, did not fail to warn his readers about the possible re-colonization of the nominally independent state by these new black-skinned masters who could be 'whiter than the whites'.²²

Now, Fanon's distrust of the bourgeoisie was also governed by another 'lack' that seemed to afflict them, that is the lack of their connection with what he calls 'national culture' (or black African culture). Their adoption of the colonizer's culture, conjoined with their criticism of native customs tends to provide perfect testimony to what Fanon had once written in *Black Skins*: 'The black man wants to be like the white man. For the black man, there is only one destiny. And it is white.'²³

What is more, Fanon, in his writings on the alienation of the bourgeoisie from traditional society, also exposes their reluctance to do away with a colonial social structure that had not only created them but also guaranteed their sufficiently prosperous existence. Yet, in stark contrast, he adds, the colonized peasants have continued to survive within the environs of tradition, clinging constantly to an anti-colonial way of life. As Hudis states, they were the ones who *lived* the Manichaeic divide that Fanon talked about.²⁴ Systematically marginalized by the nationalist parties, and denied access to the 'dubious advantages of colonial oppression',²⁵ not only did these peasants completely escape 'contamination' by colonial culture but also had nothing to lose when it came to violently confronting the colonizers. Naturally then, their determination to replace the alien colonialists had to be much greater than that of the nationalist bourgeoisie.

It is in this manner that Fanon tapped into the revolutionary spirit of the colonial peasantry, staking out a novel ground for challenging both the domination of the colonial rulers as well as the hegemony of the bourgeois leaders. Nonetheless, to stop here would be to misunderstand Fanon, to reduce his identity to that of a *mere* revolutionary. He was a revolutionary no doubt but just that he was *not* quite like all other revolutionaries. As I mentioned at the very beginning, *Fanon was indeed a bit different*.

I believe that, by now, this essay has been able to delineate how and why Fanon has always chosen to approach the issues of race, colonization, and decolonization from a perspective grounded in the realities of the colonial world. In the process, not only has he developed his analyses of identity consciousness and counter-violence, but he has also made sure that the difference between the colonial context from that of the Western metropolitan world is brought out as vividly as possible. An *assertion of difference*, even if implicit, thus can be found to be ubiquitous throughout Fanon's texts. But, even while posing 'black' identity as different from 'white' identity, anti-colonial violence as different from colonial violence, the nationalist bourgeoisie as different from the European bourgeoisie, and the Third World peasantry as different from the Western peasantry, Fanon has never given up on his vision of a time where there can take place a humanistic reconciliation between all such existing differences. For him, after all, being different is not something that asks for antagonism, it is something that yearns for acceptance.

Perhaps that is why, in *The Wretched*, we see him writing about a 'new humanism'²⁶, one that is supposed to be distinct from the European model which, despite making claims to universality, had excluded the entirety of the 'coloured' populations from its very category of the 'human'.²⁷ So we find that, for Fanon, *real* humanism begins only when difference comes to being *respected* and *ethical recognition* is meted out to all extant cultures. This involves not only a rejection of the racial binaries imposed by colonialism but also of the essentialisms engendered by Négritude. After all, Fanon was seeking out a

world that would be 'post-racial', a world where there would exist no 'black' man or 'white' man, but simply a man. Decolonization was about freeing man from both political subjection as well as racial categorization; or, as Sartre would have it, about the 'realization of a human in a society without races'.²⁸

That, in doing so, Fanon was unique becomes very evident when he speaks of *not* harbouring any anger or hatred towards the former oppressor, the 'white' man, whom he considers to be a casualty of colonial Manichaeism as well. Arguing that the colonizer is both the 'organizer and the victim of a system that has choked him and reduced him to silence', he, aligns the perpetrator with the injured (colonized) in a continuum of suffering, pointing out how difference can indeed be reconciled through such a recognition of mutual suffering and how it is only *this* that can give birth to a new humanism.²⁹

Thus, we find that true revolutionary decolonization, for Fanon was all about enabling the whole of humanity to transcend its internal differences and move towards the destiny of man which, as he said, is nothing but absolute freedom. And perhaps therefore, I should conclude this essay by leaving you with a few lines from his *Black Skins* that I believe perfectly evokes the essence of his humanism:

Superiority? Inferiority?

Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel
the other, to explain the other to me?

Was my freedom not given to me to build the world of the
You?

After this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the
open door of every consciousness.³⁰

The point of being different, perhaps, is only to fall in love with the difference.

Notes and References

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2. Reiland Rabaka, *The Negritude Movement: W.E.B. Du Bois, Leon Damas, Aime Cesaire, Leopold Senghor, Frantz Fanon, and the Evolution of an Insurgent Idea* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 2-3.
3. *Ibid.*, 9.
4. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 60.
5. Rabaka, *Negritude Movement*, 24.
6. Pramod K. Nayar, *Frantz Fanon* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 97.
7. Fanon, *Black Skins*, 115.
8. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 15-16.
9. *Ibid.*, 4.
10. Fanon, *Black Skins*, 109.

11. Sartre describes this phenomenon very accurately in his preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*. Talking about the significance of violent rebellion on part of the colonized, he writes, 'Offspring of violence, he [the colonized] draws every moment of his humanity from it: we [the colonizers] were men at his expense: he becomes a man at ours.' See Fanon, *The Wretched*, lvii.
12. *Ibid.*, 51.
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30. Fanon, *Black Skins*, 231-232.