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Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) is one of the twentieth century's most significant anti-colonial intellectuals. Born in Martinique under French colonial rule, Fanon joined the anti-Vichy Free French Forces in World War II and served in North Africa and France. After qualifying as a psychiatrist in Lyon in 1951, he ended up in French Algeria and practiced in Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital until he was deported in 1957 for his political sympathies to the Algerian national struggle. Fanon formally joined the National Liberation Front (FLN) in exile in Tunis and represented the movement on the international stage. He also participated in editing its French-language publication *El-Moudjahid*, where his own work appeared. Fanon died as he was waiting for treatment for leukemia in the US, having just completed his political testament *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), posthumously published, and famously prefaced, by Jean-Paul Sartre.

Fanon's writings on colonialism, racism, and anti-imperialism have had a massive impact around the world, especially in the global south. In addition to *Wretched*, he wrote *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), *A Dying Colonialism* (1959), and *Toward the African Revolution* (1964). *Wretched* is, without doubt, Fanon's most important book. Nothing like it exists in the annals of anti-colonial letters. No other political text expresses as astutely and productively the whole conjuncture of decolonization with its distinctive contradictions and possibilities. By targeting colonialism and positing a new egalitarian society in the future, Fanon captures the voice and critical orientation of a whole generation of radical intellectuals.

To read *Wretched* is to enter a world of colonial division, national conflict, and emancipatory yearning. As a text, it combines dynamic critique with political passion, historical probing with denunciation of injustice, reasoned argument with moral indignation against suffering. This is how it inspired a whole generation of radicals across the world to transform societies that were slowly emerging from colonial domination. By identifying the racism and structural subordination of the colonial predicament, as well as charting a humanist route out, Fanon defined a politics of liberation whose terms and aims remain relevant today.

But many of Fanon's recent academic critics, and even some of his sympathizers, continued to distort and misconstrue *Wretched*. They inflated the significance of one element in the book over all others: violence. And they underplayed Fanon's socialist commitment and class analysis of capitalism, which are two essential components in his anti-imperialist arsenal. Nowhere is this truer than in recent postcolonial theory. Indeed, postcolonial theory has come to posit violence as the theoretical core of *Wretched*. Homi Bhabha, for example, has turned Fanon's work into a site of "deep psychic uncertainty of the colonial relation" that "speaks most effectively from the uncertain interstices of historical change".¹ In his recent preface to *Wretched*, he reads colonial violence as a manifestation of the

¹ Homi Bhabha, 'Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 112-123, p. 116, p. 113.

colonized's subjective crisis of psychic identification "where rejected guilt begins to *feel* like shame". Colonial oppression generates "psycho-affective" guilt at being colonized, and Bhabha's Fanon becomes an unashamed creature of violence and poet of terror. He concludes that: "Fanon, the phantom of terror, might be only the most intimate, if intimidating, poet of the vicissitudes of violence".² This flawed interpretation eviscerates Fanon as a political intellectual of the first order. It also skirts far too close to tarring Fanon contribution's with terrorism – a bizarre interpretation for Bhabha to advance in the age of America's "war on terror". Rather than emancipation, it is terror, Bhabha posits, that marks out Fanon's life project.

It is hardly surprising that in order to turn Fanon into a poet of violence postcolonial theorists have had to deny his socialist politics. This begins with Bhabha himself, whose intellectual project is premised on undermining class solidarity and socialism as subaltern political traditions.³ Ignoring Fanon's socialist commitments is also evident in Edward Said's reading of Fanon in *Culture and Imperialism*, which is historically sparked by the first *intifada* and Said's critical disenchantment with Palestinian elite nationalism. If Said is profoundly engaged with Fanon's politics of decolonization and universalist humanism, he, nonetheless, fails to even mention the word socialism in association with Fanon let alone read him as part of the long tradition of the socialist critique of imperialism. This dominant postcolonial disavowal of socialist Fanon is also articulated by Robert Young when he bluntly states that Fanon is not interested in "the ideas of human equality and justice embodied in socialism".⁴

Sartre never made that mistake, though his reading of Fanon is not without its flaws. In his famous preface to the book, Sartre does actually inflate the significance of violence in *Wretched*. His stark injunction is: "Read Fanon: you will learn how, in the period of their helplessness, their mad impulse to murder is the expression of the natives' collective consciousness". Decolonization, as a result, becomes indelibly associated with a "mad fury", an "ever-present desire to kill", and "blind hatred" in which the colonized "make men of themselves by murdering Europeans".⁵ It is hard to stress how damaging this invocation of murder has been for understanding Fanon's life work and his conception of decolonization.

Sartre, however, does also emphasize Fanon's core socialist message. Which he summarizes as follows: "In order to triumph, the national revolution

² Homi Bhabha, "Foreword: Framing Fanon", in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), pp. vii-xli, p. xxxix, p. xl.

³ For Bhabha's marginalization of class agency, see Nivedita Majumdar, "Silencing the Subaltern: Resistance and Gender in Postcolonial Theory", *Catalyst: Journal of Theory & Strategy*, 1.1 (Spring 2017), 87-115.

⁴ Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 278. Young subscribes to Bhabha's reading of Fanon's colonized as responding through violence to the psychic drama of an identity split by power. Young calls this "the theoretical problem" for Fanon: "What is the Postcolonial", *Ariel* 40.1 (January 2009), 13-24 (17).

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin Books, 2001 [1961]), p. 15-16. All subsequent page numbers are to this edition.

must be socialist; if its career is cut short, if the native bourgeoisie takes over power, the new State, in spite of formal sovereignty, remains in the hands of the imperialists”. And he concludes: “This is what Fanon explains to his brothers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America: we must achieve revolutionary socialism all together everywhere, or else one by one we will be defeated by our former masters” (10). The aim of national struggle is to forge a socialist internationalism premised on popular solidarity and cooperation – one that reconfigures sovereignty as social and economic democracy. That, in a nutshell, is the political cause that Fanon advances in *Wretched*.

It has taken decades of quite willful misreading of the book to present Fanon as anything other than an emblem of African socialism at mid-century. For Fanon, socialism is the answer to the problems of racism, colonial domination, and economic underdevelopment that plague the Third World in the decolonization era. He was not a Marxist nor did he give due consideration to the role of the urban working class in decolonization struggles. But he was a materialist who anchored his analysis of colonialism in an objective social structure; he was, also, a class analyst of colonial society and anti-colonial movements; and, finally, he was committed to a new universal humanism that the subordinate peoples and classes from across the colonial divide could participate in and help shape. For Fanon, ending racism and exclusion had to be done not through reifying oppressed identities and celebrating national or ethnic particularism, but by common struggle for freedom and equality.

It is important to flag here that Fanon’s vision of liberation is not limited to national collective decolonization. To be free certainly meant living in a socially and politically liberated nation that independently controlled its economy. But Fanon took another crucial step. He advanced the notion that a real and authentic decolonization would have to result in the emancipation of the individual. Fanon articulated this idea most succinctly in *Toward the African Revolution* when he said: “The liberation of the individual does not follow national liberation. An authentic national liberation exists only to the precise degree to which the individual has irreversibly begun his own liberation”.⁶ Individual freedom is thus part and parcel of Fanon’s conception of anti-colonial democracy. Alongside the notion of “Power for the people and by the people”, in which popular sovereignty is a key response to tyranny and oppression, Fanon also advanced Enlightenment notions of human blossoming. As he specified in his *El Moudjahid* writings, these are “the essential values of modern humanism concerning the individual taken as a person: freedom of the individual, equality of rights and duties of citizens, freedom of conscience, of assembly, etc. all that permits the individual to blossom, advance and exercise his personal judgment and initiative freely”.⁷ Fanon thus linked

⁶ Frantz Fanon, “Decolonization and Independence” [1958], in *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. by Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1967), pp. 99-105, p. 103.

⁷ Frantz Fanon, “A Democratic Revolution” [1957], in *Alienation and Freedom*, ed. by Jean Khalfa and Robert J. C. Young, trans. by Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 567-573, p. 571.

democracy to a notion of self-emancipating individuals and understood decolonization as both collective and individual self-determination. This is, indeed, what *Wretched* ultimately yearns for: all-round democracy and human flourishing.

This essay is organized into three core themes: Fanon's conception of violence, which has attracted so much attention; his examination of the limits and flaws of the national bourgeoisie and its project of independence in the colonies; and his unique conception of liberation. I also tackle his distinct views on political agency and revolutionary process in the colonies. *Wretched* constitutes Fanon's contribution to radical thought. Engaging it brings out Fanon's new humanist remedies for global emancipation – a universal vision that remains relevant for tackling today's global inequality.

Violence

Wretched's opening sentence seems to say it all: “National liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood to the people, commonwealth: whatever may be the headings used or the new formulas introduced, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon” (27). But two things are often missed about Fanon's justification for anti-colonial violence. The first is that violence is a response to the greater violence of colonialism, and the second is that violence is part of a broader political strategy and subsumed under it: necessary but insufficient without the popular mobilization needed to unseat colonial domination.

For Fanon, colonialism was an exceptionally violent phenomenon: it dehumanized the colonized, divided and exploited them, deformed their culture, and transformed them into a lesser people. It was premised on force not political consensus, and resulted in the denial of people's fundamental rights. As total negation, the colonized equaled “absolute evil” (32), immorality, laziness, poverty, depravity, ignorance, and want. Fanon argues that the colonized refuse to accept this colonial situation and negation. Colonialism fails to convince the colonized of the legitimacy of its authority and rule. Force breeds resistance and becomes a major source of instability for colonial regimes. Fanon depicts this process in the following terms: “He [the colonized] is overpowered but not tamed; he is treated as an inferior but he is not convinced of his inferiority” (41). The colonized recognize that the system of colonial domination and oppression is designed to keep them down, and that their interest lies in pushing against its constraints and overcoming its disabling yoke.

The force of Fanon's analysis is to argue that violence is necessary in this process. This is not because the colonized are inherently violent, but because the colonizers only understand the language of violence: “colonialism will only yield when confronted with greater violence” (48), and: “The colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence” (68). This is the moment of clash, confrontation, and powerful contradiction:

The settler's work is to make even dreams of liberty impossible for the native. The native's work is to imagine all possible methods of destroying the settler. On the logical plane, the Manichaeism of the settler produces a Manichaeism of the native. To the theory of the 'absolute evil of the native' the theory of the 'absolute evil of settler' replies.... For the native, life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler. (73)

Statements like these have been used by postcolonial commentators to argue that Fanon gives dreams and mental dramas (what Bhabha describes as "the psycho-affective realm") a causal primacy in explaining colonized conduct. But that is not how Fanon mobilizes the psychological dimension in his argument. Fanon utilizes phenomenological language in order to highlight the generative connection between the individual and wider historical processes. The subjective realm conveys the powerful effect that objective reality has on individual psychology and imagination. Indeed, the whole point of Fanon's analysis is to show that it is colonialism that causes psychological and social injuries, distortions, and violence. Through Fanon's materialist framework of explanation, ideas and feelings become symptoms of social structure, and have a social basis that is essential for understanding their emergence and development.

In his chapter on "Colonial War and Mental Disorders" in *Wretched*, Fanon tackles the question of individual psychology head on, and details tens of actual cases from his time as a psychiatrist in Bida-Joinville during the Algerian war. For example: "We have here brought together certain cases or groups of cases in which the event giving rise to the illness is in the first place the atmosphere of total war which reigns in Algeria" (217). Or: "this colonial war is singular even in the pathology that it gives rise to" (202). To argue that the root of violence lies in identarian or psychological crises is to miss what causes those in the first place. It thus mis-identifies the reasons and mechanisms of collective action. The whole point of *Wretched* is to connect social suffering to colonial relations and to identify ways to remedy it.

Violence has a function for Fanon. It is an instrument for forging national unity. Only that way can the colonized hope to achieve their objectives. There is no violence for its own sake in Fanon. But only as a means to a political end: independence. The nation, thus, comes into its own as an oppositional political project and instrument of liberty.

The Algerian context illuminates Fanon's emphasis on prioritizing politics over armed struggle in *Wretched*. His identification with the Algerian Revolution's Soummam Platform is a good example of what this actually meant in practice. The three-week strategy conference in 1956, held two years after the initiation of armed struggle by the FLN, was mainly associated with its architect Abane Ramadane and regarded as the most serious attempt to formulate a cohesive progressive vision for the decolonization struggle. As Martin Evans has argued: "In terms of the armed

struggle, Soummam established the civil structures that would govern the military, appointing political commissaries to organize the population, advising on military strategy, and putting in place people's assemblies: a counter-state replacing French law and authority". The Platform also articulated new rules of war for the guerillas, and "most importantly, Soummam produced a clear set of war aims: recognition of Algerian independence and the FLN as sole representative of the nation".⁸ As Fanon's latest biographer David Macey states, Soummam called for wider activation of Algerian society in the struggle for national freedom: "The need for alliances with the Jewish minority, women's organizations, peasants, trade unions and youth groups was spelled out in some details".⁹ Abane paid with his life for this effort. He was assassinated by the exterior leadership of the FLN who regarded his internalist push for political organisation as a challenge to their conservative allegiances to Islam, military hegemony, and authoritarian Arab nationalism. But his political vision lived on in *Wretched*.

Bourgeois Independence

The critical spirit of Soummam, with its emphasis on self-organization and popular struggle, infuses Fanon's writings on decolonization. Especially important was the notion that there were competing senses of the national project and that decolonization is a struggle for freedom and democracy that takes place not only *between* nations but *within* nations as well. This emphasis on class analysis anchors Fanon's political analysis in *Wretched*. Fanon's key anxiety is that coterminous with popular national struggle is a national elite project of substituting external for internal forms of authoritarian domination and rule. His fear that the outcome of decolonization will not be democracy but national tyranny is palpable throughout *Wretched*. His socially dynamic conception of anti-colonial struggle is best expressed here:

The people who at the beginning of the struggle had adopted the primitive Manichaeism of the – Blacks and Whites, Arabs and Christians – realize as they go along that it sometimes happens that you get Blacks who are whiter than the Whites and that the fact of having a national flag and the hope of an independent nation does not always tempt certain strata of the population to give up their interests and privileges.... The militant who faces the colonialist war machine with the bare minimum of arms realizes that while he is breaking down colonial oppression he is building up automatically yet another system of exploitation. (114-5)

To "get Blacks who are whiter than the Whites" means that race solidarity cannot anchor the political dynamic of decolonization: "The barriers of blood and race-prejudice are broken down on both sides" (116).

⁸ Martin Evans, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp. 178-9.

⁹ David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Biography* (New York: Picador, 2000), p. 277.

Fanon's rejection of negritude as a political philosophy mobilization is on par with his emphasis on class in national struggle. Though he admired Aimé Césaire's spirit of revolt and challenge against racism and colonialism, he found the terms of negritude's self-affirmation insufficient, retrograde, and elitist. As Nigel Gibson succinctly states in his account of Fanon's consistent criticisms of the cultural movement: "Negritude spoke of alienation and not exploitation; it spoke to the elite and not to the masses; to the literate and not to the illiterate".¹⁰ This was especially true of Senghor. Negritude's main African proponent wanted to revalorize the black elements that had been denigrated and excluded as racially subordinate by what he described as *white civilization*. Contra reason, science, and objectivity that exist on the white pole of the racial binary, Senghor celebrated their opposite: emotion, participation, and subjectivism. Fanon rejected such essentialism as it was premised on accepting a race-based ontological division between white and black that he believed was false. Though Fanon was sympathetic to negritude's spirit of anti-racist negation, he repudiated the racial ontological divide that both colonialism and negritude depended on.

As early as *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon's position on race was clear. "My life", he said, "should not be devoted to drawing up the balance sheet of Negro values". Adding: "There is no white world, there is no white ethic, any more than there is a white intelligence".¹¹ In an essay entitled "West Indians and Africa" published in 1955, Fanon is certain that negritude is the wrong response to colonialism: "It thus seems to me that the West Indian [Césaire], after the great white error, is now living in the great black mirage".¹² With the intensification of decolonization, negritude would come in handy. Rather than undermining French colonial aims in Africa, it was used to fortify it. Even as Senghor spoke in the name of black freedom on the African continent, he mobilized negritude as an ideology of state rule and rejected Algerian independence. Negritude's radical race talk had actually come with political subservience, and this undermined the active unity and solidarity Fanon advocated for the African continent. Fanon's damning judgment was clearly expressed in *Wretched*. If negritude was a symptom of the illusory cultural politics of race, *Wretched* is where Fanon would develop his alternative political worldview in which class politics is primary.

Fanon thus charts how, during the struggle for decolonization, the colonized elite actively pursues its own class interests and constructs a system of domination and exploitation for its own benefit. Fanon calls this process

¹⁰ Nigel C. Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. 62. For more on negritude, see: Azzedine Haddour, "On Negritude and Political Participation", *Sartre Studies International*, 1&2.11 (2005), 286-301, and Patrick Williams, "'Faire peau neuve' – Césaire, Fanon, Memmi, Sartre, and Senghor", in *Francophone Postcolonial Studies*, ed. by Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 181-191. For recent revisionist histories, see Reiland Rabaka, *The Negritude Movement* (London: Lexington Books, 2015) and Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015).

¹¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 229.

¹² "West Indians and Africa" [1955], in *Toward the African Revolution*, pp 17-27, p. 27.

“The Pitfalls of National Consciousness” and dedicates a whole chapter in *Wretched* to elaborating the bourgeois approach to national independence. Writing as decolonization was taking place, Fanon articulates a deep anxiety about the nature and quality of freedom being advocated by national elites. His whole emphasis is about a collective unity cracking up and fracturing because of the colonial bourgeoisie: “The national front which has forced colonialism to withdraw cracks up, and wastes the victory it gained” (128). Elite interests trump the politics of equality and social solidarity. In a deep sense, the global south is still suffering from the effects of the bourgeoisie’s foundational social treason: “The treason is not national, it is social” (116).

In order to sustain its own class domination and accumulation strategies, the colonial bourgeoisie institutes a one-party system, turns its back on its own people, and looks for compromise and support from its old colonial masters. This is not surprising, and is consistent with research that has been conducted about this period. For example, Vivek Chibber, who has debunked the myth of a developmental national bourgeoisie in the colonies, described the postcolonial political economic order as a form of developmentalism that “in essence, amounted to a massive transfer of national resources to local capitalists” (157). Aijaz Ahmad has also argued that decolonization ended up giving power “not to revolutionary vanguards but to the national bourgeoisie poised for reintegration into subordinate positions within the imperialist structure”.¹³

Fanon was cognizant of this potential eventuality and critiqued it as it was happening. He saw that elite nationalization was being undertaken not “to satisfy the needs of the nation” but for private profit: “To them nationalization quite simply means the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period” (122). Decolonization is here read as class substitution: a local bourgeoisie simply takes over the levers of economic and political power from its old colonial masters and sits in its place. In neocolonial logic, it “discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary”: “of being a transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant”. Indeed: “The national bourgeoisie will be quite content with the role of the Western bourgeoisie’s business agent” (122).

It needs to be admitted that this acute analysis of the colonial ruling classes stands in contrast with Fanon’s acceptance of the mythology around the bourgeoisie in Europe. . At the same time as he debunks the myth of the national bourgeoisie as agent of freedom in the colonies, Fanon fortifies another: that the bourgeoisie had fought for liberal freedoms in its homeland, but is betraying that noble mission in the colonies. By utilizing the historic analogy of the bourgeois revolution in Europe, Fanon argues that the national bourgeoisie in the colonies is failing in its historic task of pushing thorough an authentic democratic revolution, and hence, shirking from the progressive role its forebearers played in Europe. As he states:

¹³ Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 28.

“the national bourgeoisie of the colonial countries identifies itself with the decadence of the bourgeoisie of the West”. It emulates that class’s “senile” end rather than its “first stages of exploration and invention”, and “lives to itself and cuts itself off from the people” (123). The result is that the colonial bourgeoisie constitutes an impediment to progress and liberation.

But what Fanon does not realize is that the bourgeoisie is actually behaving *in character* and that the bourgeois revolution is a myth. As Vivek Chibber argues, misreading the history of the bourgeoisie and attributing to it a role of political heroism is a common mistake made by postcolonial theorists . Democracy and liberalism do happen in the capitalist era, but they do so not as a result of the “bourgeoisie as historic actor”. As Chibber observes, , capital never intended to transpose a liberal order in the colonies, since it never implanted one in Europe.. What it “universalizes” is no freedom and liberty, but a regime of market dependence; what it seeks is not liberal equality, but its own political dominance. Any democratic achievements of the so-called bourgeois revolution result from popular mobilization and pressure from below, both in the metropolitan heartland and in the colonies. Hence, even in the heady days of the French Revolution, : “The revolution had finally become antifeudal and democratic, but not because of a ‘bourgeois project’. The ‘bourgeois’ legislators of the Third Estate had to be dragged kicking and screaming to assume their role as revolutionaries”.¹⁴

There is, thus, no ideal of a liberal bourgeoisie against which the colonial capitalists might be measured and found wanting. The bourgeoisie behaves in a similar way across the colonial divide: narrowly self-interested, afraid of democracy and popular sovereignty, and authoritarian. “The fact is,” Chibber concludes, “the European bourgeoisie was no more enamored of democracy, or contemptuous of the ancient régime, or respectful of subaltern agency, than were the Indians”. What Fanon reads as its social treason in the colonies was, then, its core universal feature. His analysis and description of its conduct there reflects its class behavior everywhere.

If Fanon’s historical class analogy was flawed, his real intervention lies elsewhere: in the political lessons he draws. In what needs to happen in the colonies in order for the revolutionary struggle to overcome the local bourgeoisie’s elitist vision of independence. His clear answer was democratic organization and socialism.

Liberation

Faced with these problems of decolonization – a self-interested bourgeoisie and severe underdevelopment – Fanon offers an oppositional socialist vision of emancipation. Neither by emulating Soviet bureaucratic politics nor Western capitalist democracy, he advances a New Left alternative instead:

¹⁴ Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 52, p. 75. Next quote is from p. 101.

Capitalist exploitation and cartels and monopolies are the enemies of under-developed countries. On the other hand the choice of a socialist regime, a regime which is completely oriented towards the people as a whole and based on the principle that man is the most precious of all possessions will allow us to go forward more quickly and more harmoniously, and thus make impossible that caricature of society where all economic and political power is held in the hands of a few who regard the nation as a whole with scorn and contempt. (78)

Fanon returns to this clear position so often in *Wretched* that it is surprising that so many postcolonial commentators ignore it. They prefer to quote the following by Fanon and to pretend that the humanism he invokes is somehow distinct from socialism: “But if nationalism is not made explicit, if it is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words into humanism, it leads up a blind alley” (165). Said does this in *Culture and Imperialism*. If he goes to Fanon to justify his emerging critique of Palestinian bourgeois nationalism during the first *intifada*, he remains silent about Fanon’s New Left socialism. But socialism is the one word that captures Fanon’s worldview and explains the basis of his critique of bourgeois nationalism that Said was after.

For Fanon, national consciousness has to become an instrument for satisfying the needs of the majority. He thus emphasizes the colonized’s mass capacity for self-government – “to govern by the people and for the people, for the outcasts and by the outcasts” (165) – and argues that everything “depends on them” (159). The whole emphasis is not only on democracy as outcome but democracy as form and process of organization: a true popular sovereignty. He articulates a clear rejection “to cultivate the exceptional or to seek for a hero, who is another form of leader” (158). Decentralized organization is a mode “to uplift the people” (159) and humanize them after the negations of colonialism. It is they who are “the demiurge” (159) of their destiny: collective responsibility is key. This egalitarian vision also extends to gender equality. Fanon’s anti-patriarchal sentiments are clear: “Women will have exactly the same place as men, not in the clauses of the constitution but in the life of every day: in the factory, at school, and in the parliament” (163). This widespread social participation is part and parcel of the revolution’s deepening “social and political consciousness” (163).

It is on the basis of such democratic self-organization that Fanon can argue for equality and cooperation between nations. Contra exclusionary nationalisms and competition, his internationalist commitments are evident when he states that: “It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. And this two-fold emerging is ultimately the source of all culture” (199). As Sartre understood all too well, either the Third World *rises together* in unity and solidarity or it *falls apart* in division and fragmentation. Only as a unified cooperating self-governing bloc can it face off the might of Western imperialism.

Wretched is thus committedly internationalist and refuses to essentialize the West as irredeemably racist or incapable of anti-systemic mobilization. It is clear as early as the conclusion of his first chapter “Concerning Violence” – so, quite unmissable – that Fanon is a universalist. Indeed, he actively invites the contribution and participation of subordinate European classes in the struggle to “rehabilitate mankind, and make man victorious everywhere” – seeing in them allies and potential agents for change:

This huge task which consists of reintroducing mankind into the world, the whole of mankind, will be carried out with the indispensable help of the European peoples, who themselves must realize that in the past they have often joined the ranks of our common masters where colonial questions were concerned. To achieve this, the European peoples must first decide to wake up and shake themselves, use their brains, and stop playing the stupid game of Sleeping Beauty (84).

What is striking about this openness is not only its inclusive vision but its distinct substantive claims. While many European critical theorists (like Adorno and Horkheimer) had at the time discounted the possibility of popular mobilizations for socialism in the West, Fanon does not.¹⁵ Rather than seeing permanent subaltern integration into capitalist structures and political neutralization, Fanon saw exclusionary ideologies that needed to be fought and a political potential for action. At a time when European Marxist theory had become “an esoteric discipline whose highly technical idiom measured its distance from politics”, Fanon offered theory as intellectual activity centered on politics, subaltern agency, and radical transformation. Only with the explosion of working-class mobilizations in 1968 were the exponents of defeat forced to grapple with their views on the degradation of political agency.

Contra Western Marxism, Fanon’s openness to working-class agency in Europe was there all along and clear in *Wretched*. In his concluding chapter, he employs an impassioned rhetoric that expresses his deep disappointment in Europe’s imperial history and ongoing commitment to global domination. But he is far from being anti-European, nor does he tar Europe as permanently disabled by its old colonial practices. Fanon’s injunction is to: “Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe” (251). The Europe he wants to bury forever – never again to be imitated or mimicked – is the Europe of violence, arrogance, hypocrisy, and the crushing of humanism. It is exploitative capitalist Europe that broke the individual and tore her away from autonomous unity.

¹⁵ For the impact of defeat on Western Marxism, see Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1976), p. 42. The following quote is from p. 53.

If European workers suffering under its oppressive yoke had once shared in “the prodigious adventure of the European spirit” (253), it is now time to break with its assumptions and join in forging a new universal humanism in common with other subordinate classes. By challenging global imperialism and capitalism, a radical Third World is calling for genuine connections, diversity, and a worldwide process of re-humanization. Fanon’s proposition is not a simple reversal of Eurocentrism, celebrating the cultural nationalism or particularism found in race ideologies like negritude that he so devastatingly critiques as regressive in *Wretched*. Nor does he deny Enlightenment’s contribution to human emancipation. Quite the opposite actually: “All the elements of a solution to the great problems of humanity have, at different times, existed in European thought” (253). The real novelty of Fanon’s position lies in its emphasis on political practice. What *Wretched* anticipates is a new politics of humanity that, sparked by the new frontiers of resistance in the global south in places like Algeria and Vietnam, empowers all-round participation.

Revolutionary Agency

Fanon’s elaborations on agency are, nonetheless, not free from theoretical and political complications. Especially about the social basis of revolt and about who will lead revolutionary practice in the colonies. It is worth examining these issues here as they raise certain problems about his conception of socialism.

Fanon saw himself as both conveying the “human realities” (40) of the settler colonial divide visible through markers of race, violence, and force as well as adapting Marxist theory to the historical specificity of colonial relations. In order to capture the nature of the colonial divide, he does state – but then transcends – the following: “In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. This is why Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem” (40). Does Fanon mean that all colonial whites are rich and all colonized are poor? His whole analysis in *Wretched* shows the limits of this logic and how it needs to be overcome in order for socialist decolonization to take place. Race alone obscures political assessment in the colonies. As Fanon states: “The settler is not simply the man that must be killed. Many members of the mass of colonialists reveal themselves to be much, much nearer to the national struggle than certain sons of the nation” (116). This truth becomes apparent through the process of revolutionary struggle that challenges the unequal distributions of human well-being, living standards, and space in settler colonial cities. In the process, race becomes something to be transcended not reified.

Stretching Marxist analysis to the colony is done by accounting for the mechanisms of colonial structure: through a class analysis conducted during a historical process of national revolution. Fanon dedicates the second chapter of *Wretched*, “Spontaneity: Its Strengths and Weakness”, to

identifying and weighting the different social forces involved. It is here that he finds most reason to distance himself from what a Marxist analysis of capitalism in a more economically advanced European metropolis entails. Like many socialist revolutionaries in the Third World, his challenge was to convey the distinct workings of capitalism in the colonies and to propose a historically specific strategy to transform it.

Fanon's theory of revolutionary process is based on some key historical facts. First, both the Communist parties in France and Algeria had rejected political independence for Algeria for the longest time, under different pretexts ranging from fighting traditionalism in Arab society to advocating gradualist political reforms in the colony. This tarred communism with political ambivalence at best or colonial contempt at worst. Second, the majority class in Algeria at the time (and in the Third World at large) was the peasantry. For a political movement built around proletarian revolution and the proletariat as leading "grave diggers" of capitalism (as Marx and Engels put it in the *Communist Manifesto*), this presented understandable challenges. As the Russian Revolution had shown earlier in the twentieth century, the question of devising socialist outcomes in economically underdeveloped societies, where the core agent of socialism is a minority class, is a real political challenge. This applied to the colonies. Who could carry colonial society beyond capitalism? This was, arguably, one of Marxism's core preoccupations in the twentieth century, especially since all successful socialist revolutions took place outside of advanced capitalist countries: in Russia not Germany and in Cuba not America. Fanon's "stretching" of Marxist analysis speaks to this conundrum.

Faced with colonial Algeria's social structure, Fanon advances the following conclusions. Since both the urban bourgeoisie and the working-class are integrated into colonialism, he surmises, the radical leadership of the revolution should look to the countryside for alternatives. There the peasantry constitutes a spontaneously anti-colonial mass adversely affected by colonial dispossession. Unable to surpass its elementary and diffuse forms of revolt, peasant resistance is in bad need of the discipline and national organization that only a radical leadership could bring. Through a process of mutual education between leaders and masses, the basis for a revolutionary war is laid. The role of the *lumpenproletariat* is ambiguous and contradictory but, nevertheless, significant for bringing the revolution back from the countryside to the city. As he charts the trajectory of revolutionary process, what Fanon emphasizes is how the revolution unifies villages, towns, and cities by forging national solidarity: "These politics are national, revolutionary and social and these new facts which the native will now come to know exist only in action" (117). He concludes his chapter on "Spontaneity" with this damning description of the bourgeois independence movement that revolutionary praxis has to overcome: "Without that struggle, without that knowledge of the practice of action, there's nothing but a fancy-dress parade and the blare of trumpets. There's nothing save a minimum of readaptation, a few reforms at the top, a flag waving: and down there at the

bottom an undivided mass, still living in the Middle Ages, endlessly marking time” (118).

While Fanon’s critique of bourgeois nationalism and his social emancipatory vision are exemplary, his trajectory of actual practice can be faulted for being dismissive of working-class agency. Indeed, *Wretched* develops a thesis about the colonial urban proletariat that mirrors Lenin’s aristocracy of labour thesis. If, for Lenin, imperial profits were used to divide the working class at home and create an *aristocracy of labour* stratum loyal to the ruling elite, colonialism for Fanon does something similar in relation to colonized labour. Fanon’s language even echoes Lenin’s analysis, without mentioning him by name. As when Fanon states: “The embryonic proletariat of the towns is in a comparatively privileged position In the colonial countries the working class has everything to lose; in reality it represents that fraction of the colonized nation which is necessary and irreplaceable if the colonial machine is to run smoothly: it includes tram conductors, taxi-drivers, miners, dockers, interpreters, nurses and so one” (86). Fanon dubs this urban proletariat “the ‘bourgeois’ fraction of the colonized people” (86).

Leaving aside whether Lenin’s thesis on metropolitan workers is correct or not, Fanon’s dismissal of the colonial working class is far more categorical. A whole urban proletariat is not only politically discounted but viewed as a pampered colonial product lacking political agency and purely motivated by narrow economic self-interest. Was this empirically correct? There are many examples that suggest otherwise.¹⁶

This was especially true for Algeria where the urban proletariat originated in mass impoverished landless rural labour and was a direct product of French colonial land expropriation and proletarianization. If its role during the decolonization struggle of the 1950s seemed small to Fanon, this is a reflection of French colonial repression in the cities as well as urban workers’ lack of real leverage in a French colonial society mainly reliant on its own settler labour. As the colonial economy severely restricted Algerian labour and its material well-being, Algerian workers left to mainland France in the hundreds of thousands. As Mahfoud Bennoune argues in his history of Algeria, labour migration to France resulted from economic exclusion: “The colonial economy was incapable of satisfying the basic needs of the Algerian population”. This migration had direct economic and political results that included political radicalisation in the metropolis where more political freedoms were possible. Ending colonialism and Algerian independence became key objectives of the “first Algerian working-class nationalist movement”, the North African Star (ENA) party which was founded in Paris in 1926 and then “transplanted” to Algeria. “The

¹⁶ For an easily accessible literary example, see Sembene Ousmane’s novel *God’s Bits of Wood* (1960). It is a superb dramatization of the famous 1947-8 anti-colonial workers strike on the Dakar-Niger railway that crippled French colonialism, and conveys the political agency and potential of the industrial proletariat. For an empirical examination of the validity of Fanon’s claim, see Richard Sandbrook, *Proletarians and African Capitalism: The Kenya Case, 1960–1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

experiences of these uprooted workers gave rise to the most radical national movement of colonial Algeria”.¹⁷ Contra Fanon, therefore, the urban working-class links with, and contributions to, national struggle were evident.

Fanon misses another crucial point about working-class agency. There is a direct link between a small and weak urban working-class and the problems of achieving socialism in decolonizing societies. Stretching Marxism cannot sidestep key political realities. If Fanon understands the problems of petty bourgeois nationalism well, he fails to see how the structural weakness of the proletariat impacts on democratising forces *in* decolonization, and how this increases the obstacles to socialism. Without workers’ democratic control and leverage over decolonizing leaderships, bureaucratic and petty bourgeois forms of rule get empowered. As Michael Löwy put it, petty bourgeois *substitution* and containment of revolutionary aspirations lead to bourgeois restoration: they are “a transitional stage towards neo-bourgeois stabilization and the renewal of dependence upon imperialism”.¹⁸

Marnia Lazreg advances this political eventuality in relation to Algeria. She argues that, both during and after the struggle for independence, the FLN petty bourgeois bureaucracy undermined alternative forms of popular power for workers and peasants. It also co-opted socialism and turned it into a state ideology of authoritarian rule – thus paving the way for the restoration of bourgeois power: “Hence the policy of encouraging and protecting Algerian private capital”.¹⁹ Left forces within the FLN and outside of it (like the labourist Party of the Socialist Revolution) did marshal a strong critique of the FLN’s compromised political and economic policies, and they did call for worker and peasant mobilizations in order to institutionalize Algerian socialism and roll back the power of bourgeois fractions. But they were suppressed and disorganized.²⁰ This, in turn, empowered counter-revolutionary forces even further – making the bourgeois restoration of capitalism in post-independence Algeria a near certainty. *Wretched* warns against this eventuality.

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¹⁷ Mahfoud Bennoune, *The Making of Contemporary Algeria, 1930-1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 76, pp. 78-82. The Algerian Popular Party and the Movement for the Democratic Liberties also contributed to the development of the national movement.

¹⁸ Michael Löwy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 207.

¹⁹ Marnia Lazreg, *The Emergence of Class in Algeria: A Study of Colonialism and Socio-political Change* (New York: Routledge, 2018; org. Westview Press, 1976), p. 136. See Chapter 5 for the Algerian state’s containment of post-independence workers’ self-managed enterprises, its weakening of organized producers and boosting of capitalism.

²⁰ For post-colonial class struggle, see Mahfoud Bennoune, *Merip Reports*, 48 (June 1976), 3-24, especially 6-11. See also Ian Clegg’s important study *Workers’ Self-Management in Algeria* (New York: Monthly review Press, 1971).

Sixty years after its publication, what is the value of *Wretched* today? *Wretched* in no bible and the Left is not a church steeped in dogma. The book's political significance, nonetheless, is unequivocal. *Wretched* has a particular value for radicals and socialists motivated to challenge racial oppression and social injustice today. This lies not only in its class analysis of decolonization and its socialist vision of emancipation. But also in the enduring connections it makes between popular sovereignty, anti-capitalism, and anti-imperialism. Reading *Wretched* today is recognising that socialism was a historically possible route out of colonial capitalism that was missed. That the way to tackle racism and global inequality is by digging deep into the material infrastructure that generates them. That structures of power are transformed by agents who have both the capacity and the interests to challenge them. And, finally, that the core activity of universalists is to identify what is common between separate identities rather than to inflate what is different. Here cross-national solidarities are crucial for undermining forms of rule based on elite nationalism and elite cooperation in global capitalism.

In addition, *Wretched* strikes the right balance between culture and politics. Rather than inflating the significance of cultural identities “around songs, poems or folklore”, Fanon insisted that political struggle is an essential substance of culture: “No one can truly wish for the spread of African culture if he does not give practical support to the creation of the conditions necessary to the existence of that culture; in other words, to the liberation of the whole continent” (189). Fanon's materialism shines through here as well: material conditions and social relations have primacy over the cultural practices of past generations. Culture requires freedom, and freedom requires politics. There is no way for culture to shortcut the political struggle for liberation. That explains Fanon's orientation towards establishing a new humanist society in the future. What counts is a radical politics of culture – not cultural politics.

Replicating Fanon in our own contemporary moment means devising a materialist analysis of the global south rooted in categories like class and capital, and being acutely aware of the challenges of radical political agency in the era of neoliberal capitalism. In a world of rising global inequality, ideologies of cultural difference are constantly utilized by the Right to justify competition and rivalry. In the name of global security and self-defence, universal rights and international norms of justice are gutted by powerful states. In such an unequal world, Fanon, no doubt, cuts an oppositional figure that inspires a new generation searching for socialist precursors and radical political models. Fanon's faith in reason, resistance, and revolutionary consciousness reverberates across the decades. Fanon's radical opposition to the existing political and social order of his own time is certainly worth studying and advancing today.