

The Psychiatrist and the Revolutionary: Frantz Fanon's Critique of Colonial Discourse

Kim Su Rasmussen
(Chonnam National University)
Eli Park Sorensen
(Seoul National University)

■ ABSTRACT ■

This article offers a reflection on Frantz Fanon's diagnosis and analysis of French colonialism in Algeria. We will attempt to demonstrate that there is a concrete and clear connection between Fanon as the psychiatrist diagnosing the devastating effects of the French colonial system, and his subsequent political involvement in the Algerian revolution. This is not to say that each part does not contain valuable insights in their own rights, but rather to stress that without being read together, as a whole, one would miss a significant element in the understanding of the importance Fanon's thought subsequently came to play in the emancipation struggles of the colonized worldwide. Furthermore, we argue that it is crucial to understand the intimate connection between Fanon's psychiatric work, his diagnosis of colonial mental disorders, as well as diagnosis of the colonial system as such, and then his political engagement, in order to understand the particular context in which he favourably discusses the use of violence in the name of fighting against the oppressive system of colonialism. Above all, we argue that Fanon's critique of colonialism continues to spark controversy because it still represents the most powerful and incisive analysis of, as well as answer to, the troubled relationship between the blessed and the wretched of the earth.

Key Words

Frantz Fanon, racism, psychiatry, colonialism, violence

Introduction

Homi Bhabha's essays on Frantz Fanon — “Foreword: Framing Fanon” and “Foreword: Remembering Fanon” — stand as iconic moments in recent debates on Fanon's thought, his importance, and his legacy; they marked, as Azzedine Haddour points out, “a revival in Fanon scholarship” — “upgrading” his thought to make it more viable within a contemporary theoretical landscape. “Arguably,” Haddour continues, “Bhabha has ‘re-invented’ Fanon for us” (51).¹ They also, as many critics have pointed out, constituted a conspicuous *misreading* of some of the central tenets in Fanon's theoretical framework. Although Bhabha's misreading is not the topic of this article, it is nonetheless appropriate to conjure

1) It should be mentioned that Haddour's article is generally very critical of Bhabha's reading of Fanon, being — in Haddour's view — “very selective to the point of misrepresenting Fanon” (57). For an overview of the critical Fanon reception, see Gordon 39-41.

up the problematic of this critical engagement with one of the Twentieth Century's most important thinkers — precisely because it calls upon a renewed reflection on the intricate, although also highly ambiguous, connection between predominantly psychoanalytic reflections early in Fanon's career (and in particular in the work *Black Skin, White Masks*, which Bhabha clearly prefers),²⁾ and the more directly politically engaged phase later in his life, especially in the work *The Wretched of the Earth*. In the following, we want to argue that there is a very strong connection between Fanon's psychiatric work, his diagnosis of colonial mental disorders, as well as diagnosis of the colonial system as such, and then his political engagement during which he favourably discusses the use of violence in the name of fighting against the oppressive system of colonialism.

Colonial War

As one of the most vicious and complex colonial wars during the Twentieth century, the event of the Algerian war — spanning from 1954 to the declaration of independence in 1962 — stands as one of the defining moments in post-war western history, not merely because it demanded so much sacrifice, evoked so fierce a hatred, but above all because it produced an ethical quandary from which our intellectual discourse has yet to fully recover. As in all colonial wars, the roots of the conflict go back a long time in history, namely to the French invasion of Algiers in 1830.³⁾ As part of its “civilizing mission,” France — headed by Marshall Thomas Robert Bugeaud and a brutally efficient army of well-trained soldiers — violently conquered and annexed Algeria. After the French constitution in 1848, Algeria officially became part of the French colonial empire. Although France had many colonies around the world, Algeria occupied a very unique role in the formation of the French colonial empire in that no other French colony experienced the same degree of white Europeans immigrating to, and taking up residence in, its provinces.⁴⁾ Algeria became an indispensable and fundamental, *physical* part of mainland France itself; the symbolic significance of Algeria constituted a vital part of what made France a genuine imperial power. This was also one of the main reasons why the trauma of the Algerian war was so immensely painful for the French people — why it threatened to undermine mainland France itself.⁵⁾ At the time political unrest in Algeria began to unfold, France was slowly recovering from the effects of the Second World War; indeed, it was precisely the end of the Second World War — a war during which many native Algerians fought side by side with French soldiers — which eventually spurred the revolutionary impulse in Algeria. The news of the German troops' surrender encouraged Algerian nationalists to seize the moment and demand independence. Emerging from the cities Sétif and Guelma, political unrest soon spread to adjacent areas where settlements of *pied-noirs* — the descendants of French colonizers — were violently attacked and killed. In the time following the event — in May 1945 — the French troops reacted swiftly and mercilessly. Police units and infantry troops — supported by the air force as well as navy artillery — initiated an intensive hunt for the

2) For a discussion of Fanon and psychoanalysis, see in particular Greedharry 15-43.

3) Cf. Horne.

4) As David Caute writes: “Quite apart from France's extensive economic stake in the country, including the oil of the Sahara, over one million ‘colons’, or ‘pied-noirs’, of European descent lived, worked, and farmed the soil in Algeria. Algeria was regarded as indissolubly ‘part of France’”(41).

5) Cf. Caute 42.

insurgents, eventually resulting in a bloody massacre. The French government officially reckons the number of dead to be in the region of 1,500; the Algerian nationalists operate with a figure around 50,000; subsequent investigations estimate around 6,000 to 18,000.⁶⁾

That the French and Algerian accounts of what happened in Sétif — especially the contentious issue of the number of casualties and losses — differed radically, emphasize the enormous distrust on both sides; a distrust which eventually curbed more peaceful initiatives. The rebellion — as well as the ensuing response by the French colonial authorities — became a recurrent point of reference for all parties in the years to follow; as an example of that which had to be avoided, but also as an example of that which was to follow. The atmosphere of inevitability, the sense of an all-or-nothing conflict, smouldered everywhere in the coming years; from every corner of society rumours emerged of revolutionary conspiracy plans. Among the colonizers, there was a particular strong fear of communist infiltration which — in the light of the Cold War and especially the events unfolding on the Korean peninsula — constituted a real threat. Political candidates associated with the Vichy regime — which had collaborated, and to a certain extent sympathized, with the Nazi regime during the Second World War — still enjoyed huge popularity among the French colonizers as late as the 1947 election, above all because they represented a tough, uncompromising attitude towards ideas of Algerian independence.⁷⁾ Within the Algerian population, few were satisfied with status quo after Sétif, but people were divided into a countless number of contending and warring parties. Moderate voices, including the Algerian communist party, sought a political solution within the existing colonial system, while many radical nationalists went underground to prepare for an armed confrontation.

At a secret meeting in Switzerland — probably at some point late in 1953 — a group by the name *Comité révolutionnaire d'unité et d'action* (The Revolutionary Committee for Unity and Action) was established. The group consisted of a small handful of leaders from various radical factions, including Ahmed Ben Bella — a war hero who had been awarded the Croix de guerre, and the Médaille militaire for his brave efforts during the Second World War, and subsequently was to become the first President of an independent Algeria. Ben Bella was at the time of the meeting leader of an underground organization called *Organisation Spéciale* whose main purpose was to fight against the French colonial occupation of Algeria. During the summer of 1954, another meeting took place — spurred by the event of the humiliating French defeat at Diên Biên Phu in Vietnam — during which the group changed its name to *Front de Libération Nationale* (The National Liberation Front) or simply *FLN*, and decided to officially launch the Algerian revolution on the 1st of November 1954.

But in spite of intensive preparations and planning, the group's first two revolutionary actions carried little success. Two of the primary aims were to gain access to weapons from various military depots, and to agitate for a general, nation-wide uprising among the Moslem-Arab population. In both cases, the efforts of *FLN* were largely unsuccessful. One thing they did manage, however, was to provoke a fierce French counter-reaction; the French colonial army initiated a ruthless and efficient pursuit of suspects and insurgents. And it was this brutal response which eventually led to an unintended consequence, namely the emergence of a general sympathy with the radicals among the common native Algerian population which, until then, had been largely in favour of a peaceful solution. While a significant number of *FLN*'s leaders were either arrested or killed during the first year of the conflict, the revolutionary group gradually gained popularity among the Moslem-Arab population because of the French forces'

6) Cf. Talbott 22.

7) Cf. Ferro, "En Algérie," 506.

brutal punishment and “revenge” methods. The French army, as a rebel leader at one time observed, was the *FLN*'s best recruitment agency.⁸⁾

Fanon the Psychiatrist

In 1951, Frantz Fanon qualified as a psychiatrist in Lyon, and two years later he started to work in Algeria, where he became the *chef de service* at the psychiatric department of the Blida-Joinville hospital. After witnessing a series of atrocities carried out by the French authorities, and, crucially, treating subjects deeply traumatized by the colonial violence, Fanon quickly became involved in the conflict, siding with the insurgents; he resigned from his position at Blida-Joinville in 1956. Subsequently, Fanon wrote for and later became the editor of *El Moudjahid* — the central revolutionary bulletin of *FLN* — and he increasingly appeared as the representative, spokesperson as well as key theorist of the militant Algerian revolutionary movement during the war. In 1960, he was given the post as the provisional Algerian government's ambassador in Ghana; the year after — shortly before Algeria's independence, he died from leukaemia at a hospital in Washington, D.C.

In his 1956 letter of resignation, sent to the Resident Minister in Algeria, René Lacoste, Fanon outlined what he considered to be a fundamental paradox in colonial discourse; the social structures in Algeria were explicitly in conflict with his intentions and aims as a psychiatrist. The French “pacification” techniques involved torture sessions, deportations, and killer raids — even in mainland France where Algerian students as well as sympathizers with the Algerian independence cause were rounded up and brutally interrogated.⁹⁾ While around two million Arabs had been forcefully uprooted and many killed — as David Cauter points out — “not a single Frenchman had been convicted before a French court for the murder of an Algerian” (44). Fanon the psychiatrist dealt with the direct effects of this hideous situation, as evidenced in his case stories,¹⁰⁾ in which he describes the mental disorders of both colonizers as well as the colonized. The mental disorders, he went on to conclude, were not to be seen as individual issues, but rather as effects of an overall, pathological social system. The ethical standard Fanon had learned while training to become a doctor in France — the cardinal belief in the universal good of practicing medicine and therapeutic treatment, regardless of politics, race, culture, and religion — was in a very fundamental way at odds with the reality he experienced as a doctor in Algeria.¹¹⁾ In his letter of resignation, Fanon observes; “If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment, I owe it to myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization” (52).¹²⁾ Here one notices how the emphasis has changed from that of the psychiatrist to that of the revolutionary; from the psychiatrist's stern and objective focus on the conflict between individual and its surroundings — to the revolutionary theorist's diagnosis of an entire social and political system.

One of the most significant reasons why Fanon felt compelled to participate in the militant Algerian nationalist movement was the French authorities' introduction of sinister counter-measures to quell the Algerian revolutionary impulses in the first years of the conflict. During the summer of 1955, the

8) Cf. Horne 110.

9) Cf. House on this issue.

10) See Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.

11) Cf. Cauter 45.

12) Fanon's letter of resignation is included in *Toward the African Revolution*.

French authorities initiated the principle of “collective responsibility” — by which entire villages could be made responsible for subversive actions and events that occurred in the vicinity. For example, if a telegraph pole was sabotaged in a village, the inhabitants were held accountable for this act — which often meant random interrogation, torture, and execution. If a French colonial soldier was killed, the citizens of an entire village might be evacuated after which it would be bombed to ruins. The *ratissages* — killerraid — were regularly employed upon native populations suspected of having connections to, or perhaps even hiding, rebels. Faced with these fascist methods, the *FLN* responded in no less a brutal manner by launching the principle of “collective retribution” whereby all Europeans — military service people as well as civilians — became targets of Algerian bullets.¹³⁾

The *FLN*'s principle of collective retribution was first manifested in August 1955, when two of *FLN*'s most experienced guerrilla commanders led an attack to conquer the city of Philippeville. The French colonial army had, however, secretly obtained details of *FLN*'s plan and were thus prepared when the fellagha attacked. The ensuing event was a chaotic mass of bloodshed during which hundreds of civilians were killed indiscriminately — elderly people, women, and babies. Furthermore, prominent leaders of the moderate Algerian nationalists

— the *MNA*, or the *Messalistes* — were killed on direct orders from the leadership of the *FLN*. The French colonial army responded with a fierce counter-attack during which people who were under suspicion of collaborating with the rebels were — not arrested — but simply shot; if suspects escaped into a crowd of civilians, French soldiers would fire indiscriminately into the group.¹⁴⁾ For many people — Algerians as well as Europeans — the massacre in Philippeville seemed like a repetition of what had happened in Sétif, only worse. In the aftermath, the French colonial army began to arm the *pied-noirs* and to establish a series of local militias.¹⁵⁾

Fanon did not mention these events in his letter of resignation to the Resident Minister, René Lacoste, but elsewhere, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, he observed; “In all armed struggles, there exists what we might call the point of no return . . . This point was reached in Algeria in 1955 with the 12,000 victims of Philippeville, and in 1956 with Lacoste’s instituting of urban and rural militias” (70). After Philippeville, a position beyond the divided factions of the French colonists on one side and the radical Algerian nationalists on the other side — and thus the possibility of a peaceful solution to the conflict — had become virtually impossible. In France, a peaceful, harmonious solution had become unthinkable above all because of the unbending pressure from the *pied-noirs* as well as French nationalists — and in Algeria, voices arguing for co-existence were silenced through the extensive and thorough terror against, and liquidation of, moderate critics. The acute situation meant that Fanon was forced to choose side.

After 1956, Frantz Fanon’s theoretical endeavours are largely divided into two areas, two different directions. On the one hand, his theoretical perspective consists of an attempt to *diagnose* the colonial system — its functions, its modalities, its ways of camouflaging and legitimizing itself. On the other hand, Fanon’s perspective involves a very specific and conscious attempt to elaborate strategies of resistance, ways of dismantling and dissolving the colonial discourse. What is so fascinating in Fanon’s thought is precisely the intimate connection between these two areas — a connection which, in one sense, is a logical and necessary one, but also, in another sense, a historically conditioned relation.

Today it is easy to overlook the fact that Frantz Fanon was above all a *psychiatrist* and that his

13) Cf. Horne.

14) Cf. Horne 121.

15) Cf. Macey 268.

diagnosis — as well as political thought — to a large extent was inspired and informed by his medical work in the colony. In other words, what in essence lay behind Fanon's resignation from his position — as well as his decision to become member of the *FLN* — was above all that he gradually came to see his *profession*, psychiatry, as inevitably intertwined with French colonial discourse. As Françoise Vergès observes;

European-trained psychiatrists, up to Fanon's time, were agents of French colonization. The discourse of colonial psychiatry, which chose to ignore the historical condition of its formation, posited a fundamental difference between the psyches of Europeans and non-Europeans. (86)

Fanon came to resent this way of defining the work and practice of psychiatry in Algeria, and it was in the process of developing a way out of the institutional dilemma — to cure patients suffering from mental problems caused by an oppressive social structure with an institutionalized racist psychiatric approach — that he began “decolonizing psychiatry,” to use Vergès' phrase.¹⁶⁾ The native subject, Fanon discovered, was *alienated*, and this alienation was the direct product of a pathological colonial discourse. As Fanon wrote in his letter of resignation, “Madness is one of the means man has of losing his freedom. And I can say, on the basis of what I have been able to observe from this point of vantage, that the degree of alienation of the inhabitants of this country appears to me frightening” (53).

Fanon argued that the colonial system segregated the population into different areas. More specifically, Fanon suggested, the colonial system established a basic hierarchy among colonizers and colonized. The effects of this hierarchy were expressed in various ways, some more explicit and intense than others — such as the widely different *legal status* assigned to people inhabiting the Algerian colony. This issue had its roots in 1848 when the French Deputies in Algeria introduced a framework differentiating Algerian inhabitants' legal status; “for Frenchmen the French law, for foreigners the international law, for natives the military law.”¹⁷⁾ Observing — as well as experiencing the consequences of — this structure of gross discrimination, Fanon pointed out that European colonizers were generally elevated above the law — none were punished or imprisoned for their crimes — whereas the colonized were constantly exposed to interrogation, humiliation, and torture, even if he or she was merely *suspected* of having broken the legal framework.¹⁸⁾ The misery of this blatantly abusive and extremely biased legal framework was further underscored by the fact that it was almost impossible to change; the 1947 election led to a situation which gave the *pied-noirs* (around one million) and the natives (around eight million) an equal amount of seats in the Algerian parliament. And since juridical proposals according to the legal framework required at least two-third of the parliament's votes to pass, the colonizers could easily hinder any political attempt to change status quo.¹⁹⁾

In Fanon's bleak diagnosis, the juridical, political, and economic inequalities are merely the most obvious and explicit manifestations of the effects of the entire colonial system. A different — and much more diffuse and blurred — aspect is the *cultural* discourse of colonialism. The French colonial strategy of the *mission civilisatrice* was in reality a comprehensive and many-faceted process of transformation and appropriation. To use Victor Hugo's phrase, the French colonial endeavour in Algeria

16) On this issue, see also Jock McCulloch and Richard Keller.

17) Cf. Ferro, “La conquête de l'Algérie,” 497.

18) Cf. Wretched 72-3.

19) Cf. Ferro, “En Algérie,” 508.

sought “to civilize the people, to colonize the earth.”²⁰⁾ When Fanon refers to the colonial system’s civilizing project, one should distinguish between two adjacent but nonetheless separate meanings; on the one hand, the civilizing project was an attempt to legitimize the colonial system *from the perspective of colonial power*. On the other hand, the civilizing project involved ways of forcing and subjugating the colonized subjects to *accept* or even *take over* the colonizer’s perspective — for example the colonizer’s perception of the colonized as uncivilized, backwards, and inferior. As Michael Azar writes: “The dividing line between ‘the master’ and ‘the slave’ is the very basis for the French colonial empire, the founding principle for the designation of France as the embodiment par excellence of the universal subject endowed with a mission to globalize itself” (24). The most notable aspect of Fanon’s thought lies precisely here: that is, his analysis of the colonial system’s concrete psychological and existential efforts to “civilize” the natives by way of *making them desire* colonial discourse. It is in this sense, Fanon argues, that French colonial discourse creates a human being with “black skin, white mask” — which of course is also the title of Fanon’s early work; a human being permanently and systematically alienated to its own being.

The French colonial empire’s civilizing project on one level involved plundering and undermining the colonized subject’s culture, while on the other hand replacing the latter with the colonial power’s culture and value system. This radical transformation occurred through a myriad of institutionalized mechanisms such as imposing French as the official language, as well as the introduction of the French educational system in the Algerian colony.²¹⁾ Underlying this project one finds a psychological ethos of white European superiority, and, by extension, the idea that non-Europeans were fundamentally unable to take care of their own development, their own well-being — and hence unable to rule their own country, and ultimately their own bodies.

No wonder that the colonized were unable to recognize themselves through the colonial power’s cultural representations. In Fanon’s perspective, this experience of not being able to recognize oneself is analyzed within a psychological and existential discourse where the starting point is not merely French culture’s representations of the colonized, but perhaps above all colonized subjects’ internalization of colonial discursive images and representations. One of the most obvious consequences, as Fanon observes, is that the colonized eventually begins to consider him or herself as *other*; and it is precisely this experience of oneself-as-other — that is to say, the experience of seeing oneself only through the colonizer’s gaze — which Fanon diagnoses as a form of “cultural alienation.”²²⁾

In referring to colonialism’s civilizing project, Fanon does not mean the French empire’s more or less successful attempt in legitimizing the colonial *system*; rather, he is referring to the different ways of implementing and carrying out specific processes of internalization *among* the colonized populations — the processes’ different strategies, their different institutional frameworks, as well as their concrete psychological and existential effects. This process of internalization — a form of absorption as well as acceptance of something *as one’s own* — produces a schism, a kind of psychological and cultural split; or what one may call a form of schizophrenia, in a non-clinical sense — that is, the experience of “black skin, white mask.” All this is according to Fanon involved in the “civilizing project”; it essentially means that the colonized subject is forced to internalize and accept a broad spectrum of socio-cultural codes and norms which ultimately devalue or negate selfhood — at least insofar as he or she is black, coloured, non-white. In other words, the radical negation of the black body — and

20) Quoted in Ferro, “La conquête de l’Algérie,” 491.

21) Cf. *Le Sœur* 55-86.

22) Cf. *Wretched* 166-99.

correspondingly positivization of the white body — constitutes what one might call internalized xenophobia. As Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Mask*:

We understand now why the black man cannot take pleasure in his insularity. For him there is only one way out, and it leads into the white world. Whence his constant preoccupation with attracting the attention of the white man, his concern with being powerful like the white man . . . it is from within that the negro will seek admittance to the white sanctuary . . . He requires a white approval. (51)

The person caught up in the phantasmagorical structure of “black skin, white mask” is denied the possibility of a positive self-worth, in part because everything beyond colonialism’s cultural horizon has been devalued or negated, and in part because colonialism’s negative or paternalistic representations of “the other” undermines any normal self-perception. By internalizing the colonial power’s gaze — by which the colonized see and experience themselves as other — the alienated subject is barred from developing a more positive notion of his or her own body. The symptom of internalized xenophobia is thus commonly a latent but nonetheless pervasive, ever-present self-hatred, and which in turn produces self-erasure, self-obliteration, repression, colour-blindness, as well as gestures of mimicking white discourse. As Fanon writes:

In the man of color there is a constant effort to run away from his own individuality, to annihilate his own presence. Whenever a man of color protests, there is alienation. Whenever a man of color rebukes, there is alienation . . . The attitude of the black man toward the white, or toward his own race, often duplicates almost completely a constellation of delirium, frequently bordering on the region of the pathological. (60)

The colonized, Fanon bleakly observes, is confronted with the dire choice between on the one hand absolute identification with colonial power, which effectively means self-obliteration and alienation; or, on the other hand, a complete rejection of colonial discourse, a long and hard process of *going native*, a process of cleansing oneself of the colonial “poison” that keeps the colonized subject’s mind enslaved.²³⁾

While one of course finds xenophobic aspects in other cultural contexts, it is at the same time important to stress the specific historical significance of Fanon’s colonial discourse; that is to say, few other cultural contexts have to the same extent involved a process of internalized xenophobia — in the name of a civilizing mission — which is so all-embracing and systematic than that of European colonialism, and perhaps in particular the Algerian case, which, if anything, stands as both the epitome as well as one of the most spectacular failures of the colonial enterprise in Africa.

According to Fanon, the colonial system as a whole consists of two main parts; a political form of colonial practice which includes juridical, parliamentary, and economic components — and a cultural form of colonial practice whose main ideological structure involves a *mission civilisatrice*, a civilizing mission. These two main parts mutually support and supplement one another which also mean that the dismantling of the colonial system necessarily involves dismantling both the political as well as cultural practices of colonialism.

Both cultural as well as political practices of colonialism are inevitably connected to various forms

23) Cf. Wretched 166-99.

of racism, as Fanon argues in *Toward the African Revolution*: “In reality, a colonial country is a racist country . . . It is not possible to enslave men without logically making them inferior through and through. And racism is only the emotional, affective, sometimes intellectual explanation of this inferiorization” (39-40). According to the definition Fanon outlines, racism carries out a very specific function within the colonial system; it attempts to mediate between certain “universal” ideas — e.g. the idea of France’s civilizing mission — and concrete facts of the colonial reality, such as inequality, discrimination, injustice, assaults and so forth. In other words, colonial racism is the mediator between “universal” ideas of human beings, and the actual inequality between humans — and it is this mediating role which constitutes an *immanent structure* within the colonial system.

Colonial racism is a *structure* in the sense that it designates a set of subject positions and different functions which together produce a situation in which the “racist subject” is not an exception but instead becomes the norm. It moreover means that colonial racism cannot merely be reduced to a set of aberrant individual dispositions, a set of individualized forms of prejudices; nor can it be reduced to a particular structure of authoritative personality, a widespread non-egalitarian family structure, a definition of the national people in ethnic-biological terms. Rather, colonial racism penetrates the system — from one end to the other — so as to leave no “outside” position in the colonial universe. Colonial racist practices include infantilization — treating the natives as children; it includes denigration — the assumption that natives are somehow “defective”; distrust — natives as fundamentally untrustworthy; ridicule — natives are incompetent, and hence ridiculous; exclusion — racism excludes, typically for incomprehensible reasons; rendering invisible — the native is non-existent except within the interest sphere of white settlers; scapegoating — the natives are to blame for the country’s misery; violence — the natives are per se inferior, and should therefore be treated according to a different moral standard.²⁴⁾

The colonial system’s basic goal is according to Fanon to convince the native population that their culture is backwards, that they themselves are inferior, and that they need colonialism to educate and enlighten them. On the surface, the colonial system presents itself as the benevolent mother figure, helping and supporting her native children in their struggle against harsh surroundings. In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon ties this image to what he calls the European spirit; “The West saw itself as a spiritual adventure. It is in the name of the spirit, in the name of the spirit of Europe, that Europe has made her encroachments, that she has justified her crimes and legitimized the slavery in which she holds four-fifths of humanity” — adding, as if in after-thought, “Yes, the European spirit has strange roots” (252). To Fanon, the French colonial empire’s idealized self-perception is, in essence, based on a distinction between superiority and inferiority, or, the master-slave dialectic; a dialectic which on the one hand establishes a glorifying self-perception which on the other hand is upheld only by more brutal forms of colonial exploitation.²⁵⁾ The colonial system — embodying a disciplinary parental figure that protects its native children from themselves, from their own self-destructive instincts and perverse bodies — thus legitimizes its oppressive methods as means to fulfilling its “civilizing” mission.

When Fanon changes his focus from the psychic suffering, as a conflict between the individual and

24) We follow here Richard Schmitt’s critical description 36-8. Schmitt argues that each of these racist practices should be seen as “a means to the end of objectification” (38), which more specifically means “pretending that [people] are things, and, more importantly, forcing them to accept that pretense, at least in relation to the oppressor” (39).

25) For Fanon’s Hegelian inspiration, see in particular Azar, Gibson, and Turner.

his or her surroundings, to a political diagnosis of the entire political system — it is not so much because he *forgets* or *ignores* the former; rather, he comes to see the psychic suffering as a concrete effect of an immanent structure within the social system. In other words, what Fanon argues is that colonial racism is a traumatizing social structure.

Fanon the Revolutionary

It is against the background of his diagnosis of the disastrous effects of the colonial system that one must understand Fanon's formulation of a strategy — a militant, nationalist, and revolutionary activism — to resist and fight against the French colonizers; and ultimately gain independence, freedom. As has often been commented on — especially with reference to his notorious chapter “Concerning Violence” in *The Wretched of the Earth* — Fanon endorses, perhaps even celebrates violence as a legitimate means in the fight against the colonial system. Fanon writes:

Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a programme of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say that it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content. Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their nature ... Their first encounter was marked by violence and their existence together — that is to say the exploitation of the native by the settler — was carried on by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannon. (28)

Two things stand out from this quote; the first one is the claim that changing status quo requires something other than “friendly understanding” — change, radical change, means bloodshed, sacrifice, brute force. The other thing is the claim that in order to properly understand the first claim, one must contextualize the present. “Decolonization is a historical process”; it means, among other things, a historical process initiated by, and continued with, violent methods. This violence is above all manifested in what we earlier called the immanent structure of racism within the colonial system. In the work *L'An V de la révolution algérienne*, Fanon is eager to stress that colonial violence in a very concrete way is related to the experience of racism:

But the violence which is in question here is not an abstract violence, it is not only a violence divined by the spirit, it is also a violence of the everyday behaviour of the coloniser towards the colonised: apartheid in South Africa, forced labour in Angola, racism in Algeria. Contempt, a politics of hate, these are the manifestations of a very concrete and painful violence. (176)²⁶⁾

The French occupation of Algeria, from the beginning to the present, is founded upon a violent discourse, and it is this discourse that Fanon wants to emphasize and highlight in his attempt to legitimize the *FLN's* use of violent methods. In other words, Fanon — as Samira Kawash has pointed out — argues that “the task of the critic is not to condemn terrorism, but rather to call all violence by its proper name and to place the terrorism of the colonized in relation to the unnamed terrorism of the colonizer”

26) We quote here from Robert Young 39. Young's translation.

(236).

In the concluding section of *Wretched of the Earth* — “Colonial War and Mental Disorders” — Fanon focuses more specifically on the psychological effects arising from the national liberation; “Perhaps these notes on psychiatry will be found ill-timed and singularly out of place in such a book; but we can do nothing about that” (200), he writes dismissively. The national liberation struggle — of which violence plays a crucial part — is in Fanon’s eyes not merely a question of political independence, a clear and well-defined goal. It is simultaneously designated as a starting point for a new definition of Algerian selfhood, whatever that in the end means. The national pride and identity, Fanon argues, receive a vital injection with anti-colonial violence; “The colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence” (68). In the colonial regime, the native subject loses his or her sense of subjectivity. Fanon writes:

Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: “In reality, who am I?” ... a colonized people is not simply a dominated people. Under the German occupation the French remained men; under the French occupation, the Germans remained men. In Algeria there is not simply the domination but the decision to the letter not to occupy anything more than the sum total of the land. The Algerians, the veiled women, the palm-trees and the camels make up the landscape, the *natural* background to the human presence of the French. (200-1)

Fanon’s psychiatric background enables him to understand the specificities of the Algerian situation — that is, how the effects of Algerian colonialism involve a radical undermining of human subjectivity. Fanon’s anti-colonial violence is thus at one and the same time directed towards the colonizers as well as the colonized themselves. The latter kind of violence relates to two dimensions; on the one hand, it is a legitimization of violence carried out against traitors, as well as moderate forces among the Algerians. On the other hand, it involves a metaphysical violence that seeks to overcome the socio-cultural alienation — the attempt to cleanse oneself and throw off the “white mask.” Fanon’s violence is not a goalless, destructive violence — violence for the sake of violence — on the contrary, he is arguing specifically in favour of non-violent, rational strategies; only in certain historically specific circumstances — like that of Algeria, or South Africa — may violence become a necessary means towards emancipation.²⁷⁾ As Robert Young points out — the French use of torture was widespread in Algeria as well as mainland France, where methods for example included “standard electrodes attached to the nipples and genitals which were then plugged straight into the wall, the rape of women with bottles which were then broken inside them, the execution of young children in front of their parents.” This, Young observes, should make us hesitate before moralizing against Fanon advocating the use of violence; “Let no one criticize Fanon for speaking of it then ... without acknowledging that Fanon was confronting the problem of the colonial state violence that Algerians faced in their everyday lives” (38).²⁸⁾

After the massacre in Philippeville, August 1955, the Algerian war went into a phase gradually spiralling out of hand; both parts — the French colonial army and the Algerian nationalists — engaged in a series of reactions and counter-reactions which escalated the conflict, while moderate forces were eventually marginalized or eliminated. On becoming full member of the *FLN* in 1956, Fanon not only accepted the principle of violence as a necessary condition in the Algerian revolution; he provided a theoretical

27) Cf. Young 39.

28) On this issue, see also Roberts.

reflection – in his works – which set out to explain and justify it. Among the contemporary French left-intellectuals, there was a general acceptance of the Algerian revolutionary violence — Sartre’s preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* perhaps being the most prominent endorsement. Subsequently, Pierre Bourdieu as well as others have directed a harsh critique towards both Fanon as well as Sartre, accusing them of having misunderstood the conflict’s basic structure, and of having ignored the internal Algerian conflict between Arabs and Kabylis whose historical roots stretch back to the Arab conquest of Algeria.²⁹⁾

Conclusion

More recently, in particular through the postcolonial perspective of Homi Bhabha, as we mentioned in the introduction, Fanon’s later political reflections have not only become an issue of contention, but quite simply rewritten along lines to which we have objected in this article. When Fanon suggests an intimate connection between colonialism and racism, we have argued, he is attempting to diagnose the driving force of the colonial system — whereas when Fanon is discussing violence as a legitimate weapon in the struggle against colonialism, he offers a solution to the problem. For Homi Bhabha, and the many postcolonial readers inspired by his interpretation of Fanon, this schematic is clearly too Manichaeic. In Bhabha’s view, Fanon’s work — and especially *Black Skin, White Masks* — implies a Lacanian-deconstructive gesture, whereas “those aspects of Fanon’s work which do not support his argument” (57-8) are simply ignored, as Azzedine Haddour points out. It is as if Bhabha, as Neil Lazarus observes, reads Fanon “‘back to front’, as it were — that is, from *The Wretched of the Earth* . . . to *Black Skin, White Masks* . . . thereby distorting the testimony of Fanon’s own evolution as a theorist” (163). Or, to put it in a different way, Bhabha’s reading of Fanon is first of all an appropriation of the latter’s thought with the specific purpose of accommodating its uneasy parts, and thus make it appropriate for Bhabha’s own theoretical framework — which emphasizes above all ambiguity, in-betweenness and hybridity; that is to say, concepts which only fit poorly with Fanon’s political vision. One example will suffice: when Bhabha in the essay “Foreword: Remembering Fanon” reads Fanon’s metaphor “Black Skin, White Masks” as an uncertain “doubling,” a “deep psychic uncertainty of the colonial relation itself” (xv), he is decoupling (or deconstructing) a notion which to Fanon precisely encapsulates an experiential structure that is more antagonistic, and, as such, un-resolvable, than ambiguous or uncertain. Bhabha is able to read Fanon in a Lacanian-deconstructive perspective because he separates the early and the late Fanon — because he *refuses* to accept the uneasy (at least in terms of the Lacanian-deconstructive postcolonial perspective Bhabha adheres to) wholeness or connectedness, albeit not homogeneity, of Fanon’s thought. When this connectedness emerges in Fanon’s writings, Bhabha simply dismisses it; “At times . . . [Fanon] turns too hastily from the ambivalences of identification to the antagonistic identities of political alienation and cultural discrimination; he is too quick to name the Other, to personalize its presence in the language of colonial racism” (xix). Bhabha’s tendentiousness in reading Fanon, Lazarus argues, has the specific purpose of portraying him as a “poststructuralist *avant la lettre*” (164) — while debunking, ignoring or rewriting Fanon’s explicit political engagement; his nationalism, militarism, existentialism, dialectic thought, humanism and so forth. Bhabha’s reading has been widely influential in postcolonial studies, and, as such, may be seen as representative of a particular version of the Fanonian thought to which we have attempted to construct a critical response

29) Cf. Le Sueur 244.

in this article.³⁰ As we have strived to demonstrate, there is a concrete and clear connection between Fanon as the psychiatrist diagnosing the devastating effects of the French colonial system, and his subsequent political involvement in the Algerian revolution. This is not to say that each part does not contain valuable insights in their own rights, but rather to stress that without being read together, as a whole, one would miss a significant element in the understanding of the importance Fanon's thought subsequently came to play in the emancipation struggles of the colonized worldwide. Today, Fanon's critique of colonialism continues to spark controversy, above all because — around fifty years since his death — it still represents perhaps the most powerful and incisive analysis of, as well as answer to, the troubled relationship between the blessed and the wretched of the earth.

❖ References

- Azar, Michael. "In the Name of Algeria: Frantz Fanon and the Algerian Revolution." *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Anthony C. Alessandrini. London: Routledge, 1999. 21-33.
- Bhabha, Homi. "Foreword: Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition." *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. London: Routledge, 1986. vii-xxvi.
- _____. "Foreword: Framing Fanon." *The Wretched of the Earth*. Frantz Fanon. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2004. vii-xli.
- Caute, David. *Frantz Fanon*. New York: The Viking Press, 1970.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.
- _____. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press, 1967.
- _____. *L'An V de la revolution algérienne*. Paris: Francois Maspero, 1959.
- _____. *Toward the African Revolution*. Trans. H. Chevalier. New York: Grove Press, 1988.
- Ferro, Marc. "En Algérie: du colonialisme à la veille de l'insurrection." *Le livre noir du colonialisme*. Ed. Marc Ferro. Paris: Laffont, 2003.
- _____. "La conquête de l'Algérie." *Le livre noir du colonialisme*. Ed. Marc Ferro. Paris: Laffont, 2003.
- Gibson, Nigel. *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination*. Cambridge: Polity, 2003.
- Gordon, Lewis. "Fanon, Philosophy, and Racism." *Racism and Philosophy*. Eds. Susan E. Babbitt and Sue Campbell. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999. 32-49.
- Greedharry, Mrinalini. *Postcolonial Theory and Psychoanalysis: From Uneasy Engagements to Effective Critique*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Haddour, Azzedine. "Fanon Through the Poststructuralist Speculum." *Wasafiri* 44. 2005. 51-58.
- Horne, Alistair. *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962*. London: Macmillan, 2002.
- House, Jim. "Colonial Racisms in the 'Métropole': Reading Peau noire, masques blancs in Context." *Frantz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks: New Interdisciplinary Essays*. Ed. Max Silverman. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005. 46-73.
- Kawash, Samira. "Terrorists and Vampires: Fanon's Spectral Violence of Decolonization." *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Anthony C. Alessandrini. London: Routledge, 1999. 235-257.
- Keller, Richard. "Madness and Colonization: Psychiatry in the British and French Empires, 1800-1962." *Journal of Social History* 35:2. 2001. 295-326.
- Lazarus, Neil. "Disavowing Decolonization: Fanon, Nationalism, and the Question of Representation in Postcolonial Theory." *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Anthony C. Alessandrini. London: Routledge, 1999. 161-194.

30) For a critique of Bhabha (and Bhabha-inspired critics), see Greedharry, Lazarus, Parry, and Haddour.

- Le Sueur, James D. *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics During the Decolonization of Algeria*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2001.
- Macey, David. *Frantz Fanon*. New York: Picador, 2000.
- McCulloch, Jock. *Colonial Psychiatry and the 'African Mind'*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Parry, Benita. "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse." *Oxford Literary Review* 9:1. 1987. 27-58.
- Roberts, Neil. "Fanon, Sartre, Violence, and Freedom." *Sartre Studies International* 10:2. 2004. 139-160.
- Schmitt, Richard. "Racism and Objectification: Reflections on Themes from Fanon." *Fanon: A Critical Reader*. Eds. Lewis R. Gordon et. al. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1996. 35-50.
- Talbott, John. *The War Without a Name: France in Algeria 1954-1962*. New York: Knopf, 1980.
- Turner, Lou. "On the Difference Between the Hegelian and Fanonian Dialectic of Lordship and Bondage." *Fanon: A Critical Reader*. Eds. Lewis R. Gordon et. al. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1996. 134-151.
- Vergés, Françoise. "To Cure and to Free: The Fanonian Project of 'Decolonized Psychiatry'." *Fanon: A Critical Reader*. Eds. Lewis R. Gordon et. al. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1996. 85-99.
- Young, Robert J.C. "Fanon and the Turn to Armed Struggle in Africa." *Wasafiri* 44 (2005): 33-41.