



The Interplay of Language, Violence, Revolution and Liberation in Frantz Fanon's African Political Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Frantz Fanon was born in Fort-de-France on the Island of Martinique. He was a son of a descendant of African slaves; his mother was said to be an illegitimate child of African, Indian and European descent, whose white ancestors came from Strasbourg in Alsace. This piece focuses on the concern of Fanon, basically to resolve the problems of Black-White relationship, which was fostered by colonialism and colonial rule. He proposes violence as a potent instrument for resolving this relationship. In relation to colonization, he argues that speaking the language of the colonizer instead of one's own language is ipso facto to assume the colonizers culture and to reject one's own culture. This promotes cultural and political domination. How then can a person gain freedom? He argues that one's freedom is a function of one's determination to act in other to remove obstacles that stay in one's way. Fanon believed that violent revolution is the only means of ending colonial repression and cultural trauma in the third world. Violence he believes is a cleansing force. It frees the 'native' from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect. While understanding the cultural circumstances surrounding the birth of Fanon's philosophy, this piece asserts that his position, which is based on violence, cannot give an enduring peace, for violence cannot give what it does not have.

KEYWORDS

Interplay, Language, Violence, Revolution, Liberation, Frantz Fanon, African, Political, Philosophy

Introduction

Jinadu (1980) had argued that in some way or the other that political thinkers are the product of their social milieu. He wrote, "There is necessarily a sense in which political thinkers are products of their social milieu. Their thoughts and writings are profoundly affected by the complex nature of the various social influences and forces to which they are exposed and subjected" (p. 20). While Freud placed great emphasis on ontogenetic, Fanon (1967) emphasized the influence of the environment. He wrote, "...every neurosis, abnormal manifestation, every effective erethism in an Antillian (his home town) is the product of his cultural situation" (p. 152). He thus emphasized the relationship between social structure and the individual.

This perspective explains why it is significant to study the relationship between man and his ideas and the connection between a man's thoughts and the milieu or environment within which he wrote or thought. There will always be found social, historical, biographical and intellectual contexts that determine and shape the thinking of thinkers. Frantz Fanon is no exception. Thus Jinadu (1980) further wrote that "In the case of Fanon, his writings on colonialism are rooted in the socio-economic and political milieu created by French colonial rule in Martinique and Algeria" (p. 21). He had a socio-political milieu, which was the colonial society and the quest for liberation guided his thoughts in the search for an African revolution. This piece however studies the interplay of Language, Violence, Revolution and Liberation in Frantz Fanon's African Political Philosophy.

The Life of Frantz Fanon

Frantz Fanon was born in Fort-de-France on the Island of Martinique. He was a son of a descendant of African slaves; his mother was said to be an illegitimate child of African, Indian and European descent, whose white ancestors came from Strasbourg in Alsace. Socio-economically, the family of Fanon was middle class, and thus could afford the fees for the Lycee Schoelcher, the most prestigious high school in Martinique, where the writer Aime Cesaire taught. He grew up in a racially mixed society of Martinique, with values and schooling modelled after those of France.

During the Second World War (1939-1945) he worked with

the Free French forces in North Africa and France from 1947 – 1951, during which he attended a Medical School in Lyon, France, and began a residency in psychiatry. After his return to Algeria, he was appointed chief psychiatrist at a hospital in Blida, Algeria in 1953. In 1956 Fanon resigned his post at the hospital and joined a guerrilla army, the Front de Liberation Nationale (Algerian National Liberation Front or FLN) that eventually forced France to accept Algeria's independence.

He enlisted in the French army and joined an Allied convoy that arrived in Casablanca. He was later transferred to an army base at Bajaia on the Kabylie coast of Algeria. Fanon left Algeria from Oran and saw service in France, notably in the battles of Alsace. In 1944 he was wounded at Colmar and received the Croix de Guerre medal.

Fanon's work reflects the intellectual influences of his years in France, where he was drawn to the group of black intellectuals associated with the Journal Presence Africaine. He was also close to a group of French intellectuals associated with the Journal les Temps Modernes that included Jean Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Albert Camus. These two groups and writings of the German philosophers Karl Marx and Georg Wilhelm, Fredrick Hegel strongly influenced Fanon's political and philosophical orientation. As a practicing psychiatrist in Algeria, he was convinced of a close connection between the individual pathologies of his patients and the political situation. He concluded that colonialism causes a unique pathology in both the colonized and the colonizer, and the only cure is a revolutionary struggle by the colonized to free themselves from colonial rule. Fanon articulated these ideas in his political writings. In 1959, he published *A Psychiatric Study of Colonialism*; Fanon, F. (1967). *Black skins, white masks*; Fanon, F. (1967). *Towards the African Revolution*. Fanon, F. (1968). *The wretched of the earth*. Fanon, F. (1994). *A dying colonialism*. In his final years of life, Fanon visited Ghana, Mali, and other African countries as an FLN representative.

The Political Sociology of Colonial Society

The concern of Fanon was basically to resolve the problems of Black-White relationship, which was fostered by colonialism and colonial rule. Writing on his reason for criticizing colonialism, Fanon (1989) avers, "Someone to whom I was talking about this book asked me what I expected to come of it..."

This book, it is hoped, will be a mirror with a progressive infrastructure, in which it will be possible to discern the Negro on the road to disalienation" (pp. 183-184). He targets to bring about social and political change, to disalienate both the colonizer and the colonized.

At the time of Fanon, Algeria was under France, and there was a philosophy that underlay the French colonial rule. It was evident in their policies of assimilation and association, even though the word assimilation is commonly used to speak of the French colonial policy. As a philosophy, it believed in the inequality of human beings and the superiority of French culture and civilization, and thus, the denial of the authenticity of indigenous culture. In the contention of Hodgkin (1957), the policy of assimilation was a "constitutional fiction" (p. 38). It was far from being realized and thus created a gap between theory and practice. Through assimilation, the French colonial powers wanted to create in Martinique and Algeria a French elite from among the people who, in the contention of Buell (1928) will serve as instruments of French colonial rule. All the oppressions of the time were hidden under the table of bringing civilization to the colonized. In the contention of Lewis (1952), it was "less a generous urge to extend to benighted peoples the blessings of French civilization than the need to provide justification for the maintenance of French rule" (151). This was the perspective propagated by Marx and Engels that colonialism substituted civilized institutions for barbarous ones. This, in the view of Irele (1969) led nationalists like Fanon to attempt to rediscover their African heritage and to assert a racial pride and consciousness. Developing an underdevelopment theory, they argued that colonialism was unprogressive, rapacious, exploitative and disruptive to the development of the history of the colonized people. In the contention of Fanon (1968), "It is violence in its natural state" (p. 61). Kabwegyere (1972) quoted Mr. George Wilson, a British Colonial administrator in Uganda who wrote about the violence he generated, "Recently, I have been compelled to assert my authority in a manner that has caused serious loss of life and property. To allow uncivilized races to defy authority is a sure way of losing it, and my action therefore was imperative" (p. 305). Beyond physical violence, there was also structural violence, which Fanon (1967) describes as the Manichaeism of the colonial situation. He wrote, The colonial world is a world divided into compartments. It is probably unnecessary to recall the existence of native and European quarters, of schools for native and schools for Europeans: in the same way we need not to recall apartheid in South Africa. (p. 37).

Reacting to this violence, Fanon (1967 and 1968) argued that it had a way of not just destroying the colonized but also boomeranged on the colonizers; it can lead to the importation of these violence methods into their own countries. He sees Fascism and Nazism as manifestations of the violence effected on the colonized. Reacting to the superiority of French culture, he avers that all cultures are equally valid and moral standards not absolute or universal.

Violence and the Colonial Situation

Kedouri (1970) describes Fanon with great exaggeration as "the most eloquent panegyrist of ... violence, a writer who celebrates it with savage lyricism" (p. 139). He has an ambivalent stance on the issue of violence: his thought on the colonial situation is inherently violent and his justification of violence as a potent instrument of violence. According to Jinadu (1980), He condemns the violence inflicted on the colonized by the colonizer. According to him, such violence is not conducive to the self-realization of the colonized. But he also celebrates the instrumental value of violence as a means to a desirable end when socially organized and ideologically directed to achieve the liberation of the colonized. It is in this sense that he regards violence as the praxis of decolonization and freedom as self-realization. (p. 43).

When the indigenous people tried to resist colonialism, many were killed and injured. Talking of the colonizers who were foreigners, Fanon (1967) wrote that they imposed their rules

"by means of guns and machines" (p. 40). In his *Wretched of the Earth*, in which he described the violence of the colonizers, he wrote further, "... it is obvious that the agents of government speak the language of pure force" (p. 38).

Contrary to the law of dialogue, he proposed violence as a means of fighting colonialism. He first argued that "colonialism is not a thinking machine nor a body endowed with reasoning", and thus to begin to dialogue or appeal to the consciences of colonizers would be a waste of time, since the lack of reasoning and thinking places them outside the parameters of dialogue. The persistence of social injustice drives men to the conviction that the best way to help their situation is to resort to the use of physical violence. And he maintains that violent confrontation between the colonized and their colonizers in Algeria gave rise to the emergence to the new order and a new consciousness. Fanon (1968) wrote, The mobilization of the masses, when it arises out of war of liberation, introduces into each man's consciousness the ideas of a common cause, of a national destiny, and of a collective history. In the same way the second phase, that of building up the nation, is helped on by the existence of this cement which has been mixed with blood and anger. (p. 93).

He however observed that sometimes, this fight is sometimes based on the inordinate ambition of the colonized to gain the position of the colonizer, which is envied by the colonized. Fanon (1994) wrote, "The look that the native turns on the settlers town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession- all manner of possession" (p. 47). If this be the case, it can be argued that the structural violence brainwashes, indoctrinates and decreases the victim's mental potentialities, and thus alienates the colonized. It is therefore not surprising that the colonized rejects his indigenous values and institutions believing that they are inferior to those of the whites. He apes the language, intonation and mannerism of the white man, thinking of himself as progressing while he is alienating and emptying in self-realization.

Language, Culture and the Colonial Situation

Fanon (1967) thinks that one of the ways through which the colonized suffer alienation of psychological violence is through language. He understands language as a means of communion and an expression of brotherhood. He wrote that to speak is to "exist for the other" (p. 17). Although a means of communication, it is also a means of transmitting knowledge from one generation to another. In relation to colonization, he argues that speaking the language of the colonizer instead of one's own language is ipso facto to assume the colonizers culture and to reject one's own culture. This promotes cultural and political domination. Language is thus part of a person's culture, and Fanon (1956) defines culture as the "...combination of motor and mental behaviour patterns arising from the encounter of man with nature and with his fellow man" (p. 32). He therefore sees the use of foreign language as an instrument of colonialism.

Fanon's Concept of Liberation

Fanon's concept of liberation goes beyond the search for spiritual freedom. According to Jinadu (1980), It implies the removal of a whole arsenal of socio-economic, cultural and political restrictions imposed on the colonized man- restrictions that limit the area of choices and opportunities that are available and open to him. Fanon's position is that the extent of one's freedom is the function of socio-political institutions and practices; in other words, these institutions and practices can have either a liberating or constraining impact on individuals. In a colonial situation their impact on the individual is negative. (p. 66).

How then can a person gain freedom? He argues that one's freedom is a function of one's determination to act in other to remove obstacles that stay in one's way. This struggle is continuous until one attains the good life. It is a search for the truth and part of the continuing process in which man's potentialities are forever enlarged.

Thus Fanon (1967) writes that he has "one duty alone: that of not renouncing my freedom through my choices" (p. 229). Within the context of colonialism, liberation becomes for Fanon decolonization or political independence, which will involve bringing to an end a colonial government and the transformation of the colonial situation in such a way that the numerically superior, though sociologically inferior may now become the numerically and sociologically superior. Thus any decolonization that does not change the structures of colonialism is a false decolonization.

Fanon as a Theorist of Revolution

Inextricably bound up with Fanon's concept of liberation is that of revolution. He understands revolution as the political act aimed at transforming the colonial situation. Angered by this bestiality of colonialism, Fanon decided to procure a 'cure' and that is his involvement in the Algerian revolution in 1954-1962. Fanon believed that violent revolution is the only means of ending colonial repression and cultural trauma in the third world. Violence he believes is a cleansing force. It frees the 'native' from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect. Thus Fanon calls on the colonized to be ready for violence; for it seeks to put society somewhat in its right shape; making the first last and the last first. However, this is not to say that Fanon was advocating violence for its own sake rather, he sees it as a prominent tool for 'righting' the wrongs exhibited in the society.

The idea of violence in revolution attracted his audience because he did not have to search too far for reasons to convince his audience. He pointed to the exploitative relationship that existed between the settlers and the Africans. The settlers used every means possible to secure their economic interest, including extreme brutality, even at the cost of 45,000 lives in Setif, 90,000 in Madagascar, 2,000 in Kenya and 25,000 in German Tanganyika, he thus urged Africans to answer violence with violence.

Evaluation and Conclusion

A general criticism levelled against Fanon by scholars like O'Brien (1965), Coser (1966) and Gotthiel (1967) is that he is poor in systematization and coherence and that he is easily carried away by his emotions into issues under discussion to the extent that he loses objectivity, which is indispensable for a balanced analysis of reality. Thus, Coser (1966) wrote, "Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*... is badly written, badly organized and chaotic. The author's reasoning is often shoddy and defective. This is not a work of analysis. Its incantatory prose appeals not to the intellect but to the passions". (p. 298). The problem with this criticism is the obscurity of what it means by a work being systematic or coherent? And secondly, was that what Fanon set out to pursue? If he was

able to pass his idea without coherence and systematization, then these concepts need to be reassessed.

As a criticism against Fanon, Kedouri (1970) describes him as "the most eloquent panegyrist of ... violence, a writer who celebrates it with savage lyricism" (p. 139). On the part of Arendt (1969), he considers Fanon's discourse on violence as rhetorically excessive. Scholars like Nghe (1963), Klein (1966), Rohdie (1966), Cauté (1965) and Grendzier (1973) have opposed Fanon's position that violence provides relief. This position is based on the thinking that violence cannot give peace, for it cannot give what it does not have. However, Jinadu (1980) argues that the criticisms of these scholars are mistaken, and can only be considered as an interpretation. This again can be contested. If they are all mistaken, what alternative interpretation does Jinadu offer?

Frantz had argued that to speak the language of the colonizer is to assume the colonizers culture and his civilization is not true, as the language of the colonizer could serve other better purposes such as communication and efficiency administratively. What about the colonizers in some other parts of Africa that spoke the language of their colonized. Does it mean that they have now assumed the culture and civilization of their colonized? Today we learn different languages to help us communicate in our globalized world, not necessarily because we are ashamed of being black or feel better looked upon as white. However, Jinadu (1980) was right when he pointed out the use of language in the colonial context is a powerful demonstration of one particular kind of alienation, and a neurotic behaviour manifested in an attempt to speak a foreign language with deliberate exaggerated affection.

In the midst of all the criticisms against Fanon, he remains one of the figures in African history who has impacted on the historical situation of which he was part. He has influenced the political attitude of many and given great insight into the political development of colonial and postcolonial Africa. And if he had spoken with great passion, it is simply because of the depth of the abuse of the Martiniquan people by the French army during the time of Fanon, which reinforced his feelings of alienation and disgust with colonial racism.

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