FRANTZ FANON'S
THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH
IN CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

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*The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968) is a lasting testimony to the genius of Frantz Fanon. Hailed as "The Handbook for the Black Revolution," *The Wretched of the Earth* is a probing examination of colonization, a compelling description of the process of decolonization, and a prophetic analysis of independence movements around the world.

*The Wretched of the Earth* provides a glimpse of Fanon's grand vision of international and intercultural affairs, and Fanon gives specific prescriptions for individuals and collectivities that continue to seek cultural and national liberation. Fanon's conclusion underscores the importance of this work for African and African American liberation, to be sure; but, more importantly, it challenges Africans throughout the diaspora to assume a leadership position in bringing about a new, more humane world order. *The Wretched of the Earth* is a series of four far-ranging and connected essays. Fanon, a psychiatrist by training, also presents a "series of case studies" of psychiatric disorders that are tied to struggles for liberation.

CONCERNING VIOLENCE

The first essay, "Concerning Violence," establishes the premise concerning decolonization—that is, "decolonization is *always* a violent phenomenon" (p. 35; emphasis added). By decolonization,
Fanon refers to the process of reversing power relationships and quotes biblical passages in this connection: "The last shall be first and the first last" (p. 37). Although Fanon's focus is on the decolonization process in Africa, he discusses parallels with African Americans and underscores the distinctions between the African and the American situations.

Fanon is very clear in his message: The struggle for power in colonized states will be resolved only through violent struggle. Because the colonized states were created and are maintained by the use of violence or the threat of violence, it is a necessity that it will take violence to reverse these power relationships.

Fanon underscores the manner in which "racialism" has compartmentalized societies, with marked inequality in all aspects of human existence. This inequality is maintained by the use of force, by the denial of educational opportunity, and by the forced segregation in living arrangements. In Africa, this compartmentalizing of the races is so severe that the only solution is the total supplanting of the colonizer by the colonized—that is, by complete and total revolution.

Yet it is more than a simple shifting of power or taking of positions of responsibility. The process of colonization has been more than the simple physical domination of Africa. Instead, this physical domination was accompanied by the planned psychological depreciation of the African's self-worth and of the African's culture and history. Within the European ethos, the African was viewed as the antithesis of virtue, as evil incarnate. Thus Fanon demonstrates the multifaceted nature of the violence visited on the African—both material (physical) and psychological.

From the degradation of European domination, however, lies hope for the African—and that hope, paradoxically enough, lies in the struggle for liberation. It is in struggle that the people become united, that a new cultural form emerges, that the spirit of Harambee is born.

Fanon incorporates a hydraulic metaphor in his analysis: The colonized exist in a state of tension created by their poor material and political status in relationship to the colonizer. This tension is released in violence and aggression that is initially directed within (accounting for "Black on Black" crime and violence) but later becomes transformed into a thirst for liberation whereby the minimum demands are that the last shall be first.

This emphasis on the cathartic release of tension reveals the influence of Fanon's psychodynamic training: He uses a great deal of Freudian metaphor in this treatise. For example, in discussing the need to release the built-up tension in the colonized, he writes,

The native's relaxation [in dance] takes precisely the form of a muscular orgy in which the most acute aggressivity and the most impelling violence are canalized, transformed, and conjured away.... There are no limits—for in reality your purpose in coming together is to allow the accumulated libido, the hampered aggressivity, to dissolve as in a volcanic eruption. (p. 57)

As seen in these passages, Fanon also uses rich, conceivably sexual imagery.

Fanon's analysis is also influenced by Marxist thinking in that he fully recognizes the role of class in the quest for liberation although he hastens to add that class analysis cannot be divorced from the context of the racial reality created by African colonialism. He sees struggle as emanating from the peasant, the lumpenproletariat:

It is clear that in the colonial countries the peasants alone are revolutionary, for they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The starving peasant, outside the class system, is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays. (p. 61)

The nationalist bourgeoisie, by contrast, seeks to compromise with the colonial system and may secretly condemn the peasants' use of violence.
But Fanon is unequivocal in his belief that it will be through violence that decolonization occurs and that victory, if pursued, is certain. Here, Fanon suggests that the colonial system will capitulate to the native when the native adopts the fervor that is characteristic of the true revolutionary spirit. Throughout this essay, Fanon impresses with his scope and mastery of history and international politics. He correctly contextualizes the African struggle within a world dominated by the two superpowers that are wasting the earth’s resources in the insane effort to out-nuclear-terrorize each other. Fanon identifies the link between the superpowers’ expenditures and the quality of life in the Third World:

Those literally astronomical sums of money which are invested in military research, those engineers who are transformed into technicians of nuclear war, could in the space of fifteen years raise the standard of living of underdeveloped countries by 60 per cent. (p. 82)

This message is clear for us as we have witnessed the simultaneous starvation in Africa and the unprecedented buildup of American and Soviet war-fighting capabilities.

In the section on “Violence in the International Context,” Fanon makes clear the relationships between Europe and Africa. He powerfully suggests that the opulent riches of Europe were stolen and usurped from Africa, Asia, and America. Thus the newly independent Third World countries are urged not to emulate the decadent societies of the West (or East), but to chart a new path in defining human and international relationships.

More importantly, Fanon calls for a redistribution of wealth and points to the decadent history of European domination for his rationale:

We should flatly refuse the situation to which the Western countries wish to condemn us. Colonialism and imperialism have not paid their score when they withdraw their flags and their police forces from our territories. For centuries the capitalists have behaved in the underdeveloped world like nothing more than war criminals. Deportations, massacres, forced labor, and slavery have been the main methods used by capitalism to increase its wealth, its gold or diamond reserves, and to establish its power. (p. 101)

Pointing to the demands for reparations from Nazi Germany after World War II, Fanon stridently claims Europe’s riches for Africa: “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World. The wealth which smothers her is that which was stolen from the underdeveloped peoples” (p. 102).

It is, therefore, incumbent for the independent Third World to thoroughly recast the world economy. As Fanon suggests, the Third World has every justification for reclaiming its wealth and resources. The wealth that has been extracted and exported from Africa must be returned. Nowhere is this more important than in South Africa, where for centuries the Afrikaners have exported the tremendous mineral wealth of that region to European depositories.

SPONTANEITY: ITS STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS

In the second essay, “Spontaneity: Its Strength and Weakness,” Fanon assesses the dynamics between the leaders of struggle and the masses of the people. The leaders of the nationalist party are frequently Westernized into having negative attitudes toward the peasants, and peasants may be suspicious of the nationalist bourgeoisie because of the latter’s adherence to Western cultural forms, as in their dress and language.

This natural tension between nationalist leaders and the “rank and file” is used by colonial systems to create dissension and competition. Colonial systems make a concerted effort to “colonize the mentality” of the nationalist bourgeoisie and to use as “spokespersons” those who have been so colonized. Moreover, the nationalist bourgeoisie—those who assume leadership after the revolution—are caught in an approach-avoidance conflict in seeking to be independent of the colonial system but also friendly with it.

Thus it is within the lumpenproletariat—that disenfranchised mass of humanity—where spontaneity resides and where one finds the “most radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people” (p. 129). Fanon sees a particular place, within this class, for “the pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed, and the petty criminal” (p. 130).
who can redeem themselves in armed revolutionary struggle. The historically disenfranchised thus gain some measure of self-respect—and a place in history—by taking up the liberation struggle.

Perhaps the most important message is that decolonization is all but inevitable and that, in the process, a sense of national unity emerges that acts as the social glue for the newly independent nation:

Violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organized and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them. Without that struggle, without that knowledge of the practice of action, there's nothing but a fancy-dress parade and the blare of the trumpets. (p. 147)

THE PITFALLS OF NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

In the third essay, "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness," Fanon rearticulates the inherent conflict between the national middle class and the masses. The former, embracing the values and ideologies of the colonial system (as manifested by the acquisition and display of opulent cars and homes), is conceptually incarcerated by the habit patterns established by the mother country.

Fanon suggests that this middle class, which assumes power at the end of the colonial regime, is inadequately prepared to replace the colonial system because of a lack of training and resources and must resort to sending "frenzied appeals for help from the mother country" (p. 149). Thus, instead of independence, the decolonized nation states remain fiscally dependent and indebted to the colonial power. But more than being inadequately prepared, Fanon condemns the national middle class for creating this dependency by imitating the goals, objectives, and methodologies of the traditional bourgeoisie. Indeed, Fanon asserts that this middle class becomes little more than the "business agent" of the Western bourgeoisie.

Fanon makes a telling observation in this regard: These business agents for the Western bourgeoisie frequently neglect national development in favor of the development of a "tourism industry" that Fanon refers to as the "brothel of Europe" (p. 154). Thus national leaders recreate the rule of the Western colonial powers:

Agricultural workers are exploited, profits are not reinvested, rural and interior areas are ignored, and large sums are spent on conspicuous "display" items such as expensive cars, homes, and personal accoutrements. These tourist nations, these brothels of Europe and America, are evident throughout South America, the Caribbean, Africa, and elsewhere in the Third World.

In this essay, Fanon also introduces the notions related to "cultural violence": the racist myths and beliefs concerning the presumed inferiority of the African. These beliefs are internalized by the national bourgeoisie, who then turn their backs on the peasant interior and mimic the colonial powers. This mimicry and ineffectiveness also occur in the political parties of the state. But more than criticize, Fanon prescribes. He suggests that "the interior, the back country, ought to be the most privileged part of the country" (p. 186). Government should be deconsecrated and decentralized, and privileged classes are to be vigorously opposed.

In concluding this essay, Fanon provides a prescription that demonstrates his vision and his compassion for humanity: "The national government, if it wants to be national, ought to govern by the people and for the people, for the outcasts and by the outcasts" (p. 205).

ON NATIONAL CULTURE

The fourth essay, "On National Culture," is concerned with the problem of reclaiming national history and culture as a process of liberation and as an aftermath of decolonization. Fanon notes, for example, the passion involved in the research on ancient African civilizations and the rediscovery of the dignity and glory of past generations. These efforts are seen to be the natural byproduct of the colonial system's overt efforts to obliterate indigenous cultural forms.

In this connection, Fanon calls attention to the fact that the European degradation of the African was not limited in national origin or tribal identification but applied to the whole of Africa. As a result, the intellectual backlash is one that similarly transcends
national origin and tribe. Indeed, Fanon points to the common struggle for cultural nationalism and cultural identification occurring throughout the African diaspora, notably in North America.

Focusing on the scholarly work of native intellectuals, Fanon provides an assessment of the identity transformations that are evident in their work. This analysis can be seen to be in parallel to the so-called Negro-to-Black conversion experience. In the initial phase, the person has unqualified assimilation to the colonial system including its beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. In the second phase, the person becomes “immersed” in the reclaiming of culture. And in the third phase, called the fighting phase, the intellectual embarks on a crusade to enlighten the masses. In Fanon’s words, “he turns himself into an awakener of the people, hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature” (p. 223).

In this third phase, the intellectual throws “himself body and soul into the national struggle” (p. 232), an act that Fanon sees as imperative:

To fight for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation, that material cornerstone which makes the building of a culture possible. There is no other fight for culture which can develop apart from the popular struggle. (p. 233)

Thus Fanon sees cultural nationalism as a prerequisite to national liberation and the liberation of the nation as necessary for the renewal of culture. Indeed, Fanon suggests that the struggle for national liberation is a manifestation of national culture. In this, Fanon leaves us no choice because we either fulfill our mission (of discovering and encouraging “universal values”) or we betray it.

**COLONIAL WAR AND MENTAL DISORDERS**

In somewhat of a break with the preceding four essays, Fanon includes four series of descriptions of psychiatric case studies. These case studies cover the scope of mental disturbances as a consequence of revolutionary struggle and illustrate the perversity of colonialism for both the perpetrator and the victim of colonial systems.

Colonial war is a time for coming to grips with reality, and Fanon implies that the myth of the colonial powers crumbles under the onslaught of liberation struggles and that concomitant to this crumbling is a smashing of the reality bases on which it rests. The corpus of these case studies underscores the fact that it is the superordinate/subordinate role relationships in colonial situations that give rise to criminality and other social and personal pathologies.

**CONCLUSION**

Fanon’s “Conclusion” is a direct appeal to like-minded individuals to transform themselves in an effort to remake the world. It is a strident call for the rejection of the European model that has brought the world to “atomic and spiritual disintegration” (p. 311). He calls on us to not imitate the Western world but to chart a new course, perhaps using the Western world as a negative role model.

Indeed, Fanon calls on the Third World to solve the problems—of human relationships—that Europe has not been able to solve. “It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of Man” (p. 315), of avoiding the crimes committed by Europe in its quest to conquer the world. “Humanity is waiting for something from us other than such an imitation, which would be almost an obscene caricature” (p. 315).

Thus Fanon conclusively leaves us with an imperative—a moral one—to “try to set afoot a new man” (p. 316). The decolonized has the responsibility to create, to invent, to chart a new course for humanity. And therein lies the challenge and the responsibility of the Black scholar in America.

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