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A Critical Consideration of the Effects of Violence in Fanon

Benda Hofmeyr

Department of Philosophy, University of Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

My aim in this paper is twofold: first, I aim to establish to what extent Fanon ascribes intrinsic value to violence or whether it would be more accurate to align his position with a constructive and instrumental conceptualisation of violence. From a close reading of his 1960 address 'Why We Use Violence' (Fanon [1960] 2018) and the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* ([1961] 2004), a more nuanced understanding emerges that avoids the trap of the Arendtian binary scheme, which validates instrumental violence while dismissing Fanon's conceptualisation as non-instrumental. Ascribing intrinsic value to violence in Fanon decontextualises violence, which cannot be understood outside of the end it serves in the struggle for decolonisation. The intrinsic necessity of violence in colonial contexts is wrongly conflated with the intrinsic value of violence beyond instrumentality. The necessity of violence upon which Fanon insists is not an unqualified advocation of violence or a call for violence ex nihilo. Instead, he is urging the colonised to make productive use of the violence that is already given to them. Violence as Fanon conceptualises it, it will be shown, is not merely instrumental and reactive, but is also creative and constructive.

In the second instance, a critical assessment of Fanon's creative and liberatory conceptualisation of violence is needed for the question remains, was Fanon right in his belief that violence in the context of the French-Algerian War would purge the African mind of the trauma colonisation inflicted, that violence is not endlessly self-perpetuating but would give rise to newly empowered subjects capable of postcolonial nation-building. To critically assess the effects of revolutionary violence, I confront Fanon's conceptualisation with the lived wartime experiences of Algerian intellectual Feraoun as documented in his *Journal 1955–1962: Reflections on the French-Algerian War (2000)* in the conclusive part of this paper. Feraoun concurs with Fanon that violent retaliation is a necessary condition to bring about liberation, but his testimonial reveals that revolutionary violence did not cleanse the Algerian subjects of their psychological dehumanisation, but instead spawned violent, inhumane revolutionary subjects who ended up wielding the violence they opposed against their own people.

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CONTACT Benda Hofmeyr Benda.hofmeyr@up.ac.za

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Dubbed the 'apostle of violence', Fanon has been lauded and critiqued for his insistence that violence is a necessary condition for the attainment of anti-colonial freedom. Statements such as the 'colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence' in *The Wretched of the Earth* ([1961] 2004, 86) is read as unambivalent testimony to his wholesale advocation of violence. Roberts (2004) defends the view that Fanon considers violence to be *intrinsically* valuable in the anti-colonial struggle for freedom. His argument hinges on the differentiation between two concepts of violence: instrumental violence and intrinsic violence. Instrumental violence is enacted as a means to an end. Violent measures are taken solely to achieve a particular result. Intrinsic violence, on the other hand, is 'a metaphysical concept in which the act of either random irrational or calculated violence itself contains inherent value', according to Roberts (2004, 146). Intrinsic violence is valued in and of itself irrespective of the outcome at a specific moment of implementation. What is at stake in intrinsic violence is the colonised's reclamation of agency and identity. In the Preface of *The Wretched of the Earth,* Sartre maintains that for Fanon intrinsic or what he (Sartre) calls 'irrepressible violence is neither sound and fury, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even the effects of resentment: it is man recreating himself' (Fanon [1961] 2004, 21). The fact of the matter, he continues, is that only violence can efface the marks of violence. This accounts for the appeal of Fanon's advocation of violence to the colonised – the broken, the traumatised, the dehumanised.

I pit this reading of violence in Fanon against Oranli (2021)'s contention that such readings fall into the trap of approaching Fanon through Arendt's framing of violence, that is, through a binary paradigm of instrumental versus non-instrumental violence. It is argued that this is in fact a false dichotomy since violence in Fanon can be construed as having both constructive *and* instrumental aspects. In *On Violence* (1970), Arendt conceives of violence in instrumental terms, while she claims that for Fanon violence is non-instrumental. With her focus on the macro-violence of regimes, she fails to account for the structural/everyday violence that Fanon is concerned with – the micro-effects of violence on the victims of colonial violence, what it does to the subjectivity of the person engulfed in a violent world. This failure on Arendt's part stems from her hard distinction between the social sphere (that is, the sphere of hierarchy, necessity, and coercion) and the political sphere (the sphere of equality and freedom), which leaves her analysis devoid of any reference to the inequalities and violence inherent in the social sphere and how it inevitably contaminates the political sphere (Oranli 2021, 1111).

My objective here is twofold: first, I aim to establish to what extent Fanon ascribes intrinsic value to violence or whether it would be more accurate to align his position with a constructive and instrumental conceptualisation of violence. From a close reading of his 1960 address 'Why We Use Violence' (Fanon [1960] 2018) and the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* ([1961] 2004), a more nuanced understanding emerges that avoids the trap of the Arendtian binary scheme. Ascribing intrinsic value to violence in Fanon decontextualises violence, which cannot be understood outside of the end it serves in the struggle for decolonisation. The intrinsic necessity of violence in colonial contexts is wrongly conflated with the intrinsic value of violence beyond instrumentality. The necessity of violence upon which Fanon insists is not an unqualified advocation of violence or a call for violence *ex nihilo.* Instead, he is urging the colonised to make productive use of the violence that is already *given* to them. The violence that constitutes the colonised's subjectivity, and that eventually causes the colonised to resort to

violence, originates form colonialism itself (Bulhan 1985, 144). Keller (2007, 165) concurs stressing that anticolonial violence in Fanon is 'an appropriation of the violence of the settler turned towards the end of liberation and the creation of new revolutionary subjects'. Violence as Fanon conceives of it, it will be shown, is not merely instrumental and reactive, but is also creative and constructive (see [1961] 2004, 93–94). The question remains, however, was Fanon, who became the revolution's principal theorist and the primary mouthpiece of the National Liberation Front (FLN) (Le Sueur 2000, xxvii), right in his belief that violence in the context of the French-Algerian War would purge the African mind of the trauma colonisation inflicted, that violence is not endlessly self-perpetuating but would give rise to newly empowered subjects capable of postcolonial nation-building. To critically assess the effects of revolutionary violence, I confront Fanon's conceptualisation with the wartime lived experiences of Algerian intellectual, Mouloud Feraoun as documented in his *Journal 1955–1962: Reflections on the French-Algerian War* (2000) in the conclusive part of this article. Whereas *The Wretched of the Earth*'s uptake was immediate and widely influential in the colonial and postcolonial world, Feraoun's *Journal* has remined relatively obscure outside of Algeria until relatively recently. What it offers is a critical counter-narrative to a certain interpretation of Fanon as unqualified advocate of violence. While both realised that a recourse to violence was needed to secure Algerian liberation, they diverge in how they conceive of the effects of violence.

'Why We Use Violence'

In his 1960 address to the Accra Positive Action Conference, 'Why We Use Violence', Fanon provides a more nuanced and historicised justification of the use of violence in anticolonial struggle than that found at the beginning of the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth,* 'Concerning Violence' (Fanon [1961] 2004, 1–62). What is unambivalently clear in these remarks is that violence for Fanon is a coerced final resort born of the violence inflicted upon the colonised people. He starts his reflections by focusing on the violence integral to colonial oppression. Violent force – by those 'more advanced in the techniques of destruction' (Fanon [1960] 2018, 654) – always institutes a colonial regime, which is maintained through the continuation of violence. It is not an abstract violence but a visceral violence evident in the colonists' contempt and their politics of hate. Moreover, violence against the present does not satisfy colonialism. Rather, it is a three-dimensional violence: it is a violence 'in everyday behaviour, violence against the past that is emptied of all substance, violence against the future, for the colonial regime presents itself as necessarily eternal' (ibid).

It is worth considering to what extent the violence of the colonial regime is in actual fact 'eternal'. It is my contention that he was not in fact arguing that the violence is literally eternal, but to foreground the systematic psychological, social and political means utilised to perpetuate and normalise colonial violence. The chief objective of a colonial regime's violence is colonial domination, which necessarily requires the sustained application of multi-faceted forms of force. To establish domination, the colonial regime has to maintain control over the colonised population through the use of physical force and psychological intimidation to subjugate the local population and ensure their compliance with colonial rule and to quell any dissent. Importantly, Fanon foregrounded the

two-directional impact of colonial violence on both the colonised and the colonisers. The destruction of the colonised population's cultural identity and heritage coupled with the sustained brutality the coloniser inflicts upon them result in their systematic dehumanisation that reinforces their supposed inferiority, thereby justifying the colonial project. The coloniser, on the other hand, is psychologically reinforced in their superiority and entitlement, and subsequently justified in their imposition of their own culture, values, and norms on the colonised people. The objective of maintaining colonial domination is of course colonial powers' economic interest in colonised territories, which entailed the forcible extraction of resources and labour from the local population. Colonial domination also operates by capitalising on existing dissention within the colonised society, deepening divisions and exacerbating tensions, often by favouring certain groups over others. In the process, they succeed in preventing the creation of a unified resistance front against colonial rule. When liberation movements do arise, which they inevitably do according to Fanon, as we shall see, colonial regimes often respond with increased violence to maintain the colonial status quo. This, then, is what Fanon means when he postulates that the colonial regime inflicts violence against the future – a violence that might not be literally eternal, but systematic and cyclical with the objective of securing perpetual colonial domination.

Faced with this dismal *fait accompli*, the colonised 'are soon logically confronted by the problem of ending the colonial regime by any means necessary' (Fanon [1960] 2018, 654). The eternal physical and psychic violence the colonial regime inflicts *elicit, engender* or *give rise to* an internal violence in the colonised people, what Fanon calls 'a just anger' (ibid, 655). But, qualifies Fanon, 'violence must first be fought with the language of truth and reason' (ibid). Regretfully, however, it becomes inevitable – an inevitability or 'historical necessity' that no one cannot but deplore, according to Fanon. The colonised's violence is nothing but 'defensive reactions reflecting a quite banal instinct of self-preservation' (ibid). It is not merely a reactive violence, however, but a creative violence for as Fanon states, for the Algerian people, 'the only solution was this heroic struggle at the heart of which they had to crystallize their national consciousness and deepen their attribute as an African people' (ibid). He is adamant that the bloodshed in Algeria will be pervasively influential in bolstering the great African nation. In some colonies, violence is the last resort of the hunted man driven to defend his life, backed up into the corner of the colonial prison that has become unbearably oppressive. The breeding ground of the colonised's violence is one in which he no longer has the option of giving meaning to his life, 'but rather of giving one to his death' (ibid).

The colonist, for his part, is inflicted with an all-consuming guilt complex, which gives rise to aggression rooted in physical and moral fear – the fear that the violence inflicted will be revenged – a fear that finds its justification in a certain Manichean conception of humanity divided into the oppressors and the oppressed (compare [1961] 2004, 41, 51, 84). In strong support of Nkrumah's democratic egalitarianism, Fanon contends that this fear is unfounded since Africans are not racist. He quotes Nkrumah: 'The concept of Africa for the Africans does not mean that other races are excluded. It only means that African who are naturally the majority in Africa should govern themselves in their own countries' (Fanon [1960] 2018, 656). Algerians, according to Fanon, maintains that Algeria belongs to colonist and colonised alike – a country that should be built together and founded on a democratic basis 'commensurate with our ambition and our love' (ibid).

It is love, then, not counter-terror that is the reason why Africans employ violence. The colonised, according to Fanon (ibid, 657), is not motivated by revenge but by conciliation:

> We do not say to the settler 'You are a stranger, go away.' We do not say to him: 'We will take over the leadership of the country and make you pay for your crimes and those of you ancestors.' We do not tell him that 'to the past hatred of the Black people we will oppose the present and future hatred of the white man'. We say to him: 'We are Algerians, banish all racism from our land, all forms of oppression and let us work […] for the flourishing of man and for the enrichment of humanity.'

If there is an ethical justification of violence to be found in Fanon, here it is clearly connected to a desire to restore the solidarity that violence breaks.

However, the coloniser is obstinate in their insistence that Algeria is French, Angola is Portuguese, and the Union of South Africa is a white state (ibid). Fanon proceeds to provide a vivid account of the merciless violence inflicted upon the Algerian people that cannot but revoke revulsion and anger in those witnessing the atrocities: Algerian wounded whom the French took prisoner and then savagely slaughtered in their beds; in the military hospitals of the resistance, he treated tortured Algerians, cared for Algerian women gone mad after rapes and torture, and buried dozens of Algerians shot in the back. It is this 'immense repulsion for the French atrocities' that have motivated those Europeans that have joined the ranks of the National Liberation Front (FLN) (ibid, 658).

Fanon is unambivalent in his qualification of violence here: 'the violence of the Algerian people is neither a hatred of peace not a rejection of human relations, nor a conviction that only war can put an end to the colonial regime in Algeria' (ibid, 658). In the face of the rejection of their plea for a peaceful resolution, they were left with no other option but to defend themselves against de Gaulle's merciless military force that sought to break the Algerian people. In light of the fact that so many Africans died to defend the sovereignty of European states it is worth it, Fanon maintains, when Africans agree to die for the freedom of Africa (ibid, 659).

Violence in *The Wretched of the Earth*

In apparent stark contrast to this contextualised, historicised and nuanced account of violence as creative and constructive, Fanon will declare only one year later in *The Wretched of the Earth* ([1961] 2004, 35) that decolonisation 'is always a violent phenomenon'. Here too, however, Fanon stresses the fact that the violence of decolonisation is responsible for the 'veritable creation of new men' (ibid, 36): 'It transforms spectators crushed by their inessentiality [the native brought into existence by the settler] into privileged actors' (ibid). To be sure, this creation is effected only through 'a murderous and decisive struggle between two protagonists' (ibid, 37). Whence and why this need for violence? The colonist is the 'bringer of violence into the home and into the mind of the native' (ibid, 38). The native's and the settler's zones are diametrically opposed, not in service of a higher unity, but according to the principle of reciprocal exclusivity: 'No conciliation is possible, for the two terms, one is superfluous' (ibid, 39). When they decide to surge into forbidden zones and reclaim their humanity, the colonised will appropriate the coloniser's violence that destroyed what it found in the colony.

Fanon, the psychiatrist, exposes the inner tension and traumatisation of the colonised from the emotional terror the violence of the coloniser inflicted. The initial aggression finds expression in the colonised's 'collective autodestruction' ([1961] 2004, 54). In this Fanon recognised the need for release of the mounting inner tension of the native, but also avoidance:

> It is as if plunging into a fraternal bloodbath allowed them to ignore the obstacle, and to putt off till later the question of armed resistance to colonialism […] All these patterns of behavior which proves to the settler (whose existence and domination is by them all the more justified) that these men are not reasonable beings (ibid).

The colonised seeks recourse in the rationalisation found in a belief in fatality – the cause of misfortunes and of poverty is attributed to God. Avoidance also takes the form of a recourse to terrifying myths compared to which 'the settler's powers are infinitely shrunken' (ibid, 56). In the phenomena of dance and of possession, Fanon recognises the sublimation of 'the most acute aggressivity and the most impelling violence […] canalized, transformed, and conjured away' (ibid, 57).

Eventually, however, there is no more room for such escapism or psychological defence mechanisms. The native finds himself with his back to the wall, 'the knife is at his throat (or, more precisely, the electrode at his genitals)' (Fanon [1961] 2004, 58). The challenge now is how to lay hold of the violence that myths and mass suicide formerly appeased. The time has come, according to Fanon, for new conditions that will make possible a completely new line of action (ibid).

This is a protracted time – a 'ripening process' – that precedes action (Fanon [1961] 2004, 69). When violence finally breaks out it is not 'simply informatory, but also operative' (ibid, 70). It announces the time of change but also has an effect not merely on the colonised people who awaken to their adversity, but it modifies the attitude of the colonialist who, faced with immanent threat of violent retaliation either decide to quickly decolonise or to intimidate by a show of force – 'military parades and maneuvers, and air force displays'. This display, instead of causing the people to back down, ignites and reinforces the people's aggressiveness. The point of no return has been reached: 'nerves are jangled, fear reigns and everyone is trigger-happy. A single commonplace incident is enough to start the machine-gunning' (ibid, 71–72). Fanon stresses that this is not a planned armed insurrection; the colonised people 'have spontaneously brought their violence to the colossal task of destroying the colonial system' (ibid, 72). We can therefore deduce that the colonised's recourse to violence is not so much rational as it is an affective, instinctual release of libidinal energy that can no longer be sublimated.

According to Fanon ([1961] 2004, 73), 'it is the intuition of the colonized masses that their liberation must, and can only, be achieved by force'. 'By what *spiritual aberration*', asks Fanon, 'do these men, without technique, starving and enfeebled, confronted with the military and economic might of the occupation, come to believe that violence alone will free them?' (ibid, emphasis added):

> It is because violence (*and this is the disgraceful thing*) may constitute, in so far as it forms part of its system, the slogan of a political party. The leaders may call on the people to enter upon an armed struggle. This problematical question has to be thought over […] when the Algerian people reject all means which are not violent, these are proofs that something has happened or is happening at the very moment. The colonized races, those slaves of

> modern times, are impatient. They know that this apparent folly alone can put them out of reach of colonial oppression […] The underdeveloped peoples try to break their chains, and the extraordinary thing is that they succeed ([1961] 2004, 73–74, emphasis added).

What is clear from this passage is the fact that Fanon, who is first and foremost a diagnostician and a healer, is not pro-violence in any unqualified sense. Instead of glorifying violence for violence's sake, as Arendt contends (1970, 65), he calls it a 'spiritual aberration' and a 'disgraceful thing'. Statements such as decolonisation 'is always a violent phenomenon' (Fanon [1961] 2004, 35) cannot be understood outside of this context in which he traces the genealogy of the colonised turned to violent means as last resort – with his back to the wall, 'the knife is at his throat (or, more precisely, the electrode at his genitals)' (ibid, 58).

What this close reading reveals is that one cannot ascribe a wholesale and unqualified advocation of violence to the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*. Rather than that of advocate, Fanon assumes the role of political and psycho-analyst interpreting or diagnosing what he sees happening in colonial Africa and in Algeria above all. He asserts unambivalently that the colonised's recourse to violent means is the appropriation of the means the colonist wielded against the colonised: 'as always, the settler has shown him the way he should take if he is to become free. The argument the native chooses has been furnished by the settler, and by an ironic turning of the tables it is the native who now affirms that the colonialist understands nothing but force' (Fanon [1961] 2004, 84). As a counter-violence it is not violence *ex nihilo,* but a contextualised response that is 'proportionate to the violence exercised by the threatened colonial regime' (ibid, 88).

Fanon concludes the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* with a focused consideration of the resistance struggle in Algeria. Here he qualifies violence as both instrumental *and* productive: it is levelled against 'the organized reduction to slavery of a whole people' (Fanon [1961] 2004, 91, footnote) and from the destruction that it brings about 'life can spring up again' (ibid, 93). Fanon plots an unmistakable Hegelian master-bondsman dialectic when he writes:

> for the colonized people this violence, because it constitutes their only work, invests their characters with positive and creative qualities. The practice of violence binds them together as a whole, since each individual forms a violent link in the great chain […] The groups recognize each other and the future nation is already indivisible […]
>
> The mobilization of the masses, when it arises out of the war of liberation, introduces into each man's consciousness the ideas of a common cause, of a national destiny, and of a collective history (ibid, 93).

It is therefore the colonised's reclamation of their past ('a collective history'), their present ('a common cause') and their future ('a national destiny'). Here violence serves as a 'cleansing force' of pent up libidinal energy: it liberates the colonised from his inferiority complex, from his despair and disempowerment and restores his self-respect (Fanon [1961] 2004, 94).

To foreground the relation between violence and agency more precisely, one can turn to Butler's analytic distinction between two configurations of violence in Fanon that emerge from a single violent context (Butler 2006, 13–14). The first configuration of violence – the original or chronologically first violence – is the violence settlers perpetrate

against the colonised. This gives rise to the Manichean structure of the colonial world composed of dialectically opposed subjectivities – Black/white, colonised/coloniser, Arab/European. As Fanon ([1952] 2008, 73, original emphasis retained) formulates it in *Black Skin, White Masks: 'It is the racist who creates the inferiorized'*; and in *The Wretched of the Earth:* '[f]or it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence' ([1961] 2004, 36). As Oranli (2021, 1113) points out, this dialectical relationship fits the schema of 'victim and perpetrator (of violence)'. According to Gordon (2017, 54–55), because in the process of this creation of subjectivities the colonised is relegated to the 'zone of nonbeing', colonialism defies the Hegelian logic of recognition. The second configuration of violence is the violence that the colonised appropriates when s/he takes up violent action against colonialism itself. It is here that violence, for Fanon, has a constructive and/or productive effect – when the violence given to the colonised is wielded for decolonisation through armed struggle (Oranli 2021, 1114). Here, as we have seen, through the turning of the tables, the colonised is purged of their inferiority complex, hauled back from the 'zone of nonbeing' and created as 'new revolutionary subjects' (Keller 2007, 165).

We can therefore conclude that violence, according to Fanon, that is, appropriated violence, is (1) *inevitable*, because the Manichean world the coloniser created is insufferable and as such unsustainable. It is also (2) *necessary*, but only necessary in a specific colonial context as a means of decolonisation (compare Nesbitt 2013, 194). This makes appropriated violence also both (3) *instrumental and* (4) *constructive.* As we have seen, Fanon is categorical about the objective of this violence; he writes in *Toward the African Revolution* that the anticolonial struggle in Africa 'is aimed both at the death of this [colonial] configuration and at the creation of a new society' ([1964] 1967, 64). As Oranli (2021, 1114) points out, '[i]t is precisely this point that escapes the critics who try to fit him into the Arendtian binary of violence'. What also becomes evident is that Roberts's (2004) insistence that for Fanon violence is intrinsically valuable hinges on a false dichotomy between intrinsic and instrumental violence, since intrinsic violence, according to Roberts's own formulation serves the end of the colonised reclaiming agency and identity (Roberts 2004, 146).

Reading Fanon through a Foucauldian lens

To understand the precise role of violence in the reclamation of agency in Fanon, a Foucauldian lens proves instructive. Fanon chronicles the move from the apparently solidified Manichean colonial world of domination to the unleashing of mobile relations of power and resistance. Here the move from liberation to continued 'practices of liberty' may be situated on a continuum between resistance as 'tactical reversal' (Foucault 1990a, 156) or the seizing of power to *react-to* constraining colonial regulations, institutionalised normalisations and societal intolerance, as Foucault theorised in the *History of Sexuality Volume I* (1990a), and resistance as creative force foregrounded in the second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality.* Here and in the 1982 essay 'The Subject and Power', Foucault introduces a reconceptualised self: the self is now no longer a mere product of an external system of constraint, but the active agent of his/her own making. Foucault consequently articulates a more positive means of resistance, that is, resistance as active self-formation amid heteronomously imposed constraints. It is

apparent, however, in the 1984 interview 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom' (Foucault [1984] 1988) that resistance as creative force cannot do away with resistance as reactive force. In volumes two and three of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault foregrounds the *agency* of the self amid an exhaustive range of disempowering forces that *subject* the subject, while simultaneously providing the means for empowering subjectivisation or self-creation. The subject, then, is never entirely 'outside' of power, but the subject's embeddedness in power 'does not entail the necessity of accepting an inescapable form of domination' (Foucault [1977] 1980, 141). The subject musters autonomy despite of but also through heteronomous power relations. The disempowering forces, which it resists, are simultaneously the forces that power self-creation. For as Greenblatt (1980) argues, the freedom of the arts of the self does not consist in self-creation itself, but in the experience of self-formation in the face of all the other forces that fashion us (compare Hofmeyr 2008, 108–109).

Foucault's conception of power therefore leads to the conclusion that, as Balibar (2002, 15) puts it, 'the conditions of existence which are to be transformed are woven from the same cloth as the practice of transformation itself' – they are both of the order of 'an action upon an action' (Foucault [1982] 1986, 221). This resonates with Fanon's conceptualisation of violence as the colonised's practices of self-transformation that are woven from the same violent cloth as the conditions of colonial existence that are to be transformed. What prevents the coloniser's violent action and the colonised's appropriated violent counter-action from getting caught in the danger of an infinite regress (Balibar 2002, 19) of violence and retaliation is that the colonised's tactical reversal of violence does not remain at the level of a reactive stance although this is a necessary step. The sufficient condition for liberation is that there must be resurrection and creation of new subjectivities purged of their inferiority complex ([1961] 2004, 94) that emerge from the ashes of the bloody violence and death. These new subjects, according to Fanon's vision, are capable of extricating themselves from the cycle of violence and counter-violence and channel their efforts toward the life-affirming project of nation-building.

Reality check: Feraoun contra Fanon

Importantly, Fanon's creative and liberatory conceptualisation of violence needs to be critically assessed vis-à-vis the first-hand experiences of those who lived through the French-Algerian war, which was probably the most violent anticolonial war of the twentieth century. French-educated Algerian (Kabyle) writer and intellectual Feraoun's journal, spanning seven of the eight years of the war (1955–1962), provides a shocking firsthand account of the protracted, violent decolonisation struggle of French Algeria. The journal sheds light on the cruel realities of the Algerian War of Independence, laying bear the violence, suffering and personal sacrifices both Algerians and French settlers endured. Like Fanon, Feraoun's life and beliefs were bound to the war but ironically neither lived to see its conclusion. Fanon died of leukaemia in 1961, and the European colonists' terrorist organisation Organisation de l'Armée Secrète[1] assassinated Feraoun in 1962, just three days before the signature of the Évian peace accord that ended the hostilities and led to Algerian independence (Lorcin 2001, 137). As Lorcin (ibid) points out, it was perhaps the coincidental nature of their deaths, which curtailed the evolution of their ideas that fixed them indelibly to the war. However, whereas the radical left

embraced Fanon's doctrine of violence in the immediate aftermath of the war, the importance of Feraoun's deeply personal visceral account of the brutality of the war remained largely unacknowledged outside of Algeria until recently. For the first two years of the war, Feraoun was punctilious in recording his impressions, 'but as war weariness set in and recording events took on the form of a litany of assassinations, the lapse of time between entries increased' (ibid, 138).

No doubt on account of their divergent situatedness – Fanon, neither Algerian nor Muslim but a psychiatrist from Martinique in the French West Indies and a revolutionary outsider in the Algerian conflict, while Feraoun was living through (and eventually died because of) the war's extraordinary violence (Le Sueur 2000, xxvi) – their respective accounts of violence are starkly divergent:

> Unlike Fanon, who believed that violence would exorcise the past and create a *tabula rasa* on which an independent Algeria could re-invent itself, Feraoun realized that the violence of the war would return to haunt both France and Algeria: France for its strong-arm tactics and Gestapo-like torture techniques and Algeria for the FLN's use of terror and death to coerce its more passive compatriots into accepting its cause (Lorcin 2001, 138).

While Fanon's belief in the cathartic value of violence may have been true to some extent on the individual level, it did not hold true on the socio-political level. Feraoun's emphasis on the self-perpetuating dynamic of violence, on the other hand, proved all too true especially in light of 'the tortured, failed, postcolonial history through the 1990s, which witnessed the FLN in its turn inflicting the methods the French once used against itself on an equally brutal and fanatical Muslim fundamentalist rebellion' (Wall 2002, 196). Characterising '*évolué*' (highly educated colonial subjects) like Fanon and himself, cultural hybridity informed Feraoun's prophetism. Within the context of the Algerian War their hybridity manifested in dissimilar ways, however. The war revealed Fanon as a split-subject stripped of the 'white mask' he had placed over his 'black skin' resulting in his partisan espousal of the Algerian cause without reservation. According to Lorcin (2001, 139), 'Fanon's was the oedipal struggle between the black son and the 'white colonial father', a struggle that could only be resolved with the death of the latter'. For his part, Feraoun dealt with equanimity with this dual fidelity to Kabylia, socially and culturally, and to France, intellectually. He was unapologetic about his admiration for French culture even as the brutality of the French repression made him keenly aware that the dream of assimilation was as untenable as it was undesirable (Wall 2002, 196). But neither was he blind to the fascist tendencies in the nationalist cause. He considered the rebels as savage brutes who maintained their hegemony over the indigenous population through a reign of terror, racism, and fanaticism. In stark contrast to Fanon's revolutionary optimism, Feraoun's *Journal* reveals his pessimistic foresight that Algeria faced a dismal future under the long-term rule of the National Liberation Front (FLN) that was quickly revealing itself as the only option (ibid). From the very early years of the war, Feraoun bore witness to the displacement of the French colonial hegemony by the rebels' regressive, authoritarian Islamist regime imposed on a hapless population by terror and assassination, 'demonstrating their willingness to kill Muslims as well as French with impunity' (ibid, 196).

While Feraoun appeared to have supported the rebels' actions during 1955, on 8 January 1956, he unequivocally dismisses the rebels' regime as 'true terrorism' (Feraoun 2000, 53). At this point, he did not however completely condemn the FLN

since he knew, like Fanon, that the French army was to blame, and that violence was unavoidable during wartime. Both agreed that violence was a justifiable reaction against the French army's violence and the settlers' intransigence. Fanon's optimism concerning revolutionary violence was vested in his sincere belief that an Algerian nation could be born during the revolution, whereas Feraoun feared a new 'colonisation' by Algeria's FLN leadership (Le Sueur 2000, xxviii). Consider what he wrote on 9 March 1956 after learning of the rebels' massacre of poor local farmers who were presumably deemed the enemy for not joining the Algerian guerillas (*maquis*) in the mountains:

> They were machine-gunned. Their farms were burned down because they were the enemy, and nothing more. Has the time for unbridled furor arrived? Can people who kill innocents in cold blood be called liberators? If so, have they considered for a moment that their "violence" will engender more "violence", will legitimize it, and will hasten its terrible manifestation? They know that the people are unarmed, bunched together in their villages, immensely vulnerable. Are they knowingly preparing for the massacre of "their brothers"? Even by admitting that they are bloodthirsty brutes – which in any case does not excuse them but, on the contrary, goes against them, against us, against the ideal that they claim to defend – they have to consider sparing us so as not to provoke repression. Unless liberation means something different for them than it does for us. We thought that they wanted to liberate the country along with its inhabitants. But maybe they feel that this generation of cowards that is proliferating in Algeria must first disappear, and that a truly free Algeria must be repopulated with new men who have not known the yoke of the secular invader. One can logically defend this point of view. Too logically, unfortunately. And, gradually, from suspicions to compromises and from compromises to betrayals, we will all be declared guilty and summarily executed in the end (Feraoun 2000, 84–85).

What Feraoun witnessed was not the emergence of a brave new Algerian nation in the course of the revolution, as Fanon believed, but rather a loss of faith in the revolutionary promise: 'People are hoping only for peace, regardless of the outcome of a fight that no longer interests them' (ibid, 85).

Although Fanon did warn against Pan-African, Pan-Arab, or Pan-Islamic culture, and against the development of tribalism and the national bourgeoisie, foremost for him were the psychological transformations of nationalism on the Algerian people (Le Sueur 2000, xxix). In his account of the Algerian War in *A Dying Colonialism* (Fanon [1959] 1965, 30) he wrote:

> The Algerian nation is no longer in a future heaven. It is no longer the product of hazy and phantasy-ridden imaginations. It is at the very center of the new Algerian man. *There is a new kind of Algerian man, a new dimension to his existence.*
>
> The thesis that men change at the same time that they change the world has never been so manifest as it is now in Algeria. This trial of strength not only remodels the consciousness that man has of himself, and of his former dominators or of the world, at last within his reach.

So, whereas Feraoun did not believe that the war would suddenly transform Algerian Muslims, Fanon vehemently believed that '[t]he power of the Algerian Revolution […] resides in the radical mutation that the Algerian has undergone' ([1959] 1965, 32). Revolutionary action, then, according to Fanon, is capable of a psychological exorcism of a downtrodden, colonised Algerian identity.

Given their divergent conceptualisations of the effects of revolutionary violence, it is perhaps not surprising that Feraoun makes no direct reference in his *Journal* to *The*

Wretched of the Earth. The latter along with Sartre's preface to it are undoubtedly two of the most detrimentally influential works written during the war with reverberating effects in postcolonial Algeria and throughout the world. One could, for example, read Feraoun's rumination, quoted above – that 'maybe they (the Algerian guerilla fighters) feel that this generation of cowards that is proliferating in Algeria must first disappear, and that a truly free Algeria must be repopulated with new men who have not known the yoke of the secular invader' (Feraoun 2000, 85) – as a critique of a literal interpretation of Fanon's insistence that decolonisation is characterised from the onset by a 'kind of *tabula rasa*' ([1961] 2004, 35): 'quite simply the replacing of a certain "species" of men by another "specie"' of men. Without any period of transition, there is total, complete, and absolute substitution' (ibid). We know that for Fanon violence is a fundamental aspect of the tabula rasa: 'At the level of individuals, violence 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' (ibid, 94). What is evident from Feraoun's *Journal* is that two different kinds of Algerian subjects were born during the revolutionary struggle, neither of which resembled the 'new man' that Fanon envisaged. The psychological trauma of violence spawned the nationalist freedom fighters, on the one hand, who, in the process of seizing the violence the coloniser gave, turned into 'bloodthirsty brutes' by directing their fury also against 'their brothers'. The latter on the other hand, became demoralised by the relentless violence that begot only more violence, 'hoping only for peace, regardless of the outcome of a fight that no longer interests them'.

Feraoun's first-hand experiences, then, offer an important corrective to Fanon's theoretical conceptualisation of revolutionary violence. As the revolutionary struggle and its aftermath testify, violent retaliation might have been a necessary condition to bring about liberation but it failed to create new subjectivities purged of their inferiority complex ([1961] 2004, 94). The appropriated violence bred a new protagonist in a continued reign of terror. Contrary to Fanon's belief expressed in *Dying Colonialism*, violence did not end up serving as catalyst for national unity and consciousness, and failed to forge a common identity and purpose among the colonised people.

Conclusion

Through a close reading of Fanon's 1960 address, 'Why We Use Violence' and the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* ([1961] 2004), I have shown that violence, as Fanon conceives of it, is not merely instrumental and reactive, but also creative and constructive. To come to a more precise understanding of the role of violence in the reclamation of agency in Fanon, I utilised a Foucauldian lens to situate the move from liberation to 'continued practices of liberty' on a continuum between resistance as reaction against stifling colonial conditions and resistance as creative impetus to bring about empowering post-colonial subject identities. While the means of resistance is necessarily violent in nature, it should be clear that Fanon does not value violence in and of itself. In fact, it is a valuation that only pertains to the specific context of the decolonial struggle for liberation in which the colonised's appropriation of the violence the coloniser brought to the African continent becomes the only means – the only language – capable of veering the coloniser off his course of colonial domination. To be sure, for Fanon, violence is a last resort but nevertheless vested with a cleansing and identify-affirming force that purges the colonised of his/her inferiority

complex and puts within his/her reach the real possibility of establishing a new free nation. In Fanon – distanced as he was from the painful reality of the effects of violence – there is certainly an idealisation of the power of violence to which Feraoun's day-to-day testimonial of the brutal reality of being immersed in a violent context offers a stark reality check.

What, in actual fact, are the effects of violence? Within the context of the French-Algerian War, violence was the means that turned the violated and victimised into agents. In Fanon's and Sartre's respective imaginaries, appropriated violence would not resurrect savage instincts but enable the colonial subject to recreate him-/herself. Because violence, then, is not merely reactive but creative it would be capable of ending the self-perpetuating cycle of violence and counter-violence. The old adage, 'violence begets only violence' proved true, however. The Algerian War of Independence did not efface the marks of violence but was marked by a cycle of escalating violence on both sides resulting in a protracted and brutal conflict. The violence was directed indiscriminately against civilian and military targets alike with the FLN's auto-terrorisation of their civilian 'brothers' perhaps the starkest indictment of Fanon's belief in the medicinal power of violence. Feraoun reports as follows on the 'rebels' state of mind':

> Their prestige is eroding precisely because they want too much of it. Did someone not tell me back home that they are now behaving like masters? Like masters whose arrogance far surpasses that of the unseasoned and impulsive administrators or of the big shots we cannot forget. Because the hakem used a whip and the big shot screamed insults. But the rebels, they strangle, they hang victims from trees […] They cut throats, they shoot machine guns, they mutilate (Feraoun 2000, 85).

Jean Daniel, a French-Jewish journalist from Algeria warned that *The Wretched of the Earth* could throw the entire Third World into 'convulsions'. This would inevitably result in mass killing because after 'having found it necessary to kill the colonist, they will find it indispensable to kill those among them who refused to kill. The redemptive assassin will be worse than the crimes of Stalin' (Daniel in Le Sueur 2000: xxx).

Notes

1. The militant and extremist paramilitary Organisation of the Secret Army was composed of French settlers and sympathisers who vehemently opposed Algerian independence. It employed violent means such as bombings and assassinations in its efforts to maintain French control over Algeria and to resist any efforts towards Algerian self-determination.

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Note on contributor

Professor Benda Hofmeyr is affiliated with the Philosophy department, University of Pretoria in South Africa. Her research interests fall within the broad ambit of contemporary continental philosophy (especially thinkers following in the wake of Heidegger with emphasis on post-structuralism and phenomenology) with an enduring fascination for the inextricable entanglement of the ethical and the political. At present, she is reflecting on the entanglement of European and non-Western, especially post-colonial African philosophy, and the possibility of a dialogue across these divergent yet fundamentally intertwined traditions of thought.

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