

In what ways has
colonialism
constituted our violent
world?



To answer this question, I embark on a critical exploration of Frantz Fanon's conception of violence as informed by colonialism; drawing from his seminal text *The Wretched of the Earth* and considering the contributions of both his accolades and critics. The premise of a Fanonian concept of violence is broad, understood as not just bodily harm, but something that involves an attack on rights, an act which dehumanises people. Colonialism as identified by Fanon was absolutely violent. By using the term absolute, I mean as relates to all things concerning the body, social, political and economic life. I am defining colonialism and colonial domination as “ both an epistemological and ontological system as well as a form of structural violence” (Persaud, 1997, p. 170). Fanon's critique understands that colonial domination is distinct from Marxist exploitation because of its racist ideology, the logic of which intrinsically forms the perspective of the colonisers and the colonised. Whilst I recognise that the use of terms like coloniser and colonised serve to reinforce hierarchies of power which oppress the postcolonial subject. In this essay, I employ these terms instrumentally in order to further my argument that such hierarchies constitute our violent world.

It is this racist ideology and the material realities of colonialism which have by and large constituted our violent world; rendering violence the only possible means of decolonisation. I follow Persaud's (1997) critique wherein he argues that we are operating under a neo-colonial schema with an increasing globalisation of the means of production. A system which he argues strongly resemble colonialism, we can therefore understand the logics of colonisation as continuing to reverberate throughout the world.

To make the argument that colonialism has constituted our violent world I advance three main points; the first is that colonialism is dependent on a Manichean racist schema which permits violence. The second is that nonviolence is futile in the face of a regime constituted by violence and is a form of complicity, the third is that violence by the colonised is a means of regaining humanity and agency which I justify using a critique of Fanon by Hannah Arendt.

The central premise of the Fanonian concept of violence is that colonialism utilises racism to construct a Manichean schema; whereby the colonisers are engaged in a Self/Other dialectic with each other but when they look at the colonised they do not see this reflected. They see what Fanon refers to in *Black Skin, White Mask* as “ the zone of nonbeing”; creating a category of people upon whom all things are permitted. Sartre grasped this most aptly when he made reference to the colonial project in Algeria, arguing; “ one of the functions of racism is to compensate the latent universalism of bourgeois liberalism: since all human beings have the same rights the Algerian will be made subhuman” (Paul-Sartre, 2005, p. 18). The logical conclusion of such a Manichean world is a complete dehumanisation of the colonised, an animalisation which is reflected in the language used to describe the colonised, “ the hordes, the stink, the swarming, the seething and the gesticulation” (Fanon, 1961, p. 7). This Manichean world is divided in two, where the colonised world is presented and constructed as a space devoid of all ethics and morality, forming the coloniser’s justification for the infliction of violence and disease. The act of colonisation is not simply constituted by force but is concerned with the normalisation of a pathological othering of

the colonised; it is, crucially, to construct a reality whereby the colonised believed in their own inferiority (Persaud 1997). This conquest is prefixed on an ideology of racism such that in the process of decolonisation the colonised must relearn how to be human. Structural racism has created an almost permanent state of violence, physical and otherwise. Here, I refer back to the notion that it is not just physical violence but epistemologies, which is to say knowledge about the world. To fight racism, argues Fanon (1961), is to fight for ethical consideration; it is a challenge to a system which presents itself as universal when in fact it is normative and (Gordon, 2011).

Fanon is exposing the Western colonial fantasy of an epistemological difference between the colonised and colonisers, reversing the idea that “the West and the national bourgeoisie are the only ones that can rectify the degradation of social life” (Agathangelou, 2016, p. 125). The racist logic of colonialism creates a group of people outside the remit of ethical consideration against whom all manner of violence is permitted.

Decolonising the ethical realm will always be considered violent because it is a space where the colonised do not belong. Their very presence is incendiary as they are not welcome in the sphere of moral and ethical reasoning (Gordon, 2011). Therefore, in the very act of demanding recognition as a political community comprised of human beings worthy of ethical consideration it will be perceived as violent. Decolonisation serves as the force which demands ethical consideration for the colonised and will therefore always be construed as violent.

The only potential for nonviolence in the colonial world, is for the colonised to be absent from it entirely. For Fanon (1961: 2-3), “ decolonisation reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives”; what he means by this is that since it is “ the encounter between two congenitally antagonistic forces” it can never be nonviolent. Not only is nonviolence futile, but it plays into colonial capitalist interests. Economic domination is embedded in the Manichean schema; the colonists draw their wealth from the colonies and as such have a vested interest in preventing violence (Fanon 1961). It behoves the colonisers to protect their economic interests, it is not profitable for the metropolis to kill their consumers. Nonviolence is therefore complicit in colonial violence— it is simply playing at dissent, whilst allowing injustice to continue. To preach nonviolence is to presuppose the colonisers as rational, to view colonial domination as a force with which one can reason when; “ challenging the colonial world is not a rational confrontation of viewpoints” (Fanon, 1961, p. 6). In this way, freedom is to be taken by the colonised and not given to them, for this assumes the right of the colonisers to grant them their freedom. Chinese anarcho-feminist He Zhen makes a similar point in arguing that it is the political responsibility of women to free themselves, otherwise they remain dependent on the state (Zarrow, 1988).

In attempting to decolonise in a nonviolent way, the colonisers Westphalian legitimacy is upheld, deriving from their monopoly over the use of force. To preach non-violence misunderstands the nature of settler colonialism. Fanon uses the examples of Algeria to show that the colonised are defined by violence. The physical violence cannot “ be kept separate from the social, economic and political realms of engagement between colonizers and

colonized” (Frazer & Hutchings, 2015, p. 14). Furthermore, Fanon asserts that colonial violence and revolutionary violence are fundamentally different. I expand upon this in the context of Hannah Arendt’s critique of Fanonian violence.

These are the terms that have been set by the colonisers; armed struggle is what the colonisers have taught the colonised. It has been made abundantly clear to the colonised that legitimacy is derived from the use of force, so it forms the logic of how the liberation movements go about decolonisation. “The very same people who had constantly drummed into them that the only language they understood was force, now decide to express themselves with force” (Fanon, 1961, p. 42). The irony is that it is the colonised are now saying the only language the colonisers understand is force. We see this reversal in the empirical example of Algeria and as well as in contemporary post-colonial environments. It is critical to reinforce that for Fanon violence by the colonised is itself, the outcome of colonial violence.

In arguing that colonial domination is qualitatively different from other forms of oppression, Fanon puts forth that violence constitutes a form of therapy for the colonised subject. He has faced criticism from Hannah Arendt (1970) in her text *On Violence*; in which she argues that Fanon instrumentalises violence for the sake of violence. Arendt’s critique rejects the centrality of violence in politics and to Fanon’s point that violence constitutes an almost libidinal release she argues such a view is socio-biologically essentialist and fundamentally misguided. Countering that any association of politics with death is the complete antithesis to politics as it marks “the absolute end to the individual’s capacity for new beginning which is essential to politics”
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(Frazer & Hutchings, 2008, p. 101). Arguing that though violence is sometimes justifiable, it can never be legitimate (Finlay, 2009). Fanon's argument however, is that violence when accompanied by a revolutionary movement is transformative. In the vein of Foucauldian thought, Fanon makes the claim that violence is productive, appealing to the cleansing nature of violence albeit when accompanied by a strong liberation movement. It must be clarified however, that Fanon presents violence as detestable albeit a necessity for the liberation of colonised peoples. The kind of violence that Fanon is advocating is not individualised, but situated in collective action, making reference to political aims and historical realities (Persaud, 1997). Fanon does not view the instrumental role of violence as a tool to crush the forces of the colonisers. Arendt's claim that the justification for violence is one of instrumental utility ignores Fanon's argument that the role of violence lies in its ability to achieve political goals and psychological healing.

When practiced in the context of organised revolution, violence humanizes the colonised, in this way Fanon (1961, p. 35) states that " the native discovers his life, his breath, his beating heart" serving to free the individual from " their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude" (Fanon, 1961, p. 51). In deconstructing the white man as a man and not a god, Fanon speaks directly to the experience of the colonised. The label affixed to the colonised of ' subhuman' is debilitating in the way that it creates a culture of dependency. In utilising, anti-colonial violence, what is regained is a sense of agency that is otherwise lost in the process of colonisation. Violence is also necessary to deconstruct a fundamentally

unjust system. The colonised cannot free themselves from this dependency and culture of deference unless “ they learn to become daring and disrespectful” (Kebede, 2001, p. 553). Through the defiant act of violence against the colonisers what is subverted is the degradation of what it means to be colonised unto the colonisers themselves. The result of this subversion is not only that the colonised regain a sense of humanity through the shock of violence but that it is possible to instrumentalise this humanising feature in order to create a just new world.

Whilst recognising violence as the force which awakens both colonised and coloniser to the humanity of the colonised; Fanon’s medical background allows him to explore the traumatising effects of violence on both the victims and the perpetrators and the impact on the future of the society. He takes pains to stress the trauma inflicted on the psyche of individuals and using the example of two Algerian boys killing their European playmate demonstrates how perpetrators of violence in the colonial context become void of moral reasoning (Fanon, 1961). If violence is the sole tool of liberation the colonised become trapped in the violent logics of colonialism. This draws attention to the myriad of ways in which colonialism has constituted violent dynamics, with anti-colonial violence also undermined by the observation “ of its pathological effects” (Frazer & Hutchings, 2015, p. 21).

The colonial world derives legitimacy from force, much like the modern nation state; In this way, liberation fighters also learn to gain legitimacy from the violence. It is important to note that Fanon is often misconstrued as glorifying violence when he in fact he demarcates strict parameters around its use legitimate use. He stresses that it is the role of postcolonial societies

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to ensure that the leaders derive legitimacy from alternative sources extraneous to violence. Fanon argues that the populations now freed from colonial domination are traumatised by the conditions of violence which have fundamentally reordered indigenous society. In the aftermath, Fanon argues that it is the responsibility of the newly formed political community to cultivate a very different kind of population if one is to expect a liberated postcolonial society. What is at stake is true liberation, of this Fanon is exceedingly clear. Violence without a strong liberation movement will allow the colonised 'elites' who have learned the behaviour of the colonisers to essentially recreate colonial conditions; "their doctrine is to proclaim the absolute need for nationalising the theft of the nation" (Fanon, 1961, p. 12). What Fanon is unable to consider, given the time at which he is writing are the ways in which globalisation has constructed a neo-colonial schema. The colonial powers who had constructed this Manichean world now police the entry of postcolonial states to contemporary international society through institutional constraints.

Individual acts of violence must be realised in the broader context of a commitment to the removal of colonial powers from institutions such as the military, and committing to personal and economic justice within individual postcolonial societies. Using the example of the FLN in Algeria, Fanon (1961) argues that transformations within systems of governing have the capacity to transform the psyche of the colonised and thereby, their attitude towards their rights over their own labour. The role of armed struggle is similarly, a mobilising and unifying force for the liberation movement. The effect of which is the introduction of the "notion of common cause, national destiny,

and collective history” (Fanon, 1961, p. 51). This unity is vital in a colonial society which is ravaged by hierarchy predicated upon the maintenance of social categorisation along the lines of colonial logic. Violence is an equalising force with the capability to give every individual a hand in their own liberation whilst preventing all the ‘merit’ being attributed to a single leader. However, without a clear vision for what happens in the aftermath of revolutionary violence, “national consciousness is nothing but a crude empty shell” (Fanon, 1961, p. 22).

To conclude, colonialism continues to influence overarching structures of power in the world shaping the epistemological and ontological realities of our violent world. In this way asserts Fanon, in the absolute violence of colonialism the only potential counter is violence. That is violence begets violence. I have demonstrated that Fanon’s account of violence is complex and shifting; his critique is presupposed by the racist Manichean self/other dialectic. This dialectic has as its logical conclusion the complete dehumanisation of the colonial subject upon whom all manner of violence is permitted. Fanon’s exposition of the colonial ideology as inherently racist recognises that all decolonisation will be perceived as violent. Regardless of whether or not it is making, rendering nonviolence futile. Moreover, nonviolence is nothing more than a continuation of colonial domination given that the claims of the colonised are diametrically opposed to the interests of the colonised. Arendt’s critique raises the concern that Fanon makes instrumental use of violence, to which my analysis counters that for Fanon the value of violence lies in its ability to achieve the political goals of the liberation movement. When violence is utilised by a liberation movement it

can subvert the inhumanity of colonisation and imbue liberation fighters with legitimacy when realised within the broader context of a commitment to societal transformation.

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