

A wholly other time? The revolutionary and the revolution

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Don't expect to see any explosion today. It's either too early ... or too late.

Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952

Now stand up and shout personal and free ... as Lenin shouted leap, leap, leap when he saw dialectical development to be that and also the objective world.

Dunayevskaya, "The Letter of May 12, 1953"

Part I: Time

There comes a time when silence becomes dishonesty.

Fanon

Fifty years is a very long time in the after-life of a revolutionary. Imagine 1933, fifty years after Marx's death, when Marxism, which Marx had developed as a theory of liberation and life, had become associated with Stalin's counter-revolution and death, forced collectivization and the gulag. Fanon is fortunate not to be associated with a state power though his thought has often been reduced to what states do best: violence.

Things have certainly changed since the post World War II epoch of anti-colonial struggles when the "whirlpool" of the Cold War between "Communism" and capitalism was often fought as a hot-war in the former colonies (Fanon 1968:76). After structural adjustment and neoliberal globalization, the question is not only what is there about Fanon's thought that transcends its time but what of Fanon haunts our time? And while we cannot join Fanon "on the trenches of the anticolonial struggle" (Scott 1999:204), we can, following Scott's logic, situate Fanon on the trenches not simply as a cry for action but to help resituate *The Wretched of the Earth* in its problematic and shift the discussion toward more practical concerns of revolutionary

will (Hallward) and revolutionary humanism (Turner and Alan 1986, Gibson 2003) in the context of the dialectics of organization.¹

Fanon insisted that he was “irreducible” to his time, declaring that “the future should be an edifice supported by living men,” and he might wonder why we are still debating the relevance and *timeliness* of his work. But like him, some of us might still believe that the present is “something to be exceeded” (1967a:13), and others confront reality daily as something dangerously against life, which must be resisted. At another register, colonialism means the end of time for the colonized (as Cabral eloquently put it, “they made us leave history, our history, to follow them, right at the back, to follow the progress of their history,” but adding “we want to return to our history by our own means and through our own sacrifices” [1974:63]). Having been expelled from history, the colonized, Fanon argues, rediscover themselves as temporal beings in the struggle against colonialism (as Fanon puts it “the thing” becomes human “during the same process by which it frees itself” [1968:37]). In an absolute way (1968:41), the living struggle against colonialism recovers lost time. And Fanon insists on rebuilding the “new reality of the nation” (his first title for *A Dying Colonialism*): “the time ‘lost’ in treating the worker as a human being will be made up ... by teaching[ing] the masses that everything depends on them ... (1968:193). Yet how is this accomplished? Fanon refuses to tell us when the time is right for a revolutionary movement (see 1968:71). But it also turns out that settler colonialism is not as impermeable as it appears and with colonialism dying, Fanon warns that another system of exploitation and loss can take its place. This becomes Fanon’s signal concern.

¹ See the discussion in Gibson 2003: 157-76, 200-3, and Turner 1999. It was only after I had completed a draft of this paper that I realized how much I had “unconsciously” internalized Turner’s argument in what I have always thought a brilliant essay and though we haven’t spoken of the essay for a few years, the now two-decade-old discussion about Fanon continues.

Practice

Every citizen to a man must act as a judge and participate in the government of the country.... [T]hat is a tremendously difficult task. But socialism cannot be introduced by a minority, a party.

Lenin

We must come back to the Marxist formula. The triumphant middle classes are the most impetuous, the most enterprising, the most annexationist in the world (not for nothing did the French bourgeoisie of 1789 put Europe to fire and sword).

Fanon

Like Lenin, the problem Fanon faced was not starting the revolution but creating a new society. For both, the destruction of the old and the creation of the new are not separate processes. Indeed, Lenin realized “*living, creative socialism is the product of the masses themselves*” (my emphasis CW 16:289). The problem was how to make sure that the most oppressed direct “the everyday administration of the state” and the decision-making of the new society (CW 25:494). This is far from easy. Indeed, despite such awareness, Lenin failed. In his last years, for example, Lenin viewed the growing bureaucratization of the party, growing national chauvinism and the “administrative mentality” of the party leaders (see Dunayevskaya 1989:119) in the context of the country reeling from civil war, continued external pressure and near famine. What to do? The libertarian Lenin² still put his trust in the party leaders, a “thin layer” of principled Bolsheviks who would hold the line, so to speak. Lenin could not break with the party concept. What can we say of Fanon, 40 years after Lenin? Fanon was not a Leninist but

² My point is not to open up a debate about Lenin (see Anderson 1989) but note that I am not simply reducing Lenin to the type of vanguardist associated with his name, but emphasizing the “libertarian Lenin” of the revolutionary period (see Leibman 1975).

like Lenin, Fanon vigorously criticized the rise of national chauvinism, the paucity of revolutionary theory, and the “laziness” of the intellectuals; he pointed to the inherent contradictions and “pitfalls” in the anticolonial movements and gestured toward a more inclusive alternative future from the bottom up. Coming as an insider-critic, his critique of the anticolonial movements was one of his great contributions. Yet despite all Fanon’s criticisms, and as much as he insisted that everything depends on the consciousness and actions of the masses, are his concepts of consciousness and political education adequate to address the counter-revolution he perceived?

In the sequence of anticolonial struggles that Fanon maps out in *The Wretched*, there is a moment when middle class, reformist, and urban nationalist parties are brushed aside by a revolutionary national liberation movement. Militants herald the revolutionary potential of the peasantry and the “lumpenproletariat,” but, argues Fanon, as the movement experiences setbacks, it needs to be critically self-reflective. The initial struggle is both “radical and totalitarian,” he argues and, reflecting on the Algerian struggle, he says that “the art of politics is simply transformed into the art of war” (1968:132). The revolutionary maturity of the resistance had meant that a critique of spontaneous impetuosity, on one hand, and the military approach on the other was a practical need. Fanon argues in *The Wretched* that the Manichean certainties that had fueled the initial movement must break apart because the “native” / “settler” binary that powered the early resistance (and seemed to power Fanon’s analysis)³ is ultimately regressive. It becomes clear that not all “settlers” are enemies and that “exploitation can wear a black face or an Arab one” (1968:145). Slogans will not suffice to raise the consciousness of the rank of file (1968:135-136). Fanon concludes that Manicheanistic thinking, the brutal thought typical of

³ See for example, Mamdani reading of Fanon (2001:10,13) in the context of the Rwandan genocide.

revolutions, “inevitably leads to defeat” (1968:147). A more nuanced politics is needed as well as an inclusive political analysis. This is Fanon, if you will, at his most Leninist. The tasks of political education are to take the activity of thinking seriously and fight those who think that “shades of meaning constitute a danger and threaten popular solidarity” (2004:95, translation altered).

As Michael Neocosmos (2011) argues, “[t]he notion of the party is at the core of the problem in his thought... Broadly speaking, Fanon’s politics conforms to the prevalent view of the twentieth century that ‘the people’ are to be understood as the subject of history and that they effectuate their agency by being represented in the political arena by a party.” Perhaps for this reason—namely that of Fanon’s apparent “orthodoxy” in *The Wretched*—many poststructuralist and postcolonial theorists have found *Black Skin, White Masks* more suggestive, more malleable to a postmodern and cosmopolitan postcolonial politics. While the postcolonial idea of “hybridity” might describe some postcolonial culture, it doesn’t, as far as I am concerned, catch what Fanon is thinking. There is also another element in *The Wretched* and in *A Dying Colonialism*, which I believe better fits with Fanon’s notion of liberation. It is connected to Fanon’s notion of a *fighting culture* (the new identity and new social relations born not in reaction to colonialism but as social actions that prefigured the new nation [see Gibson 2003]). The newness relates to the use of a quote from Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* to open “In lieu of a conclusion” in *Black Skin*. The new revolution with which Fanon identifies is one that constantly criticizes and goes back on itself—it is, in Césaire’s word (1995:135), a “revolution”—interrelated with the possibility of a different and radically open, *decentralized* and democratic organizational form. He insists that an extreme decentralization is essential to building the new nation from the bottom up and represents an important shift from his insistence that a “central

authority” (1968:135) is required to create an organized national resistance to colonialism.

Decentralization, in the immediate period of independence, appears as the necessary form to realize the new nation and is, for Fanon, essential to the struggle against regionalism, chauvinism and xenophobia as well as the technicism and professionalization of politics that occurs with the concentration of political power among elites in urban areas.

I certainly do not want to suggest that the sequence of *The Wretched*, nor the struggle for liberation, is linear. Indeed, Fanon is quick to point out that after independence the “masses” become “frustrated” because for them there is no immediate change, no redistribution of land, no social and economic reforms. The “enlightened observer takes note of this masked discontent,” he adds, “which still threatens to burst into flames” (1968:75). And it does. The feeling of injustice is real, but it often goes unheard or is violently suppressed. And thus we return to the brutal manicheanism that had characterized colonialism.

The discontent can be manifest in local acts of violence which appear spontaneous but are often micro-managed by ethnic entrepreneurs, local businessmen and local party leaders, or discontent can burst out regionally and even nationally, often organized through the politicization of indigeneity based on the “commonest racial feeling” (1968:161). The sources of injustice (the lack of land, jobs, and bread) are often articulated against “outsiders,” framed as “natives” against “settlers” or foreigners or in terms of “spiritual rivalries” (see 1968:160-161). And thus nationalism and ultra-nationalism, as Fanon predicted in 1961 and as we have witnessed for 50 years, lead to the pogroms of national chauvinism and racism (1968:156). Across the African continent, the nationalist elites in their “will to imitation” (1968:161) have politicized indigeneity (Mamdani 2002:280) and “assimilated colonialist thought in its most corrupt form” (Fanon 1968:162). Quite simply, without concrete alternatives, without open debate that includes the

masses, their discontent with liberation becomes channelled along these lines. Fanon argues that the degeneration of the national project is based on two factors, the nationalist elite's mistrust of the masses and the "haziness of its political tenets" which is reduced to the motto "replace the foreigner" (1968:158). The elites' fear of the masses can correspond with an authoritarian populism and also with an intellectual "laziness" promoting a politicization of indigeneity and "a racial philosophy that is extremely harmful for the future of Africa" (1968:162).

But the problem with the anticolonial movements cannot simply be answered by applying the logic of Marx's slogan in light of the defeat of the 1848 revolutions, "never again with the bourgeoisie." Fanon's critique of the timidity and incapacity of the national bourgeoisie to act in a decisive way against colonialism echoes Marx's critique, and Marx's advice that the workers' own organizations encourage and give direction to revolutionary excitement and "popular vengeance" (Marx 1975:325) is echoed in Fanon's advice in *The Wretched*, that violence should be channelled toward its "real" cause. For Fanon the comprador character of the national bourgeoisie is expressed by its paucity of ideas. Thus, ironically, the end of colonialism offers an opportunity for revolutionary *will* because the nascent bourgeoisie in the colonies is structurally weak. In other words, their structural weakness as a bourgeoisie can become a strength if they understand that the future depends on an absolute break with colonialism. For Fanon, it is a tricky position to navigate. It is almost idealistic because it is solely dependent on political will and often seems dependent on the nationalist leadership's willingness to take a stand and risk everything. Thus alongside an organized and principle resistance, Fanon posits a unifying liberatory ideology as what is lacking in the African revolutions. Without it, it is left up to the military to stand in for the nation—again mimicking Europe—while reactionary religious organizations stand in for the national party, both with dire consequences. But this raises the

issue of circulatory thinking. The lumpen-intelligentsia needs to be educated in the school of the people and the people need to be liberated from reactive thinking, but by whom? By a thin layer of enlightened militants schooled in the long history of struggle (in Algeria at least between the period of 1945 and 1954)? For Fanon this retrogressive development (from nationalism to racism) is almost inevitable once the independence struggle is decoupled from the mass movements. It is precisely then that the absence of ideology (1967b:189), namely an idea of the future—what he calls a new humanism—practically spelled out is profoundly concrete. A Leninist humanism perhaps?

Yet, I also want to argue here that perhaps one way of understanding Fanon's insistence on decentralization, wariness of federalism and the dominance of more prosperous regions (1968:159), is through considering Fanon's own practice of theory, his organization of thought and commitment to revolutionary change and how practice—concrete lived experience of political engagement with the Algerian revolution—enlivens contradictions and concretizes what he means by the absence of ideology.

Part II: Life against living death

Organization

The closest Fanon came to being part of the organized left was working on Césaire's Fort de France mayoral campaign on the Communist Party ticket in 1945. In the late 1940s, Fanon did attend a few Trotskyist meetings in Lyon. But organized political activity was secondary to Fanon's chosen profession as a psychiatrist. The project of disalienation of the Black in *Black Skin*, even at its most political (namely when Fanon spoke about the necessity to change the social structure), did not at all refer to the "organizational question." Though successful anticolonial movements are often in retrospect made synonymous with political organizations

and leaders, they also occur in a period of tremendous spontaneous self-organization. And in the post World War II period new conceptions of organization and liberation were being articulated globally.⁴ After Fanon joined the FLN, that organization became synonymous in his mind with the Algerian revolution but he did not consider the success of the anticolonial struggle simply in terms of an FLN victory. Instead he looked to the self-organization and radical changes that were taking place in social relations as the basis for a new society. Indeed, by his death in 1961, Fanon had become openly critical of the vanguard-type nationalist organization which he saw as a form for the one-party state preferred by the “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie” (1968:165). In other words, though he did not answer the question of organization, it was implicitly connected to his criticism of decolonization and the commitment articulated in his final year, to put Africa “in motion behind revolutionary principles” (1967b:177). But let us take another step back.

In Hegel’s famous dialectic of “master and slave,”⁵ the slave gains a mind of her own, a new standpoint for consciousness, not through pressing the master for recognition but by working on the external thing. Thereby the slave transcends slavish consciousness even if she does not transcend slavery. In his critique of Hegel in *Black Skin* (1967a), Fanon reminds us that in the colonies such a standpoint cannot emerge. With the Antillean experience at the back of his mind, Fanon agrees with Hegel that any proclamation of freedom and equality by the master cannot and will not create mental liberation. Freedom given on the master’s terms—white liberty, white justice (1967a:221)—means the slave remaining slavish and dependent, simply going from one living death to another (see 1967a:220). Instead, the kind of “work” necessary to

⁴ See, for example, James, Lee, and Castoriadis 1958, Dunayevskaya 1959 and Fanon 1959.

⁵ Though I can’t go into it here, it is worth remembering that Fanon’s reading of Hegel was mediated by Kojève, whose influential seminars were attended by Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, and Bataille among others.

gain a mind of one's own, Fanon suggests, quoting Césaire, can only occur in a struggle which “lays bare the white man in himself [and] kill[s] him” (1967a:198).⁶

The “lived experience of the Black,” the title of chapter five of *Black Skin*, has become almost synonymous with Fanon's philosophy,⁷ yet we also know from the conclusion of that chapter that lived experience alone does not provide the impetus for liberation. Black experience in a racist society is crazy making. Since every avenue for genuine reciprocity and genuine reason seems blocked off—“every hand is a losing hand” (1967a:132)—on what basis can the disalienation of the Black become grounded? It is clear by the end of *Black Skin* that it is society that needs changing and Fanon's “sociodiagnostic” means that the struggle for a *living* autonomy requires a will to liberty that makes a complete break with postcolonial bourgeois society, which Fanon equates with the slavish condition. Fanon's critique of bourgeois society, its inhumanity and hypocrisy, remains a consistent principle.

In *Black Skin*, bourgeois society is characterized as a society of the living dead: a closed society where “ideas and men are corrupt” and any person “who takes a stand against this death is in a sense a revolutionary” (224-5). This is why he quotes Marx's *18th Brumaire* (written in the aftermath of the failure of the 1848 “bourgeois revolution” in France). The future revolution could only be made “permanent” by finding its own content, the absence of which, Fanon would later decry, only leads to pseudo-equality and pseudo-independence. Fanon made this future clear at the end of *Black Skin*. He refuses to be a “slave of the past,” to rely on memories of the past; he refuses, in other words, to be defined by the other, which includes being defined in

⁶ But Fanon does not take the Lacanian move here, that is to say, rather than rejecting “work” he calls on the Antillean to work for independence. In *The Wretched*, he adds that “the colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence” seeming to suggest that it is the “risk” of life that affirms the colonized's humanity (for a reading that connects this concept to Fanon's “Concerning Violence”—the militant's work—see Zahar).

⁷ See Bernasconi 2001:184-201.

reaction to the other. Instead he insists that existence be defined in a leap that creates its own foundation beyond the instrumental and the contingent (1967a:229). *A Dying Colonialism* (first published as *L'an V de la révolution Algérienne [Year 5 of the Algerian Revolution]* in 1959, again making reference to another French revolution) explicates this idea, describing the future-present, the new ways of life and new ideas that the Algerian revolution has wrought.

Fanon did not move to Algeria in late 1953 to join a revolution; instead his goal was to put into practice a program of sociotherapy at Blida psychiatric hospital. But he was at Blida for less than a year before the Algerian revolution began. Alice Cherki (2006:78) notes that Fanon's reaction to the FLN's proclamation of independence on November 1st, 1954 is unknown but his support for Algeria's national liberation came very quickly. It was not surprising that he would join a revolutionary movement. He was already a revolutionary, who as Jean Ayme put it, had "been given the opportunity to take part in a revolution" (quoted in Cherki 2006:94).

The revolution became Fanon's identity and his work. The future Algeria came to represent the kind of new humanism that he had only wished for in *Black Skin*, a space "open to all," where there could be a "real leap" and invention introduced into existence (1967a:229) and where "every kind of genius may grow" (1967c:32). This vision was also based on the idea of the future society articulated by his mentor, Ramdane Abane, at the Soummam conference of the FLN in 1956 with the "primacy of citizenship over identities (Arab, Amazigh, Muslim, Christian, European, etc.) as the only guarantee for the establishment of a modern and balanced postcolonial society" (Abane 2011).

Concretely, for Fanon, Algerian citizenship meant that everyone, without any claim to indigeneity—regardless of race, gender, religion—would be involved in the creation of a new Algerian society. It was not a future dream but, he believed, already happening: "*in the new*

society that is being built, there are only Algerians. From the outset, therefore, every individual living in Algeria is an Algerian” (Fanon, 1967c:152).

Fanon’s optimism was born from the optimism of the Algerian people and the radical changes in social relations he described in *Year 5*. It was an optimism derived not from an “objective dialectic” of a dying colonialism but from an “effective solidarity” that was killing it off:

The optimism that prevails today in Africa is not an optimism born of the spectacle of the forces of nature that are at last favorable to Africans. Nor is the optimism due to the discovery in the former oppressor of a less inhuman and more kindly state of mind. Optimism in Africa is the direct product of the revolutionary action of the masses (1967b:171).

Resources

The rifle of the Senegalese soldier is not a penis but a genuine rifle.

Fanon

Fanon made contact with the FLN in 1955 and left the country around the new year of 1957. His identification with and commitment to the Algerian revolution was swift and absolute. Living the double life while at Blida, he prepared a paper for the First Conference of Black Writers held in Paris in September. “Racism and Culture” was written in the context of a state of emergency and emergence: “the endless strikes, the curfew that had been imposed on Blida, the attacks on neighboring farms...the summary executions of FLN sympathizers” (Cherki:86). The paper presented at the conference had no direct reference to the Algerian struggle but Fanon’s commitment was obvious in its conclusions:

The logical end of this will to struggle is the total liberation of the national territory. In order to achieve this liberation the inferiorized man brings all his resources into play, all his acquisitions, the old and the new, his own and those of the occupant. The struggle is at once total, absolute (1967b:43).

During the 1956/7 “Battle of Algiers” all these resources were brought into play. And Fanon was among them. Doctors, hospitals, and pharmacies were secretly tending to the wounded; other sympathizers were helping to distribute materials and information or provide safe houses; and so on. Fanon was contacted to help counsel militants. It was a very practical and concrete request, using his training to aid the defeat of the French, while being educated by the “school of the people” (1968:150).⁸

But the situation had Blida had become untenable. While there might have seemed something unreal about treating the torturers and the tortured, Blida Hospital had also become known to the authorities as a “den” of the FLN. It was a dangerous place to be. Soon after returning to the country after the Black Writers conference in Paris, Fanon resigned. Fanon had never thought of psychiatry apart from society and thus it had become absolutely clear that sociotherapy could not be practiced in Algeria because the social structure was against it. At least, this is what he maintained in his resignation letter. Lawlessness, torture and inequality were the “logical consequence” of an “attempt to decerebralize a people” (1967b:53), which he claimed had “put an end to my mission in Algeria” (1967b:54). In reality, he had already begun

⁸ This experience would become generalized in *The Wretched* where he argued that in order to join the “school of the people” the middle class needs to be at the service of the revolution all the resources they have “snatched from the colonials universities” (see 1968:150).

another mission to put an end to one Algeria and help bring into being another one. From full time director of psychiatry he became a full-time revolutionary, working for the FLN.

Interregnum

We must leave our dreams and abandon our old beliefs and friendships from the time before life began.

Fanon

Fanon left Algiers for France before the authorities could arrest him. In early 1957, the Parisian left was full of discussions of the Hungarian revolution that had raised the question of a socialist humanism before being crushed by Russian tanks in October 1956. Yet the heralding of the Hungarian resistance and the mass resignations from the French Communist Party (which continued to support French colonialism in Algeria) did not translate into a shift in attitudes toward the Algerian question and the liberation struggle. On the contrary, even with the emergence of “new left” non-vanguard communist organizations like Castoriadis’ *Socialism or Barbarism*, which was loudly praising the self-activity and self-organization of the Budapest resistance, the French remained mostly quiet about Algeria.⁹ Fanon, on the other hand, who made clear in *The Wretched* that his sympathies lay with the Budapest revolutionaries (noting that it signified “a decisive moment” [1968:79] in the global anticolonial movement), rejected the Parisian left talk and committed himself to decolonizing Algeria.

If Lenin had believed that his was the epoch of imperialism, for Fanon, decolonization was not simply “bacilli” (CW 22:357) for the proletarian revolution but a beginning of

⁹ Césaire also resigned from the Communist Party after Hungary but remained “loyal” to France and unwilling to support the Algerian struggle.

something quite new. Colonialism was dying, and from inside the Algerian revolution the problem was the emergence of a democratic, inclusive, and accountable society that could be the basis for a new internationalism (1968:247). This was the problem that Fanon found Lenin grappling with as he read the documents of the early Communist International at Jean Ayme's apartment in early 1957.¹⁰ The Communist International's theses that national and peasant revolts are essential to the social struggle, arguing that "the capitalist stage of economic development [was not] inevitable" (Lenin: CW 31:244) as well as Lenin's theses on "National and Colonial Question," certainly resonate with Fanon's later arguments in *The Wretched*. Indeed, Lenin insisted in his critique of Bukharin's *Economics of the Transition Period* that the idea of skipping the capitalist stage was "impossible" and could only be demonstrated "practically." It was a remark echoed by Fanon in *The Wretched* when he insisted that "whether or not the bourgeois phase can be skipped ought to be answered in the field of revolutionary action not logic" (1968:175).

Part III: To the trenches

Space

To understand how practice resolves or enlivens theoretical issues, one must return to Fanon's commitment to the Algerian revolution and the brilliance of its moment, while at the same time not freezing that moment but catching its dialectic, saturated by his experiences of 1956/7, the battle of Algiers and discussion with Abane and the FLN's Soummam document.

¹⁰ Fanon had met Ayme, an "institutional psychiatrist with a long history of anticolonial activism" (Cherki:86), in September 1956 and he introduced Fanon to Pierre Broué. The same age as Fanon, Broué had become a revolutionary socialist in 1944 and co-authored one of the most definitive works on the Spanish revolution and its "betrayal" by Stalinism (published in 1961). According to Cherki, all three talked through the night. The next day Fanon presented "Racism and Culture" at the Congress of Black Writers.

Central to Fanon's conception of the new society is the politics of space and the reordering of the colonial geography is a central marker to decolonial *reorganization* (1968:38)

Fanon's famous description of the zoned cities of colonialism—the dark, cramped, poor, hungry, native town, and the light, spacious, rich, satiated colonial town—is based on his own observations from the Antilles to Africa, especially Algiers. He noted in *Black Skin* that the elites lived high above the shacks below; in Algiers the European city is built around the port and its gaze is turned away from the Casbah toward the Mediterranean. There was not a formal organizational separation between the “European city and the Muslim one” but there was, Cherki notes (42) a “keen awareness of boundaries felt by everyone.” They were felt by Algerians who rarely ventured outside the three areas where they were concentrated: the Casbah, the “petite Casbah” near Belcourt and “the vast slums, groaning with misery, that cropped up in the interstices between established neighborhoods ... places without public works or services of any kind that the rural poor came to settle” (Cherki 2006:41-42).

In reality, the poor urban populations living in the *bidonville*¹¹ or “informal settlements” on the edges or in the interstices of the Casbah are the same displaced rural populations seen as an unruly, threatening mass by the colonial regime. For Fanon this subterranean and uncounted mass of people became the crucial actors in the liberation struggle. On the edges of the Casbah, shantytowns had been growing since the 1920s as Algerians increasingly made their way to urban areas, which offered more opportunities than the increasingly pauperized rural “reserves” often ruled by a despotic, colonial backed, “customary” authority. Expropriated from the better land, the rural poor become landless squatters and casual laborers with colonial taxations and

¹¹ From bidon meaning metal can or drum.

forced labor, turning the Algerian population, as Sartre argued, “into an immense agricultural proletariat” (2001:36).

From the late 1940s until the declaration of Algerian liberation, Algiers’s population grew significantly, particularly its shack settlements.¹² During this period connections began to develop between young French and Algerian men and women who came together to address some of the problems that plagued these communities (see Cherki:42). These connections laid the ground for the associations that some years later “contacted Fanon and provided him entry to the struggle for Algeria’s liberation” (Cherki:42).

By the 1950s, the growth of shack settlements added what Çelik (1997:110) calls “a third element” to the dualistic colonial city that Fanon described. This third element formed the core of Fanon’s *lumpenproletariat*, which by 1954, on the eve of the Algerian revolution, had become over 40% of Algiers’ native population. During the Battle of Algiers, Fanon observed how the *bidonvilles* began to take on a more practical-critical role, not only as manifestations of the material/spatial divide between Europeans and Algerian zones, but as a center for the resistance. Algiers’ marginals, poor and unemployed, became Fanonian subjects of history.¹³ The *bidonville* became part of the frontline of the struggle and in retaliation, “and as part of the war strategy,” Çelik remarks (1997:112), colonial “military forces bulldozed many squatter settlements, and army trucks transported the residents to dispersed locations to be rehoused.”

Resettlement

¹² It was estimated that 125,000 people lived in the “shantytowns” in 1953, up from 4800 in 1938 (Celik:82)

¹³ For a contemporary discussion of the importance of radical shack dwellers movement in post-apartheid South Africa see Gibson 2011 and Pithouse 2009, 2010.

The policy of “regroupment,” or resettlement,¹⁴ was launched in 1954, immediately following the beginning of the “insurrection,” with the organizational rationale that the rural masses formed the “engine of revolution.” By 1958, 3 million Algerians (one in every three of the population) had moved from where they had been living in 1954. Argued in the language of improvement and development, the resettlement camps, far from the people’s homes and livelihoods, were set up along military lines so they could be easily supervised and cheaply constructed (Çelik:129). In reality they became centers of poverty, misery, sickness and also resistance. As *Time Magazine* put it in 1959,

But for every successful regrouped village there are at least three in which the Moslems are worse off than before. In some centers the villagers are resettled in tents ringed with barbed wire. Saharan nomads, used to constant roaming, waste away by the hundreds when cooped up in camps. The 400,000 Moslem refugees outside the regrouped camps drift into cities, and rapidly join the ragged, seldom-employed urban proletariat choking the slums.

In the same year, *El Moudjahid* stated that “150,000 Algerians [are] in jail, one million [are] in resettlement centers, nearly 300,000 refugees [are] in Tunisia and Morocco, and the rest [are] at the mercy of the French military machine.”

In “The Algerian Family,” included in *Year 5*, Fanon writes of the tens of thousands of families, many headed by women, who have been are forcibly detained in an effort to

¹⁴ The timing of this strategy is important but at the same time the “state of exception” that Walter Benjamin brilliantly conceptualized about the Nazi regime, which has been recently popularized with reference to Agamben, is a colonial mission, as Steve Biko (1978:75) most succinctly put it: “Hitler is not dead he is alive and well and living in Johannesburg.”

“destructure Algerian culture.” It is a terrible situation where “no gesture is kept intact. No previous rhythm is to be found unaltered” (1967c:39, 117). But the detainees were not immune to the “oxygen” of national resistance and the destructuring is relieved and also subverted by revolutionary Algeria. Resettlement recreates revolutionaries, but uprooted, dcentered, and fragile, the problem is: how can national culture grow and aim for fundamentally new social relations (1968:246)? What didn’t seem a problem in *Year 5* would be addressed in *The Wretched*.

The new society (and its misadventures)

Travelling through the Blidean *maquis* on their way to the Soummam Valley in summer 1956, Abane and his colleague Ben M’hidi were impressed by “the courage of the young women ... mainly from bourgeois Muslim families ... who sacrificed their studies and their opulent lives ... [for] the hard life of the maquis” (Abane 2011). Fanon’s understanding of the Kabyle Djemma, as democratic councils, was not a paean to an imaginary past (indeed the idea of a collective leadership as a bulwark to a “cult of personality” was a principle at Soummam). The apparent contradiction between heralding the new while appreciating the importance of holding onto forms that were resistant to colonialism expresses the dilemma and also the openness of Fanon’s conception of “national culture.” Hocine Ait-Ahmed, one of nine “historic leaders” who founded the FLN and the only one of the external leadership around Ben Bella who approved the Soummam platform, argued, in what would become a Fanonian vein, that “the revolutionary must ... descend from the pedestal of theory to root himself in concrete life, in order to draw upon it and verify there his principles of action” (quoted in Gillespie 1961:80). The idea of rooting oneself in concrete life, of practice and action trumping theory, was methodologically

exactly what was at stake in *Year 5*, where concrete life was one of radical mutation (see Bourdieu 1958:184) which had to be recorded by the revolutionary theoretician.

Fanon began working on what would become *Year 5* quite soon after he arrived in Tunis. It reflected his Algerian experiences, his ongoing discussions with Abane and his commitment to the Soummam platform.¹⁵ The first writing for *Year 5* was an article from *Résistance Algérienne* published on May 16, 1957 which appeared as an appendix to “Algeria Unveiled” (or more literally “Algeria Unveils Itself”).¹⁶

Year 5 was addressed to the French left—especially his unique for the time discussion of the intimate connection between torture and the medical profession and his concluding piece on “Algeria’s European Minority” (with appendices written by European colleagues)—but it also had a strictly Abanean thesis associating the power of the Algerian revolution not with guns but with the “radical mutation that the Algerian has undergone” (1967c:32), which was clearly directed to the internal political struggle. Abane’s emphasis that the mass movement dominated military strategy was echoed by Fanon, who in *The Wretched* argued that the subservience of politics to the military was a symptom of the revolution’s degeneration.

The dialectics of organization are not solely about the forms of organization—whether centralized or decentralized, military or political. With Fanon, revolutionary organization also mutates and is implicitly connected with the idea of the whole nation undergoing change. Thus it

¹⁵ Indeed, in Tunis, Abane, still one of the leaders, is manoeuvred away from day to day political decisions and “relegated,” as Belaid Abane put it, “to an ‘intellectual’ function: information and propaganda. He notably directs the journal *El Moudjahid* which he had founded the previous year. Logically, Fanon is integrated into Abane’s team.”

¹⁶ Fanon’s note clearly situates his position with the Soummam platform, stating that the “consciousness that the leaders of the FLN have always had of the important part played by the Algerian woman in the Revolution” (64 n.17)

is not surprising that *Year 5* begins with “Algeria unveils itself” since it is in the battle over the veil that the depth of colonial violence and the limits of a reactive nationalism is clearly manifested: “In an initial phase,” Fanon theorizes, “the actions, the plans of the occupier that determine the centers of resistance around which *a people’s will to survive* become organized” (1967c:47, my emphasis). He further explains that the colonized “cult of the veil” forms in reaction to the “colonialist’s offensive against the veil.” But clearly for Fanon this reaction is far from satisfactory. The outbreak of the anticolonial struggle changes things. Indeed, Fanon goes as far as to contend that “in the practice of the Revolution the people have understood that problems are resolved in the very movement that raises them” (1967c 48). For him the women’s revolutionary action changes objectivity, not only the strategy and tactics of the movement, but relations between women and men. For Fanon there is a “continuity of woman and the revolutionary” with women’s actions, entering forbidden spaces, prefiguring the spatial order of the city. At his most optimistic Fanon connects woman’s action with the establishment of a new sense of herself and her body: “this new dialectic of the body and of the world is primary in the case of the one revolutionary woman” (1967c:50,59). Yet what happens as these actions decline? The organization of the new society is also evident in “This is the Voice of Algeria.” During the war colonial instruments like the radio were being taken over and used against the colonial regime. The relevance today is not simply about the existence of a progressive radio station, or even the intimation of new forms of digital media. “This is the Voice of Algeria” expresses a new space of politics, not in the radio broadcast but in collective discussions about their meaning. Imagining what was being said in the static produced by the French “jamming” created new spaces to invent the nation. But rather than simply responding to the colonial lie with another lie (Fanon 1968:50), taking a stand against the oppressive reality almost meant creating a

new reality. In the static, all could become active participants prefiguring the new society, with the “party” militant being less a director than a facilitator of its new organization. It was an example of the political education of militants in the “school of the people”—the new reality of the nation—that concerned Fanon in *The Wretched*. Yet it is also not surprising—since practice and commitment to the struggle for liberation do not end questions about how to create the new society—that the suffocation of the “oxygen” of revolution (Fanon 1967c:181), and the suppression and indeed criminalization of the mass movements by the nationalist parties which had gained power after independence, meant that Fanon’s dialectic of liberation had to be further internalized. *The Wretched*—a book that he knew would have to be his last—would be a balance sheet seriously addressing the internal contradictions and misadventures that undermined the possibility of liberation.

In contrast to the opening up of space detailed in *Year 5*, the dialectic of *The Wretched* includes the suffocation of space by the nationalist elites which brings us back to experiences of being hemmed in described in *Black Skin*. New spaces for politics are quickly closed down, as politics is consumed by the speed up of time: the already senile bourgeoisie (1968:153), the rotten huckstering petit-bourgeoisie, and the speed of the world market, the gleam of its shiny goods and get rich quick schemes (1968:166-176), while the masses either mark time or go backwards (1968:147).

If practice does solve contradictions in *Year 5*, clearly *The Wretched* complicates the issue. Beginning with “violence” and ending with “torture,” *The Wretched* is a reflection on how the social actions of women and men toward realizing a new society are subverted. The chapter, the “misadventures,” or pitfalls of national consciousness, (first presented as a series of lectures to ALN militants on the Algeria/Tunisia border as an ideological intervention against narrow

nationalism) remains powerful because it traced the speed of degeneration of the anticolonial revolution from inside the revolution. But Fanon's is not an *a priori* schematic critique of a bourgeois revolution that can be mapped onto the postcolonial Africa. Just as *Year 5* isn't the romantic ramblings of an idealist who didn't understand "Algerians," "Arab culture," "Islam" etc.,¹⁷ *The Wretched* isn't a neo-Marxist appraisal of the class character of nationalist leaderships. *Year 5* and *The Wretched* both concern the unfinished character of Fanon's engagement with the dialectics of organization as prefiguring the new society. As Lou Turner argues, once Fanon's theoretical work is alienated from the "dialectic of organization," Fanon becomes incomprehensible (1999:400). Yet, an important shift is seen in the conclusion to *The Wretched*. Rather than a "return" to Lenin's aphorism that there can be no revolution without revolutionary theory, Fanon's position remains based on the rationality of the rebellion. Thus Fanon calls on those "comrades" (an organization in the "eminent-historical sense" [Marx:1860]) who have embraced decolonization to "work out new concepts" (1968:316). Taking the "rationality of revolt" (1968:146) as the point of departure, a wholly different attitude to theoretical work is required. While we may reflect long and hard on the "zone of occult instability" (1968:227) that activist-intellectuals inhabit, for Fanon, in the revolutionary whirlwind of fifty years ago, there simply wasn't any autonomous space, no standpoint outside of commitment.

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¹⁷ Doing field work in Kabylia at the time and less committed to the Algerian revolution, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu echoes Fanon's idea of radical mutation in his book *The Algerians* in a chapter he titled "The Revolution in the Revolution" 145-192.

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