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### **The 'Wretched of the Earth' – Then and Now<sup>i</sup>**

In the aftermath of the Second World War, there were a number of factors that coalesced to create a new set of conditions for the furtherance of national liberation struggles, as well as the development of new thinking about related questions. On the historical, geopolitical level, the perceived weakness of the European colonial powers on the one hand, together with the emergence of the USA as an important new imperial power, the rising star of China in the Far East and the successes of the communist-led nationalists in Indochina all gave a boost to nationalist movements elsewhere.

However, each developing nationalist movement had its own specific dimension and dynamic. Each emerging nation asserted its own particular nationhood, more often than not in the face of the denial by colonial doctrine of the existence of any such nationhood. Nowhere was this truer than in the case of Algeria, where the French colonial power denied that Algeria could be a nation, on the grounds that there had not been an autonomous Algerian state before 1830. This was an argument that had been put forward first to justify the original conquest and then, later, to argue against the Algerian nationalist cause. This could be interpreted in a number of different ways, depending on the definition used to characterize the nation. However, as far as 'Algerian' territory was concerned, there was very little ambiguity. The boundaries had been largely fixed under Ottoman rule and, indeed, accepted as such by the French, when they took over. To all intents and purposes, Algeria was already a 'nation-state' at the time of the French conquest, even if it was one under 'foreign' rule.

Paradoxically, it was the colonial power that contributed to the definition of the Algerians as a collective, through the common juridical status imposed on them, which differentiated them from the French nation of citizens. Or, as Sartre put it, 'colonial society cannot assimilate them without destroying itself; it will therefore be necessary for them to identify as a unified collective against it. Those who are excluded will assert their exclusion in the name of their nationhood, for it is colonialism itself that creates the patriotism of the colonized' (Sartre in Memmi (1957)/1985: 29).

This objective categorisation did not, of itself, lead to the development of a nationalist movement. Nor did the subjective awareness and rejection of their condition by the colonized necessarily lead to nationalism. It could equally remain stalled at the level of individual revolt or collective reformism. The awakening of nationalist consciousness entailed, in addition, the recognition of their fundamental collective difference and the affirmation of the freedom of this collective to constitute itself into a national subject with the power to make decisions in all aspects of their political, economic, social and cultural existence, i.e. with political sovereignty. The national liberation movement is born along with the realisation that this can only be achieved by overturning the existing power relations and creating a new state.

A key thinker to emerge at this moment of history was the young Frantz Fanon, who had left his home in Martinique to fight with the Free French and then to study in France, becoming a psychiatrist and moving to a post in Algeria in 1953 (Macey 2001). Fanon, born in 1925, was to become a key theorist of the national liberation struggle, combining his experience of racism as an Afro-Caribbean and his professional experience of the psychological effects of colonialism with the experience derived from his commitment to the nationalist struggle in Algeria, for which he resigned his post at a psychiatric hospital in Blida. Fanon became not only the theorist of the Algerian Revolution in particular, but also of national liberation struggles worldwide. When he died of leukaemia in 1961 at the young age of thirty-six, he had written several key works, beginning with his analysis of the psychological damage done by racism and responses to it, with his own distinctive mix of

personal and professional experience and insights, in *Peau noire, masques blancs* in 1952. His involvement with the FLN was reflected in his writings on the Algerian Revolution, particularly *L'An V de la Révolution algérienne*, published in 1959. His final work, *Les Damnés de la terre*, was completed only a few months before his death in 1961 and achieved worldwide resonance at the time, particularly amongst those engaged in liberation struggles.

There has, however, also been considerable confusion around his work. On the one hand, it was Fanon's interpretation of the Algerian liberation struggle that provided the prism through which many of those on the Left saw that struggle. It did not always correspond to the realities of the Revolution. Similarly, many came to an understanding of Fanon's work through the prism of Sartre's interpretation of it. Again, care is needed to disentangle what Fanon actually said from Sartre's gloss on it.

There is a thread linking Fanon to some of the ideas put forward by his fellow Martiniquan, Aimé Césaire, and the other proponents of Negritude, who had spent their formative years as members of the French Communist Party. Like them, he pinpoints the issue of race, he highlights the importance of culture. However, he synthesizes his views on race, culture and the nation into a radically different perspective, which challenges all attempts to box him into mechanistic categories and all forms of reductionism of his thought to simplistic notions. With his predecessors, Fanon shared an overarching universalist perspective. However, whereas theirs had been inspired by the prospect of the victory of the universal working class and the realisation of socialism across the globe, with Negritude a stage, or a 'moment', in the dialectical march of progress, Fanon put the dialectic into a new historical perspective, in which it is all about the forms of struggle of an entire people against the colonial power, in which the constitution of nationalism and the national consciousness was a necessary step in the process of taking control of their own destiny. Necessary though it was, nationalism was, in Fanon's view, merely a stage, not an end in itself and the process of liberation itself paramount. His own experience of racism, and that of others, as well as the lessons he learned from the bitter colonial oppression and the implacable nationalist struggle in Algeria, combined to destroy any faith in the possibility of solidarity on the part of the international proletariat, or in the redemptive power of the working class per se, at least as presently constituted. His universal goal was thus not so much that of the worldwide proletarian revolution, but the creation of a new type of human being, a 'new man'.

Fanon's analysis of Negritude is a complex one. On the one hand, he sees it as a product of the history of racial oppression, and accepts that, in its total 'unconditional affirmation of African culture' (Fanon (1961)/1987: 156) it is an inevitable gut reaction to the blanket racism of the white colonialists. He does not, however, subscribe to its logic and warns that, necessary though it has been, from a historical point of view, this 'racialized' view of culture, in which 'African' culture is promoted, rather than 'national' culture, will ultimately lead the supporters of Negritude into a dead end.<sup>ii</sup>

At the same time, he refuses to accept that Negritude is merely a moment, a negative stage, in the overarching dialectic. Blackness is not something that should continue to be defined totally in relation to the whites (Fanon (1952)/1975: 88-89). Moreover, he takes issue with the Hegelian dialectic of the master and the servant, which, for him, is not applicable to the relation between the slave master and the black slave, where there is no reciprocity, where the master is profoundly indifferent to the recognition of the slave, only wanting his labour (Fanon (1952)/1975: 175, note 9), and where, ultimately, the slave, to achieve his liberation, must also become indifferent to the master. Where, in its classic Hegelian form, the dialectic is premised on a relation between two conscious minds, Fanon insists that, in the case of the relation between the white master and the black colonized/slave, the added racial dimension changes everything. In the eyes of the master, the black slave is never a thinking, conscious being; it is only his body that is seen. Just as the master could not care less about being

recognized by the slave, so the slave in his turn will reciprocate this indifference. It will not be a question of seeking his recognition, or even of reversing the master-slave relation by replacing him as master. What the colonized/slave wants is to make the master disappear, to take over his farm and eject him from the land.

This rejection of the European model or paradigm applies not just to the Hegelian dialectic, but also to Freud. The Oedipus complex, Fanon says, is not universally valid. It does not exist in the black man (Fanon (1952)/1975: 123). As such, it is a construct of European social and cultural conditions and not a constituent component of a human essence.

Fanon's starting point was the alienated individual. Racism and the dehumanisation that was a key effect of colonialism had combined to produce this alienation, depriving the colonized of his/her humanity and transforming them into pure body, animal or thing. He had described this phenomenon in one of his first writings, an essay, 'The North African syndrome', first published in *Esprit* in 1952. These were 'creatures starving for humanity' (Fanon (1959)/1970: 13), 'emptied of substance', reified or 'thingified', by the colonizer 'calling him systematically Mohammed' (Fanon (1959)/1970: 24).

It was by engaging in revolutionary violence that these alienated colonized subjects would recover their humanity and become whole human beings. Although the problem of alienation was experienced at the individual level, the cure would only be effective as part of a collective struggle. Indeed, Fanon saw these most alienated, these most wretched and exploited elements of society, the peasantry and the *lumpenproletariat*, mainly the landless peasants who had been forced off the land or drifted to the towns, as the main agency for change. The process of defeating colonialism and the process of healing their own damaged psyches were integral to each other. Violent revolutionary action would not only transform the colonial landscape; it would also enable them to achieve their own transition from the animal to the human state.

This was not a process that was limited to the Algerian nationalist struggle for freedom. In Fanon's view, this particular national liberation struggle was part of the wider struggle and had a vital role to play as the spearhead of the African revolution. It was not an end in itself, but a moment in a dialectic of universal liberation, which ultimately transcended politics with the emergence of a new, higher type of human being. It was not enough to work towards becoming a man. This man would be a new man, who would be a better man. Not only would this new man be cured from the alienation from which he had suffered, not only would the tensions between body and soul be reconciled, but he would also have moved to a new stage of humanity, on to a morally superior plane, in which the betterment of all aspects of the human condition would be the prime consideration. Or, as Fanon put it:

More precisely, it would seem that all the problems which man faces on the subject of man can be reduced to this one question: 'Have I not, because of what I have done or failed to do, contributed to an impoverishment of human reality?' The question could also be formulated in this way: 'Have I at all times demanded and brought out the man that is in me?' (Fanon (1959)/1970: 13)

Fanon, of course, was not alone in his revolutionary humanism. His perspective is well in tune with the humanist historicism of Sartre, as well as the ideas of the early Marx and the early Lukács. There is no doubt that Sartre and Fanon had an important reciprocal influence on each other. At the same time, there was a critical edge to their appreciation of each other's thinking. Notably, Fanon disagreed with Sartre on the relativism implicit in the view of Negritude as a moment in a dialectic, which would be superseded by a synthesis in a society without races (Fanon (1952)/1975: 107-8). This is to rob the black man of his freedom and black consciousness is more than negativity: it is fully what it is.<sup>iii</sup> However,

Fanon was fully in tune with Sartre on the question of the progress of humanity from the 'subhuman' stage of history to that of total human beings, in which man would finally be realized (Sartre and Lévy 1991: 36-38). Sartre also defended Fanon's position on the redemptive power of violence, although he was later to express some reservations.

Other key figures in the national liberation movements of the 1950s and 1960s had very similar perspectives. Che Guevara, in particular, dwelt on the notion of the 'new man'. For him, it was closely tied with the building of communism. As he wrote in 'Socialism and Man in Cuba' in 1965, 'to build communism it is necessary, simultaneous with the new material foundations, to build the new man' (Guevara 1987: 250). The creation of the 'new man' was the further development of Lenin's argument regarding the necessity of a cultural revolution if socialism was to succeed. For Che Guevara, it entailed all aspects of human existence, not just the transformation of the political and economic structures. It implied a complete rupture with the past, to create 'a new world where everything decrepit, everything old, everything that represents the society whose foundations have just been destroyed will have definitely disappeared' (Guevara 1987: 185). This would require deliberate voluntaristic action on the part of each individual. This is what he said in a speech, 'Duty of Revolutionary Medical Workers', in 1960:

almost everything we thought and felt in that past epoch should be filed away, and that a new type of human being should be created. And if each one of us is his own architect of that new human type, then creating that new type of human being – who will be the representative of the new Cuba – will be much easier. (Guevara 1987: 125-26)

Setting out his vision of 'What a Young Communist should be' in 1962, the parallels with Fanon's basic humanism are striking: 'every Young Communist must be essentially human and be so human that he draws closer to humanity's best qualities, that he distils the best of what man is through work, study, through ongoing solidarity with the people and with all the peoples of the world' (Guevara 1987: 184). In both cases, it remains a fundamentally universal vision of what humanism was all about, entailing a belief in the progress of humanity towards the formation of a new genus: 'Man as a wolf, the society of wolves, is being replaced by another genus that no longer has the desperate urge to rob his fellow man, since the exploitation of man by man has disappeared' (Guevara 1987: 367).<sup>iv</sup> Of course, neither Guevara nor Fanon would survive into old age to reassess their views in this respect.

For all that Fanon saw nationalism as a stage and not an end in itself, it was still part of his fundamental originality that during the time of the nationalist struggle it was to be the total priority, governing all aspects of social existence, including culture and the psyche. His emphasis on the importance of culture, as well as the impact on the individual's mental state of oppression and the struggle against it, marks a new departure from previous Marxist-inspired theories of imperialism and national liberation.

Moreover, the nationalist cause was not, in his view, subservient to the class struggle; he saw no special, a priori, leading role for the working class at national or international level. At the same time, unlike other nationalists who had refused to follow the socialist route to liberation through international proletarian solidarity, he did not represent the interests of the national bourgeoisie either. On the contrary, Fanon spoke for the most dispossessed and oppressed sections of society, emphasizing the revolutionary potential and needs of the peasantry and the *lumpenproletariat*, indeed, those who could truly be considered the 'wretched of the earth'. These were the people whom he saw leading the struggle, not the vanguard of the aristocracy of the working class.

The new priorities that he highlighted resonated with many of the ‘wretched of the earth’ or those speaking on their behalf across the globe. Not least of these was his emphasis on the intrinsic importance of violence in the liberation process. No longer seen as a means to an end, albeit a legitimate one, violence was more than a utilitarian tool in the struggle. Indeed, it was elevated to an essential process, through which the enslaved and the oppressed would achieve their liberation; it was given the status of a purifying agent, needed to cleanse the oppressed from the humiliation and defilement of colonial oppression. There was nothing inherently new in this belief in the redemptive power of violence. It formed part of the ideological mystique of the French Revolution. Georges Sorel had argued for a similar belief in the reinvigorating, creative power of violent action as a weapon against bourgeois decadence and repression (Sorel (1908)/1999), and a mystique of violence, often linked with religious ideology, had been part of the rationalisation of war, crusades and rebellions from time immemorial. It could also be used as an argument in support of some of the most questionable causes, with which Fanon would certainly have disagreed, including some of the violence currently taking place under the cloak of religious fundamentalism and the ‘war on terror’ that has dominated the last few decades.

His influence was immense, though, I would argue, mainly outside the Francophone world. Indeed, his impact was probably greatest on the black populations of the metropolitan heartlands themselves. In spite of Fanon’s own reservations, or rather ambivalence, about using blackness as a defining category in the struggle, under the slogan of Negritude, black consciousness or black power, he was certainly an inspiration to the Black Power movement in the USA, offshoots of which, such as the Black Panther Party, refused the non-violent methods adopted by the civil rights movement during the 1950s and early 1960s, to claim the need for violence in the affirmation of black power. Stokely Carmichael claimed Fanon as one of his ‘patron saints’. He specifically referred to Fanon in his famous speech on black power at the University of California campus at Berkeley in 1966. Similarly, Eldridge Cleaver described *The Wretched of the Earth*, as the ‘bible of the black revolutionary movement’ and noted that ‘every brother on a rooftop could quote Fanon’ (Cleaver 1969; Seale 1970). Despite differences of analysis and approach, which were acknowledged - not least, the significance of race as a mobilising category - the basic message taken from Fanon was threefold: his insights into the damage done to the psyche by racism; his insistence on the intrinsic value of violent struggle; and his analysis not just of the suffering and dispossession of the so-called ‘*lumpenproletariat*’, which, in Algeria, consisted mainly of those who had been driven from the land into unemployment in the towns and cities, but also his belief in the necessity of organising this ‘*lumpenproletariat*’ as the agency of change and in the potential strength these ‘lumpen’ elements could muster if they were united.

With hindsight, we can assess the major influence of Fanon in the early sixties through two main strands: firstly as a fundamental break with European-dominated leftist thought and, secondly, as a vehicle for uniting the colonized and racially oppressed in a common struggle against their oppressors.

In rejecting one of the major assumptions of European socialism, which saw the vanguard of the socialist revolution consisting in the most ‘productive’ elements of the working-class, or the labour aristocracy, Fanon gave a space to those involved in anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles to break free from their status as junior partners in the international communist movement, which, at best, adopted a patronising relationship with them, institutionalized through structures that accepted the hegemony of the metropolitan communist parties over ‘their’ colonies, and, at worst, adopted attitudes of overt racism, downplaying their exploitation in a bizarre interpretation of Marx’s labour theory of value.<sup>v</sup>

Even more significantly, Fanon made it possible for the colonized and racially oppressed to come together in a common identity as ‘blacks’. In this the category of ‘black’

no longer had anything to do with a skin colour or a racial identity, but represented a political identity, self-proclaimed across different nationalities, races, creeds and colours.

Nowadays, this 'black' identification, built on the common experience of exploitation and oppression and the sense of a common struggle, has largely disappeared, with the re-emergence of religious, national and ethnic divisions as the paramount source of identities. At the same time, there is no doubt that the 'wretched of the earth' not only continue to exist, but have grown in numbers to include whole new categories of the world's population.

This does not mean that Fanon's theories can be adopted wholesale in the very different economic, political and ideological circumstances prevailing today, which require concrete analysis, as well as the development of new methods of struggle and effective strategies of resistance. It does mean, however, that they cannot be dismissed either, not least as a measure of how much still needs to be done.

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<sup>i</sup> This is an updated version of material, some of which was first published in Majumdar 2007: 119-126.

<sup>ii</sup>. ‘Cette obligation historique dans laquelle se sont trouvés les hommes de culture africains de racialiser leurs revendications, de parler davantage de culture africaine que de culture nationale va les conduire à un cul-de-sac’ (Fanon (1961)/1987: 157).

<sup>iii</sup>. ‘Toujours en termes de conscience, la conscience noire est immanente à elle-même. Je ne suis pas une potentialité de quelque chose, je suis pleinement ce que je suis. Je n’ai pas à rechercher l’universel. En mon sein nulle probabilité ne prend place. Ma conscience nègre ne se donne pas comme manque. Elle est. Elle est adhérente à elle-même’ (Fanon (1952)/1975: 109).

<sup>iv</sup> This was written in 1964, just before what was known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was about to be unleashed in China, putting a new slant on the whole notion of cultural revolution and the ‘new man’.

<sup>v</sup> Some Western Marxists used this theory to claim that, since the rate of exploitation/surplus value was greater in the most productive industrial sectors of the most advanced countries than in the least developed ones, the workers in these sectors were the most exploited, far more so than the workers in Africa, Asia and Latin America (Kay 1975: 53) – already refuted by Marx in the third volume of *Capital* (Marx 1894/ 1974: 150). This argument did not of course take into account the difference between the rate of exploitation and the rate of profit, which could be higher even when the rate of exploitation was lower, nor the difference between the rate of exploitation and the absolute amount of exploitation (Marx 1867/ 1970, vol.1: 218, n.1).