

The Algerian Revolution and Frantz Fanon

Themes/Questions to pursue today

- What's the relation of philosophical study, materialist psychology, and revolution?
- What's the relation of critical thought, via philosophy and, for example, film, with a colonizing power?
- To what extent does a consideration of the Algerian war put us in contact with our own circumstances, for example in terms of "terrorism" and "torture"? Sartre said that looking at terrorism was like looking at a mirror (of colonial violence)...





The significance of the Algerian War for us:

- Guerilla warfare
- Urban warfare
- “Asymmetrical Warfare”
- “Terrorism”—indiscriminate bombing/killings of the civilian population, perpetrated by both sides
- Indefinite proliferation of military reality through civilian space and the populace. Aussaresses, a leader of the French paras, said: “In revolutionary war, the populace *is* the enemy...”
- Huge upsurge of policing/spying networks
- Algeria shortly related to the Israel/Palestine conflict, especially the 1973 war.
- 1980s and 1990s... Islamic parties and movements in Algeria...
- Al Qaeda connections in Algeria.

The Colonial History

- Previous to the French: The Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Spaniards, Turks...
- French in 1830, in the last months of the rule of Charles the X—as a diversion? ... which fails—(he's ousted, remember, by the July Revolution)
- Prior to arrival: 2 schools per Algerian town; everybody literate
- Exiles and unemployed French sent to Algeria...
- Guerilla warfare already: French troops freezing to death chasing partisans in the mountains; scorched earth policies in response (e.g. 500 asphyxiated to death in a cave [incl women and children])
- The French: “Wherever there's fresh water and fertile land...” who cares who it belongs to... we'll take it.
- 1841: 37,000 colonists... expropriating land... (vs. 3 million indigenous), forcing locals into servitude...
- Governance in two forms: 1. for European-majority regions: “commune de plain exercice,” modeled on France—a mayor, a council (with 3/5 majority French required)... 2. for indigenous-majority “commune mixte”: near-direct military rule
- The French resisted by leader Abd-el-Kader for 17 years. His name was placed on flags and chanted in the 1945 uprising

Key points in the revolution

- 1945 Sétif: crop failures for two years; good crops on the French corporate farm exported or shared only with Colons... V.E. Day—a march with independent-Algeria flags and repetitions of the name el-Kader... The French (probably) open fire... indigenous violence in response: 100 dead, rapes, other casualties
- French response: 40 villages bombed, 45,000 killed.
- 1955 Battle of Phillippeville: 100+ killed by Algerian mob... in response, 12,000 killed by French
- 1956 Governor Lacoste authorizes rural and urban “militias,” effectively legalizing any killing of any indigenous person by any French person
- 1957 Battle of Algiers...
- 1962 independence...

Frantz Fanon

- Born in Martinique
- Served with the Free French forces in WW2
- Trained in France in both Philosophy and Medicine
- Wrote *Black Skin, White Masks* while in France
- Deployed in Algeria as a doctor, where he quickly allied with the FLN, and took part actively in the revolution...
- *Wretched of the Earth* was written in the last months of his life, as he was dying from leukemia
- Focused on the situation of colonized people, their representations and treatment within the colonizing culture, and the effects of colonization, especially via education, upon the psychology of the colonized
- Advocated full violent exorcism of colonial forces in Algeria
- Worked in organizing African nations against European colonial forces
- Advocated payment of reparations from colonial nations to their former colonies...

Intellectual Traditions in which Fanon was rooted

- **Freudian psychoanalysis**, from which Fanon derives his notions of the fundamental *Libido* involved in revolt. He also analyzes religious practices, myth, dance and possession from a Freudian perspective, seeing them as symbolic or neurotic deferrals of libido—ways of channeling rage which ward off the problematic confrontation with the real oppressing force. Freud saw neuroses as symptoms of a maladjustment to reality. Fanon thought severe maladjustments on both individual and collective levels were central features of colonial life. On the individual level colonial life can produce pathologies as extreme as schizophrenia—and Fanon treated these very conditions in the course of the war. ON the collective level, religion etc...
- **Marxism**. For our reading the most important concept here may be in the dialectical relation between colonizer and colonized, each of which groups “produces” the other through mutual antagonism. Fanon opposed traditional Marxist theory on several points, advocating a socialist nationalism as opposed to an international communist block, and questioning whether military victory need rest on weapons production and hence industrial productivity in general...
- **Existentialism**, which he studied with Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. This is probably Fanon’s most distinctive philosophical position. From here he derived his emphasis upon radical freedom, and his insistence on becoming full humans even if it meant accepting and embracing death. Existentialism views each human as value makers. But colonialism interferes with this human capacity by ruling largely via the installation of European values, like the love of beauty, truth, and *individualism*... For Fanon the realization of freedom for the colonized entailed a preliminary rejection of these values, as the values proper to the colonized—especially the values of “bread and land” and of community—were affirmed.

Fanon's distinctive positions:

- Capitalism and colonialism differ with regard to the manner in which the oppressed are oppressed. In the first case it's indirect and involves a lot of ideology; in the latter, it's raw force.
- Colonialism reduces the colonized [*almost*] to the level of animality. Their submissive position is reinforced (not produced) by the inscription of Western values. Fanon says that DDT and Christianity operate in exactly the same way in colonized territories.
- Rebellion is the process of passing from thing-ness or animality to full humanity. Real physical violence and mental and spiritual emancipation are inseparable. As soon as the colonized individual realizes their humanity, he says, they begin to sharpen their sword.
- Rebellion corresponds with an *actual physical state* of colonized individual, which Fanon describes as a "tautness" or "tone" in the muscles. This individual is always taut: there's a constant rage, a tense affectivity, a violence that "ripples under the skin."
- This RAGE may be directed or misdirected in many ways. But it is also the fundamental, physical source of uprising.

And politically:

- A severe distrust of colonized “intellectuals”—intellectuals raised from the ranks of the colonized who have passed through European training. It is these individuals who he says the colonizers typically “negotiate” with, oblivious or dismissive of the fact that they do *not* represent the real revolutionary will.
- A distrust of political parties—sometimes okay, but mostly oriented toward some *compromise*, so as to preserve some aspects of the status quo, which benefit the political leadership (for example, an industrial base of which politicians and their friends are owners/profiters)
- A distrust of the business elite, who again for the most part *share* interests with the colonizer
- The *real* revolutionary base is the peasantry—the “fellahs”—because the urban dissidents still make their living by catering to the colonists...

And he was very much aware of the ongoing challenges after “liberation” —it’s all struggle...

- Upon “decolonization” colonizing powers retract their capital and the country becomes destitute. It’s either compromise before that, or cater to one or the other side in the *cold war*, thus becoming economically and militarily *dependent* (=the opposite of *independent*)... or just work yourself to death to try to “catch up” —which Fanon does not see as practically viable
- He recommends nationalization, neutrality in the cold war, a socialist government (but not an alliance with Moscow), collaboration with other African nations, and an increasing connection with the oppressed classes of the first world.

Perhaps most strikingly

- He actually is an **advocate of violence**. He insists that violence is the *only* possible avenue available to the colonized. Their physiologically-stored violence has been produced by colonial violence. The first world may in principle shun violence, but it perpetrates it nonetheless, systematically and brutally. Because there is no transcendent path, no other world, the sole available option is a real, violent and bloody struggle. **Sartre**, with whom Fanon studied in France, seconds Fanon on these points.
- He's aware revolution, especially in dense urban areas, involves an *increasing spiral* of violence which quickly encompasses women and children. But then, colonial violence always already involves them anyway. BUT perhaps I misrepresent his thought here, because I am speaking as if he consented to take part in a moral debate dominated by European values, which he does not. He points out that nobody questions the right of a first world nation to deploy military force at its borders, but everybody rejects the rights of subjugated peoples to use violence to free themselves. He rejects this discourse at the same time as he asserts the imperative to operate militarily.

Discussion Questions

1. What keeps the anger of oppressed and colonized peoples in check? Consider for example religious practices, myths, other cultural practices... In what circumstances can this anger shift into open revolt?
2. To what extent are the circumstances of (whichever) peoples today similar to or different from the colonized Algerian people?
3. Fanon roundly opposes “European values” and their imposition upon colonized peoples. He says they’ve “vomited” these values up and have no use for them. Yet he himself opposes a psychoanalytic understanding of certain cultural phenomena, for example myth, dance, and possession trances, to the simpler popular belief in these things. What do you think of this tension?
4. Along these lines, Fanon suggests that Haitian voodoo constitutes a sort of fantastic substitution for actual action against an oppressor. Is he missing something here? Didn’t we see voodoo facilitating, as opposed to inhibiting, revolt?
5. Fanon notes that one of the invigorating factors in the rebellious countryside in Algeria was the retelling of stories of outlaws. Isn’t there a similar love of outlaws in American society? Does it have a relation to a tendency for rebellion?
6. Fanon asserts that bottled-up violence, placed there by colonial violence, is actually present in the body, “ripping under the skin.” To what extent do you think this is true? He also suggests that tribal fighting, and violence within oppressed communities, is a mis-direction of this energy. Do you agree? Think of crime within low-income communities in Los Angeles, for example, or divides between Latinos and Blacks... Does violent crime within poorer communities correspond to an anger that might otherwise be revolutionary?
7. Fanon clearly sees that revolution involves an escalating cycle of violence, yet he seems to see no alternative route. He is in particular very skeptical about “pacifist” attitudes, and of “compromise” at the bargaining table, which he suggests is always occupied by an oppressor and a sell-out whose interests are very similar to the colonists (he means businessmen in particular).
8. Fanon argues at the end of his essay that Europe ought to give a good portion of its wealth back to its colonies, since it was stolen from them in the first place. He knows Europe won’t do so willingly, and suggests the issue rests on the question of the rising of the proletariat... What’s your attitude a. about the paying of reparations to oppressed peoples, and b. about an alliance between underclasses in capitalist nations and colonized peoples?
9. Fanon suggests some major shift must take place in a population as it shifts into full revolt. At the collective level he points to a movement from concern with religion etc. to a concern with only “the force which challenges your very being.” He describes this shift as one into confrontation with “reality,” implying that previously there existed a delusion. At the level of the individual, he describes FLN requirements that militants, in order to be trustworthy, must “commit an irreversible act,” for example the murder of a French police officer. Both of these passages involve a shift from non-commitment and possibly fantasy, to commitment, militancy and a struggle to the death. What do you think of them? Is he right to describe this shift as one from delusion to reality? Note the similarity with gang initiations. What is it that’s terrifying or interesting about “total commitment”? Is there anyone here who has made or hopes to make such a “total commitment”? Are you ready to engage in “life as infinite struggle”?
10. WHAT ABOUT TORTURE? The Algerian conflict is often associated most strongly with this aspect, and it’s a fact that certain veterans of torture in Algeria have gone on to train American interrogators and their students at the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia (one example is Paul Aussaresses, who led what he called the “company of death,” and was tried and found guilty of torture). When French practices of torture were revealed in France in 1958, there was a huge backlash and drop of support for the war. We’ve recently gone through a similar scandal. What is your attitude toward this practice? Can it be justified?
11. What of the idea that colonized peoples NEED their colonizers, because of the “backwardness,” etc., of their own cultures? Is there any truth in that? Do European colonizers “advance” their colonies?