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Review of the book Les Damnes de la terre by Frantz Fanon

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The following book review has been prepared for the Maghreb Digest by Clark Butler, a staff member who has studied at the American University in Cairo and the Université de Tunis.


Franz Fanon, sometimes described as the ideological father of the Algerian Revolution, was a native of Martinique, although during the fifties he spent time in Algeria as a French-appointed psychiatrist. He died in a Washington D.C. hospital without ever seeing the independent Algeria with which he had identified himself.

A comparison between Fanon and Marx naturally suggests itself. Both men appropriate for their particular needs the dialectical method of Hegel. Where Marx developed his dialectic within the context of the nation-state as an interplay of economic classes, Fanon develops an analogous one in an international setting where colonized peoples are pitted against colonial powers. Marxism and Fanonism thus appear as two concrete realizations of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, contained in a few portentous pages of the Phenomenology of Mind. What Hegel saw in the feudal terms of lordship and bondage as a relationship whose interest was primarily historical by the nineteenth century, Marx saw in the same century as something very contemporary. And in our own century, Fanon has conceived this same relationship in terms, not of capitalists and proletarians, but of imperialist and colonized nations.

It may be suggested that a closer comparison is possible between Fanon and Lenin's theory of imperialism than between Fanon and Marx. And in a sense it is true that Lenin and Fanon are talking about the same thing. But where Lenin is interested in colonialism chiefly for its repercussions on the imperialist powers, Fanon is far more interested in the effect of colonialism on the colonized.

Hegel, with whom the dialectical method originated, assumed what he thought was the security of an "absolute" position, beyond the range of an ongoing dialectical movement. Marx and Fanon, on the other hand, both renounce the stance of the spectator, choosing to see themselves as finite instruments of an ongoing, more or less open-ended progression, the conclusion of which neither could guess. Marx has been called a latter-day prophet, but if a Biblical comparison must be made perhaps "apocalyptic" would be more accurate. Fanon shares this same apocalypticism, this same sense of an imminent day of judgment when "the last shall be the first." And like Marx, he accepts an interim ethic of violence.

But the differences between Marx and Fanon are also important. Marx was a man of wide scholarly erudition, while Fanon appears
chiefly as a polemicist. Les Damnés de la terre is Fanon's Manifesto, but he never wrote his Das Kapital. The most important difference between the two men, however, concerns the role which they attribute to the proletariat. The Marxist position is known. Fanon, on the other hand, describes the proletariat in its context in the Third World: it is here a relatively small, privileged and Europeanized class of workers cut off from the problems and trials of the rural masses. It is not inherently revolutionary. It is a pseudo-proletariat whose existence is called forth by the pseudo-bourgeoisie typical of the underdeveloped economy, and it leads a more or less unreal existence on the margin of current history. The real protagonists of history are, according to Fanon, popular masses, who are finally becoming aware of their alienation and are determined to overcome it.

The book may be divided into two parts. The first part, covering approximately the first 130 pages describes the process of decolonization. This description is in abstract, general terms, as if to suggest a logically necessary process. Concrete examples are called upon, not for their own sake, but simply to illustrate what appears as a universal movement in the underdeveloped world. Yet one cannot escape the impression that Fanon continually has the Algerian example in mind. Here Fanon is able to write with considerable self-confidence and verve. For what he was writing about in 1960 was, virtually, already history, and his analysis of the seemingly inevitable path of decolonization was after the fact. This part of the book takes the reader into the era of independence. The last chapters of the book, however, deal with problems of independence, which thus far have no adequate solution. Normative expressions suddenly creep into Fanon's vocabulary, which at first strikes one as strange in view of his constant ridicule of "moral professors." The politicization of the masses ought not to be a simple stratagem by "bourgeois leaders" to camouflage their true intentions. "We ought never to lose contact with the people, who have fought for their independence and the concrete improvement of their life." "We ought to turn our backs on Europe."

But the dialectic of decolonization which Fanon traces deserves our attention and consideration, regardless of the fact that Fanon has no clear idea about its ultimate resolution. His analysis shows once more the particular value which the dialectical method possesses for an understanding of certain historical sequences, however illegitimate it may be for long-range prediction. Perhaps the greatest value of the method is in laying bare the ironical way reason has of using the limited reason of finite men for its own purposes, of making the absurd paradoxically intelligible. Jean-Paul Sartre, in his introduction to Les Damnés de la terre, remarks that colonial administrators were not paid to read Hegel. What Fanon does is to show, through impassioned, empathetic description of opposing but interactive points of view, just how colonialism dug its own grave.

Fanon's analysis of decolonization perhaps warrants summarization.
Taking the colonial world as an initial "given," Fanon describes it as a Manichaean, profoundly divided world. It is a world of contrasts between prosperous, coastal cities and stagnant hinterlands, between the modern European city and the old native city of the medina, between concentrated affluence and widespread poverty. The colon - a term Fanon uses to encompass all European settlers and not merely agriculturalists - makes it such a world. He identifies the native with an inferior culture, with criminal tendencies - the criminality rate in pre-1954 Algeria was one of the highest in the world - with fatalism and general indolence.

The colonized react to the thesis of the colon in different ways, depending on the circumstances. Some try to join the society of the colon; these include members of the nascent local bourgeoisie, represented by a political party which works to achieve the rights and privileges enjoyed by the bourgeoisie of the mother country. Most, however, never envisage joining this world, but rather fall back on religious and other traditional supports. The frustrations of the colonized lead them to various maladjusted behavior patterns which only seem to confirm the original judgment of the native by the colon. This is a point which Fanon, as a psychiatrist, exploits at considerable length.

The colon, however, can press his dehumanization of the native only so far. On the one hand the colon depends on the labor of the native. On the other hand, concern for his own security leads him to reduce the native to the level of an animal. There comes a point when the native reacts to reassert his humanity, and this he does through violence. By killing a European, the native re-appropriates himself as a person, he negates in one clean stroke the world of the colon, and sets about to oppose his own absolutism to the one by which the colon had attempted to negate him. He turns his back on the political struggle which some of his compatriots still carry on within the context of colonialism. With this act the nation is born.

But if the nation is born in spontaneous violence and defiance, it cannot survive against the still dominant odds unless it organizes and has the patience to plan. From direct confrontation with the colon in the city, the nationalist retreats to the country or to the mountains and here he at last discovers the masses. The nationalist movement gains momentum from this coming-together of the nationalist intellectual and the rural masses. In Fanon's expression, the nationalist leader must "go to school to the masses;" he needs their support and guidance as much as they need him to articulate their authentic aspirations. Working together, they set in motion a revolution which eventually is able to divert, if not defeat, large armies sent by the colonial power.

The nationalists made skillful use of diversionary tactics. They know how to exploit the violence of which the marginal but burgeoning populations of the bidonvilles (shanty-towns gravitating around the
colonial European city) is capable. The colonial power is helpless; it can neither defeat the revolution nor satisfy its demands within the framework of the colonial system.

No co-existence or compromise is possible between the absolutism of the colon and that of the nationalist. Political parties or intellectuals who plead for compromise merely reveal their lack of contact with reality. At least the colon knows that it is either him or the native. The nationalist, however, knows something more, namely that, given the contradictions of the situation, he has all but won. Independence is the only way the rights of which the native is now conscious will be respected; and since the colon cannot grant those rights without renouncing his own privileges, the native, who will not rest until his rights are respected, sets about to force that respect from the colon by destroying his world. Independence, when it comes, is never "given" by the colonial power; rather, it is won and taken by the native population itself.

Political independence, however, brings its own problems: if the rupture with the past is incomplete, a national bourgeoisie is likely to assume power in the post-independence era. This bourgeoisie, however, is a poor imitation of its European counterpart; it has adopted the mentality of the European bourgeoisie, but it lacks the capital to play its economic role. It is either unable or unwilling to invest. It is specialized in non-capitalistic functions, in the services and liberal professions, and knows little about the problems of the rural masses. Initially, it has no economic program. As the new nation continues to be a supplier of raw materials, a victim of neo-colonialism, the national bourgeoisie finds an outlet for chauvinistic sentiments through glorification of the traditional handicrafts sector of the economy. If it undertakes nationalizations, it does so not for the nation but to advance private interests.

The national bourgeoisie undertakes to replace the colon rather than to overturn the system of exploitation which the colon embodied. It sets up a one-party system to "politicize" the masses; politicization here means mystification. The bourgeoisie used the apparatus of the one-party system to divert the attention of the masses from their continued exploitation to the past, to "the glorious struggle" for independence, or, alternatively, to international questions.

At this point in his narration, Fanon abandons description for prescription. He becomes the advocate of the next stage in the dialectic. Ceasing to be the spectator of an accomplished dialectic, he places the spectacle in a contemporary context and shows its pragmatic function. Phenomenological descriptions of the process of decolonialization was never itself the end for Fanon, it merely served to build up the momentum necessary for surmounting the present obstacle, just as Marx's description of the historical development from primitive to capitalistic
forms of organization inherently contained reference to an immediately transcendent stage of the dialectic: the socialist revolution.

Likewise, Fanon's description implicitly points beyond itself to the necessity for a further development: namely, the socialist revolution which is to succeed the purely nationalist revolution. Indeed, it is in the socialist revolution that the nationalist revolution accomplishes itself, inasmuch as the nation, under the tutelage of a native bourgeoisie, remains an essentially unaccomplished project, still divided between concentrated wealth and widespread poverty, still dominated by a foreign culture. Fanon's use of the "ought" is as contradictory or as necessary as is Marx's. Socialist revolution is necessary from the theorist's point of view; it is obligatory from the militant's perspective. Fanon, of course, is both theorist and militant.

Yet Fanon seems to have had no clearer picture than Marx about what specific shape socialist society is to take. Its general values of equality, justice and fraternity are clear. But Fanon gives only limited explanations of how they are to be implemented. He is an advocate of mass democracy, but so are Algeria's present leaders. He does not condemn the one-party system in toto, but rather criticizes only its abuses as a tool of bourgeois mystification. He favors the cooperative form of economic organization. He favors the decentralization of power from its former seat in the colonial capital, so as to include the under-privileged rural masses in national construction. He insists that the realization of the universalistic, international or even supra-nationalistic aims of revolutionary leaders must begin and pass through national development, cultural as well as economic. He thus concurs with other observers in estimating that the first wave of pan-Africanism was premature.

The most crucial problem faced by underdeveloped countries is, of course, underdevelopment. Fanon sees little likelihood of a solution through internal austerity investment programs. The remaining alternative is foreign aid, which in turn seems to imply foreign control or neo-colonialism. Fanon is convinced that the Western powers will eventually resort to massive developmental aid to underdeveloped countries, not only because to do so is just - is not present European prosperity built on the labor and resource exploitation of the underdeveloped countries? - but, more pertinently in his view, because the self-interest of an expanding international capitalism necessitates the economic development of the Third World. The workers of the Western world, increasingly unemployed, will exert the necessary pressures for foreign investments. What Fanon envisages, then, is a world community based on economic interdependence. Western capitalism needs the new frontiers of the Third World as much as the Third World needs the economic assistance of the West.

It is perhaps an exaggeration to interpret Fanon, as for example
Time magazine does, as "a rock thrown through the window of the West," Fanon's denunciation of Europe must be placed in its "dialectic" context: it is an exaggerated reaction to the exaggerations of colonialism, not an absolute position. With the lapse of time, it is likely that a more comprehensive synthesis will emerge from the two initial antitheses. Not only is the pervasive cultural influence of the West "preserved" in the very attack Fanonism makes against it (the categories of thought which Fanon uses derive directly from the history of Western thought: Hegel, Marx, Freud), not only was the book written in a Western language and published in a Western country, but Fanon himself finally concludes that it is for Europe's sake as well as its own that the Third World must turn away from the Europe which it knew. The Third World, inheriting the West's historical mission to realize humanity, must try to fulfill the requirements of that mission where the West has failed. Fanon thus concludes Les Damnés de la terre by proclaiming:

For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn a new leaf, develop a new thought, attempt to establish a new man.

If it is true that history is the gift of the West to the world, the entry of the non-Western world into history marked by decolonization may be viewed as a process of Westernization. Alternatively, if the West is to be understood as narrowly as Fanon understands it, if the West is no more than the ugly façade which it presented to the nationalist militant, then decolonization perhaps may be equated with de-Westernization. But in that case, the Western nations, in ceasing to be colonial powers, themselves are paradoxically being "de-Westernized." The phenomenon, whether one of Westernization or not, is universal. Perhaps it is time to put aside sectarian controversy. Fanon, himself, writes in one of his more lucid moments:

The fundamental confrontation which once seemed to be that of colonialism and anticolonialism, or alternatively that of capitalism and socialism, is already losing its significance. What counts today, the problem which bars the future is the necessity for a redistribution of wealth. Humanity must respond to this question, under pain of being shaken to its very foundations.

He might also have said that the confrontation between Westernism and anti-Westernism is also one that, in a world which, indifferently, is being either universally Westernized or de-Westernized, "is already losing its significance."

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