

# Liberation through violence in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*: Historical and contemporary criticisms

Alberto Castelli

Università degli Studi dell'Insubria,  
Varese, Italy

## Correspondence

Alberto Castelli, Università degli Studi  
dell'Insubria, Varese, Italy.

Email: [alberto.castelli@uninsubria.it](mailto:alberto.castelli@uninsubria.it)

## Abstract

Fanon wrote *The Wretched of the Earth* in the face of the horror of the Algerian civil war and in the broader context of anti-colonial liberation struggles in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Such experiences had showed that violence is necessary both to impose domination and to break free from it. It comes as no surprise, then, that Fanon puts his faith in revolutionary violence. In dissent from some recent interpretations, this article argues that Fanon considered physical violence a useful tool both to free people from the constraints of colonialism and to build a society free from oppression. The article also discusses the limits of such a theory of violence: Beginning with Hannah Arendt's 1969 criticisms of Fanon's ideas, the article deals with some questions that Fanon failed or did not want to ask himself, and that the peace studies scholars could benefit from considering carefully.

Frantz Fanon's reputation has radically changed over the last sixty years: In the 1960s, he was considered a prophet of violence, an unrelenting revolutionary "that posed an even greater threat to the West than communism."<sup>1</sup> Recently, however, scholars have called for serious reflection about "Fanon's supposed glorification of violence as socially and psychologically liberating,"<sup>2</sup> and argued that his ideas, rather than bringing fire and sword, "allow us to look (...) toward a critique of the configurations of contemporary globalization."<sup>3</sup> It is a question that merits peace studies scholars' attention in this moment, as thoughtful interpretations of the classical authors who dealt with the relationship between politics and violence form the premise for any informed reflection on violence. The image of Fanon as a bloodthirsty philosopher is clearly exaggerated;

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

© 2022 The Author. Peace & Change published by Peace History Society and Wiley Periodicals LLC.

but describing him as a mere forerunner of our sensitivity about injustice and discrimination risks obscuring or devaluing significant nuances in his thought on violence as an instrument of justice. Indeed, it cannot be denied that Fanon provided his readers with a far-reaching legitimization of the use of force and that he “recommended violence for reasons surpassing the necessity of self-defence or the removal of a rotten social system.”<sup>4</sup> This fact makes sense in light of the political experience surrounding the decolonization process. Fanon wrote *The Wretched of the Earth* against the backdrop of the Cuban Revolution (1956–1959); the independence of Morocco, Tunisia, and Sudan in 1956; and above all, the Battle of Dien Bien Phu (1954), which marked the defeat of the French in Vietnam and opened the way to the Geneva Accords and the independence of Vietnam (divided into two stages), Cambodia and Laos. This constellation of transformative events appeared to many that an indication that violent anti-colonial revolution and radicalism were forging a historically ordained path toward freedom and justice.

Looking more closely at Fanon's own historical circumstances, it should be noted that, right after the battle of Dien Bien Phu, the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) announced the beginning of an armed fight against France for independence. Fanon joined the FLN in November 1954, helping in the struggle by hiding weapons and other supplies at the Blida hospital where he worked. He soon became acquainted and forged friendship with Ramdane Abane, a prominent revolutionary political leader in the FLN, who was convinced that only an armed popular struggle could get rid of colonialism in Algeria. Such a struggle, however, was not to be spontaneous; it was to be run by a strong organizing political center, with the aim of establishing a democratic and secular republic. Fanon himself took part in this organizational endeavor, working in the FLN central command in Tunis.

After the eight-day-long general strike called by the FLN in January 1957, the French government waged a fierce repression, characterized by systematic arrests, tortures, and killings. President De Gaulle eventually tried to find an agreement, but the FLN did not stop fighting and the French colonizers, united in the Organization de l'Armée Secrète, refused to interrupt their fierce “anti-Arab” terrorist activity. Robert Young gave a clear illustration of the Algerian situation in this period in writing: “violence [...] is too clean and cerebral a word, too surrounded with the dignity of philosophical conceptualization, to describe the raging, sadistic and sickening butchery of what went on in Algeria.”<sup>5</sup> The extreme brutality of the war in Algeria, and across all of recent history, from the world wars to the rise of totalitarianism, and from colonial oppression to the courageous revolts of subjugated peoples, showed Fanon that violence could serve to impose domination or to free oneself from it. In his view, violence guided with a skilful hand could reshape a society toward an enduring state freedom and justice. It is from this vantage point that this article pursues two aims: The first is to consider how Fanon defended his theory of violent revolution in *The Wretched of the Earth*. While some recent and perspective interpretations tend to reduce the importance of violence in Fanon's thought, I argue that it is the core of his revolutionary theory. To be more precise, Fanon considered physical violence as a useful means of both freeing people from oppression and building a new, nonoppressive societies.

The second aim of this article is to explore the limits of Fanon's theory of violent revolution as an instrument of liberation for subjugated peoples. To support this view, I recall the criticisms Hannah Arendt leveled at *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1969, which have yet to receive their due consideration in the scholarly literature.<sup>6</sup> I conclude with some brief remarks and a number of questions that Fanon did not address. The answers to these questions ultimately cast doubt on the potential for violence to achieve the just society Fanon envisioned, and instead weigh in favor of theories locating true liberative potential in anti-violence and nonviolence posited by Arendt and others.

## OPPRESSION, VIOLENCE, AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Fanon dictated *The Wretched of the Earth* to his wife in the spring and summer of 1961, when he was already very ill with the leukemia that would kill him on December 6 of the same year. However, the famous first chapter of his book, "On Violence," had been written shortly before the rest of the work.<sup>7</sup> Here, Fanon immediately makes clear that colonial domination is violent, radical, and racist, and in no way allows for a confrontation or dialogue between the oppressors and the oppressed. In colonial regions, "the police and the military ensure the colonized are kept under close scrutiny, and contained by rifle butts and napalm."<sup>8</sup> Oppression is not alleviated or masked, and violence is perpetrated not only on the bodies of the colonized, but also on their minds. The latter, psychological violence, is practiced by forcing stereotypes onto the native peoples. They are described as evil, lazy, and irrational creatures that need to be protected, subhuman by nature. "The colonial world" Fanon wrote, "is a Manichaeian world [in which], the colonist turns the colonized into a kind of quintessence of evil. Colonized society is not merely portrayed as a society without values. The colonist is not content with stating that the colonized world has lost its values or worse never possessed any. The 'native' is declared impervious to ethics, representing not only the absence of values but also the negation of values. He is, dare we say it, the enemy of values. In other words, absolute evil. A corrosive element, destroying everything within his reach, a corrupting element, distorting everything which involves aesthetics or morals, an agent of malevolent powers, an unconscious and incurable instrument of blind forces."<sup>9</sup>

Precisely, because of the radical and structural nature of such domination, according to Fanon, liberation from colonialism can only be a violent phenomenon that "reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives," and can be resolved "only after a murderous and decisive confrontation between the two protagonists." In the context of such a radical conflict, the colonized peoples' struggle for liberation must and can only consist of a counter-violence that is proportionate to the inhumanity that they have suffered. According to Fanon, "to destroy the colonial world means nothing less than demolishing the colonist's sector, burying it deep within the earth or banishing it from the territory."<sup>10</sup> From this standpoint, no moral argument that leverages the quest for concord can convince those who have suffered colonial oppression firsthand and long to free themselves from the suffering. He elaborated this point in stating, "During the struggle for liberation [...] this artificial sentinel [the western morality] is smashed to smithereens. All the Mediterranean values, the triumph of the individual, of enlightenment and Beauty turn into pale, lifeless trinkets. All those discourses appear a jumble of dead words. Those values which seemed to ennoble the soul prove worthless because they have nothing in common with the real life struggle in which the people are engaged."<sup>11</sup>

Fanon goes further than maintaining that counter-violence is necessary to drive the colonists out. He also insists that such a practice has positive effects both psychologically, in the minds of the rebels, and politically, opening the way to building a new society. Fanon maintains of the psychological aspect that, above all, anti-colonial violence allows the oppressed to vent their rage against those who are truly responsible for the injustices they have suffered: "After years of unreality, after wallowing in the most extraordinary phantasms, the colonized subject, machine gun at the ready, finally confronts the only force which challenges his very being: colonialism."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in the context of the armed struggle, the colonized individual understands the value of fellowship among equals; he discovers the concrete bond between him and his conationals, and leaves behind the European individualist mentality by which "my brother is my wallet and my comrade, my scheming."<sup>13</sup> Finally, counter-violence allows the colonized to become aware

of themselves and their own humanity, to take back their dignity and be cured of the mental illnesses (first and foremost, an enormous inferiority complex) brought on by the colonial system.<sup>14</sup>

In regard to the positive effects that the practice of counter-violence has at the political level, Fanon begins with the idea that since colonialism destroyed the precolonial autochthonous society, it is impossible to restore the previous culture or social organization; consequently, the postcolonial nation will have no choice but to forge ahead in the struggle and rise up “from the rotting cadaver of the colonist.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, counter-violence “is invested with positive, formative features” because it allows a new political unity to take shape. “This violent praxis is totalizing since each individual represents a violent link in the great chain, in the almighty body of violence rearing up in reaction to the primary violence of the colonizer. Factions recognize each other and the future nation is already indivisible. The armed struggle mobilizes the people, i.e., it pitches them in a single direction, from which there is no turning back.”<sup>16</sup> Fanon argues that the nation’s same cultural identity will be shaped in the violent struggle against oppression: “To fight for national culture first of all means fighting for the liberation of the nation, the tangible matrix from which culture can grow. One cannot divorce the combat for culture from the people’s struggle for liberation. [...] The Algerian national culture takes form and shape during the fight, in prison, facing the guillotine, and in the capture and destruction of the French military positions.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, written into “the objectives and methods of the struggle” is a new national solidarity, a new culture, and a new humanity.<sup>18</sup>

Once the armed struggle has solidified the political unity of the people into this new humanity, building a just and prosperous society will become a relatively easy task. After liberation, in fact, the collective energies that were dedicated to the fight against the colonists will be directed against other enemies that beset upon the people, such as poverty, illiteracy, and underdevelopment. Moreover, the practice of revolutionary violence allows the colonized to realize that victory over the oppressor is the result of a collaboration on the part of everyone, and that the new liberty was paid for through the personal sacrifice of every individual. Fanon argues that this kind of awareness will prevent the population from accepting a new domination: “When they have used violence to achieve national liberation, the masses allow nobody to come forward as ‘liberator’. They prove themselves to be jealous of their achievements and take care not to place their future, their destiny, and the fate of their homeland into the hands of a living god.”<sup>19</sup>

## WHAT KIND OF VIOLENCE?

At this point, two important questions should be clarified: What kind of violence, according to Fanon, should be used in the anti-colonial armed struggle? And what exactly does he mean (both in tactical and military terms) when he speaks of counter-violence? In regard to the first question, Fanon explains that although violence is inevitable in the fight for liberation, not all the oppressed are willing to resort to it. Nationalist parties that represent the proletariat citizenry and the bourgeois lower classes are particularly unwilling to use it because they would have something to lose in a revolution. These are laborers, small shop owners, and artisans who can find their niche in the colonial system, find their own way to make a decent living, confining their hopes to a better salary, for example, and better living conditions in general. Therefore, the nationalist parties that represent these classes are not revolutionary forces and would be content to have a share of the power within the existing order.

Instead, it is the rural masses who are willing to take part in a violent struggle. The conditions of poverty and oppression in which the peasants live prevents them from having any faith in the

possibility of improving their lives under the existing system; they only wish to take the colonists' land and wealth, and violence is the most obvious and direct way to do this. When the angry and spontaneous violence of the rural masses explodes, the "dramatic measures" that the authorities can take are useless. No demonstration of military power intimidates the rebels: "the gun goes off on its own for nerves are on edge, fear has set in, and everyone is trigger-happy."<sup>20</sup> Faced with these explosions of counter-violence, according to Fanon, nationalist leaders must abandon any moderate political stance, bridge the gap that separates them from the rural masses, and attune themselves to their needs and aspirations. Only in this way can they, on the one hand, exploit the immense revolutionary force of the peasants, and on the other, lay the foundations for a new national solidarity.<sup>21</sup>

However, the revolutionary leaders must do more than merely ride the momentum of the rural masses; they must also guide them, holding them back when necessary, and channel their rage into the execution of a precise political plan. For Fanon, the angry spontaneous peasant revolt is crucial but insufficient; it is also essential that the revolutionary leaders know how to enlighten, educate, and organize the militants, accepting responsibility for the fact that "an army needs to be created, a central authority established."<sup>22</sup> Fanon repeatedly insists on this point: "Antiracism and the determination to defend one's skin, which is characteristic of the colonized's response to colonial oppression, clearly represent sufficient reasons to join the struggle. But one does not sustain a war, one does not endure massive repression or witness the disappearance of one's entire family in order for hatred or racism to triumph. Racism, hatred, resentment, and 'the legitimate desire for revenge' alone cannot nurture a war of liberation. [...]. Of course the countless abuses perpetrated by the colonialist forces reintroduce emotional factors into the struggle, give the militant further cause to hate and new reasons to set off in search of a 'colonist to kill'. But, day by day, leaders will come to realize that hatred is not an agenda."<sup>23</sup> In short, Fanon—as Gibson pointed out—proposes a "Leninist" revolutionary program of armed struggle founded on the anger of the oppressed, but led by a group of professional political leaders.<sup>24</sup>

In terms of military-revolutionary tactics, Fanon does not propose waging field battles against the occupying army, because one cannot win a war against tanks and bombers when armed with just a rifle. Instead, he proposes guerrilla warfare, sabotage, attacks, and disruptive actions that hinder trade and make production in colonized territories expensive. In his opinion, such a strategy would be effective because it would undermine the colonists' interests, which entail exploiting the colonized territory and ensuring that its population purchases the goods produced by the industrial apparatus of the occupying power.<sup>25</sup> The guerrilla warfare aimed at draining the colonists' energies and making colonialism a profitable business for the capitalist European classes can therefore be a winning strategy for the colonized rural masses to pursue.

## UNDERSTANDING COUNTER-VIOLENCE

A number of scholars have made claims that in his work as a whole Fanon uses the term "violence" in ways ranging from the most literal to the most symbolic meaning.<sup>26</sup> It appears unequivocal, however, that "anti-colonial violence" in *The Wretched of the Earth* refers to armed action (organized or spontaneous) aimed at driving out or killing the oppressors, and that Fanon attributes a positive value to such violence as a liberating event and a precondition for building a new humanist society; that is, a political and social system that does not allow for the division into oppressed and oppressors, and capable of carrying out a shared idea of justice. In an equally unequivocal way, it emerges that all of this is not revealed so much in individual passages, which

could easily be misunderstood when taken out of context, but rather in the general sense of Fanon's essay. Not surprisingly, right at the end of the second chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, in what reads as a wish to summarize the meaning, Fanon writes that "violence alone, perpetrated by the people, violence organized and guided by the leadership, provides the key for the masses to decipher social reality. Without this struggle, without this praxis there is nothing but a carnival parade and a lot of hot air. All that is left is a slight re-adaptation, a few reforms at the top, a flag, and down at the bottom a shapeless, writhing mass, still mired in the Dark Ages."<sup>27</sup>

The fact that Fanon attributes such a positive value to anti-colonial violence does not, however, mean that he considers it to be a good unto itself. Similar violence, as useful and productive as it is, is not the new humanist society Fanon is aiming for, only the appropriate and necessary instrument for building such a society.<sup>28</sup> It would certainly not be correct to accuse Fanon of glorifying violence in itself, in the sense that he considers it neither an unconditional producer of desirable outcomes, nor the carrier of a sort of *igiene del mondo* (hygiene of the world) that has value regardless of the results it produces.<sup>29</sup> Majid Sharifi and Sean Chabot assert that to Fanon, "counter-violence is only productive to the extent it allows the colonized to experience and struggle for freedom." In this freedom, achieved by the struggle and determined by the struggle, but which does not coincide with the struggle, "the colonized begin recognizing themselves as humans endowed with agential power, right to self-determination, and self-respect at the individual and community level."<sup>30</sup>

It is important to remember, however, that not all scholars concur with the interpretation that, for Fanon, violence is just an instrument to be used with political farsightedness. For example, Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, in an article from 2008, argued that Fanon understands counter-violence in two separate ways: as an instrument "for achieving and sustaining political power - that is, the power to rule"; and as a "libidinal energy," that is, a force generated by the oppressive system and which takes shape in the minds of the colonized-turned-militants. In this second sense, according to these authors, violence is liberating for individuals and it "operates analogously with physical laws, in which the imposition of force provokes a reaction."<sup>31</sup> This type of violence, argue Frazer and Hutchings, "is about *being* rather than *doing*"; in other words, it is not an instrument that can be chosen or discarded at will, but a reaction that arises from the condition in which the oppressed are trapped.

Based on these observations, according to Frazer and Hutchings, one could believe that the violence of being represents the source of energy that allows the violence of doing to become effective, "providing the momentum motivating the colonized to do what is necessary to overthrow the oppressor, and thereby cleanse both themselves and their world of violence."<sup>32</sup> However, upon closer scrutiny, according to these authors, this comfortable conclusion is challenged by what Fanon writes in the fifth chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, titled "Colonial War and Mental Disorder," in which he gives a series of examples of the devastating psychological effects that violence can have on both the colonized and the colonizers. These examples, according to the authors, demonstrate that, for Fanon, the way out of the violent condition cannot in its turn be violent. They write "although Fanon is adamant that the cure for the pathologies of colonialism and anti-colonial war will be found in the future built by anti-colonial violence, his vivid accounts of the lives of his patients and the broader family and social relations in which they are embedded suggests an alternative conclusion, in Fanon's own words that 'the future of such patients is mortgaged.'"<sup>33</sup> According to Frazer and Hutchings, Fanon shows in "Colonial War and Mental Disorder" that he is not so convinced that violence is a useful instrument for overturning the oppressive system and building a new humanist society. There would seem to be a paradox in Fanon's thinking, in which "the argument that begins as a celebration of revolutionary violence



ends up by drawing attention to the corrupting and debilitating effects of violence [...] on both perpetrators and victims.”<sup>34</sup>

Frazer and Hutchings' proposed idea that violence can be about *being* and not just about *doing* is undoubtedly perceptive and reflects Fanon's text, although he does not use these expressions. However, it becomes harder to follow the authors when they argue that Fanon's remarks in the fifth chapter of his essay show his distrust of anti-colonial violence. Fanon is certainly fully aware of the horror and suffering that violence provokes in those subjected to it and those who inflict it; this does not mean, however, that it loses value in his eyes as a revolutionary political instrument. For him, violence is part of a revolutionary strategy, indisputably and sadly destined to provoke suffering in all those involved, but also to open the way to the new humanism. Fanon is aware of the problems inherent to using counter-violence, but he is convinced that it is the only useful means for putting an end to oppression. It is not a paradox that, on the one hand, he approves of attacks in the stadiums or venues frequented by the French, and on the other hand, is concerned about the psychological effects that the practice of violence can have on those involved in it.<sup>35</sup>

Another interpretation that tends to reduce the importance of violence in *The Wretched of the Earth* was put forward by Richard Bernstein in his seminal book *Violence: Thinking without Banisters*, published in 2013. Bernstein argues that Fanon is a true critic of violence because he places a special emphasis on its limits as an instrument of revolutionary struggle. He does not deny that, for Fanon, the angry and unrestrained violence of the colonized population is the driver of the struggle for liberation. He adds, however, that at the heart of Fanon's discourse is the awareness that such violence is not enough to carry the struggle to a successful end (“hatred is not an agenda”), and that the explosion of such violence puts society in danger. In short, according to Bernstein, Fanon is a critic of violence, inasmuch as he is convinced that “unrestrained violence does not achieve liberation and real freedom – it undermines it. By engaging in such unrestrained violence, the colonized become the savages that the colonizers take them to be. Fanon insists that the aim of liberation is to *destroy the cycle of violence and counter-violence*.”<sup>36</sup>

Bernstein argues that, despite Fanon's apparent tendency to rhapsodize about violence at several points, he never really appreciates it. Bernstein traces the vehemence and passion with which Fanon describes the armed struggle back to the need to incite the Algerians to fight, and not to an immutable conviction on the part of the author. Bernstein calls upon readers to distinguish “the provocative performative role” of *The Wretched of the Earth* from its central argument, which Bernstein refers to as “Fanon's critique of violence.”<sup>37</sup>

Bernstein is right in arguing that Fanon is a critic of savage violence and that, for him, violence only has value to the extent that it can “*destroy the cycle of violence and counter-violence*.” Here, one might ask: What revolutionary who promises the people liberation would not condemn the spiral of barbarism triggered by “unrestrained violence”? What genuine defender of a new humanism would deny that the practice of savage, widespread, and prolonged violence could undermine the foundations of civilization? To state that Fanon is a critic of violence as defined by Bernstein merely states the obvious: that the author of *The Wretched of the Earth* has a project and an outlook that goes beyond brutality and that, in short, he is not a fascist.

It is difficult to follow Bernstein when he interprets the many long and significant passages by Fanon on the virtues of disciplined anti-colonial violence in terms of propaganda, and when he suggests that a distinction could be made between a Fanon concerned about the “provocative performative role” of his writings and a “real” Fanon, a critic of violence. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon rejects savage violence as an instrument for political struggle; but the theme of the armed struggle is central and, as shown, loaded with a positive value that goes far beyond breaking out of the oppressive restraints imposed by colonialism. Bernstein's remarks are surely

perspective, but they do not disprove that physical violence is the core of the theory of revolution exposed in *The Wretched of the Earth*, as I argued above.<sup>38</sup>

It is possible, now, to briefly summarize Fanon's ideas about revolution and violence, as they have emerged from the analysis to this point. First, he described the conflict between colonized and colonizers as absolutely radical. Second, he had no faith that any moral pressure or dialogue could help to overcome violence against the colonized. Third, he strongly believed that revolutionary violence has a number of positive effects at the psychological and at the political levels. Fourth, he thought that the spontaneous rage of the oppressed is the driving force behind the revolution; but, fifth, such a force must be led, organized and controlled by the awareness of the political leaders in order to build a nonoppressive society.

Fanon's body of ideas takes on a very different cast in the light of Hannah Arendt's equally influential commentary on violence and liberation. A comparison between Fanon and Arendt is particularly important, not only as the most prominent mid-century critic of revolutionary violence, but because she dealt specifically with *The Wretched of the Earth*—and with its American understandings—so that her remarks on violence were formed directly from Fanon's essay. Indeed, starting from an analysis of *The Wretched of the Earth*, she undermined, with the depth and rigor that are peculiar to her, at least three of Fanon's fundamental assumptions about the utility of violence as an effective tool for liberation, the capacity of revolutionary violence to exterminate oppressive political systems, and the necessity of revolutionary violence in every revolt against oppressive power. Arendt's discussion of Fanon's theory of revolution helps us to gain insight into the relationship between violence and liberation, and to question whether Fanon and his adherents underestimate the political potential of nonviolent struggle the truly radical and more effective instrument for change.

## FANON AND ARENDT

Arendt's *On Violence* was published in 1969, just four years after *The Wretched of the Earth* was first published in English. In this essay, written against the backdrop of youth protests and fierce social tensions in the United States, Arendt repeatedly calls *The Wretched of the Earth* into question. The target of Arendt's argument is not Fanon's book however, but the American New Left and "the present student generation," who based their own ideas (also) on *The Wretched of the Earth* and its preface written by Jean-Paul Sartre.<sup>39</sup> Not coincidentally, in fact, Arendt explicitly states that she is aware that Fanon "is much more doubtful about violence than his admirers."<sup>40</sup> It is true that, in some passages, the German philosopher places Fanon—alongside Sorel, Pareto and Sartre—among those who glorify violence<sup>41</sup>; but it is also true that, in her notes quoting an article by Barbara Deming, she endorses the thesis in which the word "violence" in Fanon's text was often synonymous with "radical and uncompromising action."<sup>42</sup> Having clarified this point, Arendt levels a series of direct and implied criticisms at Fanon that cast his theses in *The Wretched of the Earth* as problematic—particularly as read and adopted in a western political context.

Before examining those criticisms, however, it is worth enumerating the different premises that Arendt and Fanon take as their starting points, particularly those regarding the relationship between politics and violence. Arendt herself helps us understand this difference, defining her own idea of the relationship between politics and violence as being in opposition to the dominant Western tradition. This tradition, explains Arendt, holds that political power and violence are tightly bound by the ancient belief that the law cannot be enforced without the sword. Max



Weber said famously of this tradition that “one can ultimately only define the modern state sociologically by reference to a specific *means* that is proper to it, as it is to every political association, namely, physical force.”<sup>43</sup> In much mid-century revolutionary thought power coincides with the monopoly on physical force which, in this case, must be torn away from the oppressors to be placed at the service of the oppressed. The exponents of this tradition, regardless of their political stance, conceive of power as *power over* and consider it to be a command–obedience relationship between two subjects. Starting from this idea of power, it is clear that the violent action is conceived as an extreme way to exercise this power and as a useful means for creating it.

A second tradition, according to Arendt, conceives of political power in a different way. In this tradition, power resembles what the Greeks called *isonomy* or the Romans called *civitas*; it is a concept of power “whose essence did not rely on the command-obedience relationship and which did not identify power and rule or law and command.”<sup>44</sup> Power has nothing to do with the use of force in this schema, but rather with the willingness and capacity of a group of individuals to act together. She contends that “*Power* corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together.”<sup>45</sup>

In the second tradition, violence (or force) is in no way the “specific *means*” of power and, above all, it is not needed to create it. Power is born of consensus, not force; and when a political power resorts to violence, it is often a sign of its instability rather than its solidity.<sup>46</sup> From this point of view, “Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power’s disappearance. This implies that it is not correct to think of the opposite of violence as nonviolence; to speak of nonviolent power is actually redundant. Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it.”<sup>47</sup>

## VOLCANIC OUTBURSTS

These ideas about power and its relationship to violence are at the root of the Arendt’s more strictly political criticisms of Fanon in *On Violence*. There are at least three such criticisms: The first calls into question the political effectiveness of anti-colonial violence. The second regards the alleged need for violence, whether at the political level, to resist an oppressive power; or the psychological level, as a useful practice by which to become aware of the condition of oppression. The third focuses on the possibility that the emotions generated during the violent anti-colonial struggle can function as a foundation for the new society.<sup>48</sup>

The first criticism: for Arendt, Fanon’s confidence that, through violence, the oppressed can take the place of the oppressors is a dangerous dream. This recalls the dreams that Marx wanted to eliminate from the nineteenth-century revolutionary discourse in order to render its false consciousness “scientific.” The violent revolts of the oppressed, explains Arendt, have never produced the effects that Fanon imagines; instead, they have given life to a new violence and injustice. Arendt writes as follows: “The rarity of slave rebellions and of uprisings among the disinherited and downtrodden is notorious; on the few occasions when they occurred it was precisely ‘mad fury’ that turned dreams into nightmares for everybody. In no case, as far as I know, was the force of these ‘volcanic’ outbursts, in Sartre’s words, ‘equal to that of the pressure put on them’. To identify the national liberation movements with such outbursts is to prophesy their doom - quite apart from the fact that the unlikely victory would not result in changing the world (or the system), but only its personnel.”<sup>49</sup> In short, entrusting the fate of

liberation to the violent revolt of the oppressed—whether direct and restrained by the revolutionary leaders—appears to Arendt to be an unrealistic choice based in a failure to account for the fact that insurrections sparked from desperation are usually drowned in blood and usher in an era of greater barbarism.

For Arendt, there are at least two obstacles hindering the success of the kind of revolution proposed by Fanon. The first has to do with the extreme unpredictability of events in the political sphere, which is only exacerbated by the use of violence. In Arendt's words, "while the results of men's actions are beyond the actors' control, violence harbors within itself an additional element of arbitrariness; nowhere does Fortuna, good or ill luck, play a more fateful role in human affairs than on the battlefield."<sup>50</sup> For this reason, Arendt fears that Fanon's choice of violent revolution, rather than eventually translating into liberation, will end up increasing the overall level of violence in society: "The danger of violence, even if it moves consciously within a non-extremist framework of short-term goals, will always be that the means overwhelm the end. If goals are not achieved rapidly, the result will be not merely defeat but the introduction of the practice of violence into the whole body politic. Action is irreversible, and a return to the status quo in case of defeat is always unlikely. The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world."<sup>51</sup>

The difficulty of using violence to build a society where freedom and justice are guaranteed—and here we come to the second obstacle—is further intensified when the scope of the revolutionary armed struggle is to eliminate the poverty of desperate people. In *On Violence*, this theme is barely touched upon, but Arendt covers it extensively in the famous chapter on the social question in *On Revolution* of 1963. Comparing the American and French revolutions, Arendt argues that the latter was unable to keep its promise of freedom due to the need to put an end to "the fearful spectacle of human misery," and to listen to "the haunting voices of abject poverty." In France, in other words, "it was indeed the ocean of misery and the ocean-like sentiments it aroused that combined to drown the foundations of freedom."<sup>52</sup> The fate of the French Revolution, Arendt points out, is not an isolated case; this tends to be the fate of all revolutions that must deal with the social question. She writes as follows: "No revolution has ever solved the 'social question' and liberated men from the predicament of want, but all revolutions, [...] have followed the example of the French Revolution and used and misused the mighty forces of misery and destitution in their struggle against tyranny or oppression. And although the whole record of past revolutions demonstrates beyond doubt that every attempt to solve the social question with political means leads into terror, and that it is terror which sends revolutions to their doom, it can hardly be denied that to avoid this fatal mistake is almost impossible when a revolution breaks out under conditions of mass poverty."<sup>53</sup>

It is also worth noting for our purposes that, despite these considerations, Arendt does not believe that violence is useless in the pursuit of any political goal. On the contrary, in certain circumstances, violence might be the only way to obtain results, especially if the goal to be achieved is well defined, not too far in the future, and something that requires a fast and limited use of force. "Violence, being instrumental by nature, is rational to the extent that it is effective in reaching the end that must justify it. And since when we act we never know with any certainty the eventual consequences of what we are doing, violence can remain rational only if it pursues short-term goals. Violence does not promote causes, neither history nor revolution, neither progress nor reaction; but it can serve to dramatize grievances and bring them to public attention."<sup>54</sup> In short, violence can be useful, but only for concrete and immediate goals: when one wants to put it in the service of a cause (social progress or revolution), it proves to be an unsuitable weapon.

## REBELLION AND BROTHERHOOD IN THE FACE OF DEATH

The second criticism that Arendt levels at Fanon, as mentioned, regards the need for violence. For Arendt, the force of victorious revolutions has little to do with weapons (of which the oppressive power has always possessed more); it lies instead in the ability of the revolutionaries to erode the consensus around the existing order and to found a new power that—as we have seen—is not born of force, but of consensus. “In a contest of violence against violence the superiority of the government has always been absolute; but this superiority lasts only as long as the power structure of the government is intact that is, as long as commands are obeyed and the army or police forces are prepared to use their weapons. When this is no longer the case, the situation changes abruptly. Not only is the rebellion not put down, but the arms themselves change hands - sometimes, as in the Hungarian revolution, within a few hours.”<sup>55</sup> This means that, if the collapse of consensus surrounding “the power structure of the government,” and not the effective use of violence, makes change possible (in other words, the formation of a new power), then the successful outcome of a revolution is not necessarily a military question.<sup>56</sup>

It should be made clear that Arendt, with these considerations, is not calling into question the value of the revolt in itself. On the contrary, she agrees with Fanon that rebellion is the condition in which the oppressed become aware of their own condition and attain freedom.<sup>57</sup> Unlike Fanon, however, Arendt does not cast challengers as necessarily embracing weapons. Arendt and Fanon agree that the resistance fighters find themselves and create the conditions for the appearance of freedom by abandoning the submissive attitude and rebelling against oppression; however, she disagrees with his idea that the connection between rebellion and violence is indissoluble. In this regard, let it be noted that, when Arendt criticizes the theory of armed revolution that Fanon proposes, she is not denying the colonized the right to rebel, nor is she moved by a type of “lack of sympathy for or understanding of colonized non-European peoples” or by “a latent Eurocentric double standard at work in her thought” as Tsenay Serequeberhan asserted.<sup>58</sup> Instead, she is criticizing the violence of the rebellion proposed by Fanon without denying the opportunity for rebellion; and she can do it because, in her opinion, violence and rebellion do not necessarily coincide.

The third criticism that Arendt levels at Fanon regards the possibility that the armed struggle generates sufficient feelings of brotherhood to establish a new political unity. For Arendt, “the well-known phenomenon of brotherhood on the battlefield, where the noblest, most selfless deeds are often daily occurrences,” is not suited to establishing a new political order. It is surely true that facing death with comrades in struggle intensifies everybody's vitality and suggests the conviction that “our own death is accompanied by the potential immortality of the group we belong to and, in the final analysis, of the species.” However, she argues that “these experiences, whose elementary force is beyond doubt, have never found an institutional, political expression, and that death as an equalizer plays hardly any role in political philosophy.” The political order, explains Arendt, is founded precisely “to escape from the equality before death into a distinction assuring some measure of deathlessness.” This is the reason why no body politic “was ever founded on equality before death and its actualization in violence.” The opinion that “the strong fraternal sentiments collective violence engenders” could establish “a new community together with a ‘new man’” is an illusion. Indeed, “no human relationship is more transitory than this kind of brotherhood, which can be actualized only under conditions of immediate danger to life and limb.”<sup>59</sup>

## THE QUESTIONS THAT DID NOT TORMENT FANON

This analysis brings me to some observations on Fanon's theory of revolution and the criticisms leveled by Arendt that shed light on the meaning, possibilities and limits of revolutionary violence. First of all, Fanon does not consider the possibility that the "Leninist" revolutionary strategy he proposes, even if victorious, does not keep its new humanist promises. Judith Butler raised the issue in a very clear way when they wrote: "there is a question of whether violence as a pure instrument can remain as such or whether it comes to define, haunt, and afflict the polity that instates itself through violent means. Neither Sartre nor Fanon asks this question. Whether the aspiration is either to create man anew, or to produce a community defined as an infinite unity of mutual needs, or to achieve decolonization, then we have to ask whether violence continues to play a role in what it means to create oneself, what it means to produce such a community, what it means to achieve and sustain decolonization as a goal."<sup>60</sup>

The revolution that Fanon has in mind, in order to be victorious, would need a regimentation of the associated life, a hierarchical organization, and a strict chain of command to serve the revolutionary effort. Fanon himself supports this when he speaks of the importance of creating an army and a "central authority" to direct it. Fanon does not question how all of this could be compatible with that nonoppressive society that he calls new humanism. In other words, how can one reconcile the necessary decision-making of revolutionary political leaders, who are also military leaders, with their proposed constant and empathetic relationship with the masses? How is it possible to ensure that the leaders of the revolution, in a highly conflictual context of extreme necessity, are not tempted by an authoritarian policy in the name of strategic exigencies? How is it possible to win a revolutionary war without centralizing military and decision-making power, without indoctrinating the combatants, making them obedient cogs in an efficient war machine? How is it possible not to consider that leading an organized armed struggle tends to entail - and in fact very often has entailed—the ditching of any inclusive decision-making process and an authoritarian drift?

Questions like these perhaps should have tormented Fanon, considering that, in the reality of violent revolutions, the social and economic cleavages caused by the armed struggle tend to persist after liberation as well; that in the situation of tension created by these cleavages, dissent is discouraged or suppressed by force; and that the powerful military apparatus prepared to win the revolution, is still available and perfectly suited to the purpose. In other words, Fanon should perhaps have been concerned that the outcome of revolution is not a new humanist society, but a new oppressive power justified by the need to defend the conquests of people; a power that tends to strengthen the coercive bodies and place the entire apparatus of domination in the hands of the revolutionary leaders, at the expense of freedom and civilization.

In truth, in the third chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon addresses the issue of the internal democracy of the revolutionary party, and the relationship between leadership and people during the struggle. He insists that "a persistent battle has to be waged to prevent the party from becoming a compliant instrument in the hands of a leader."<sup>61</sup> These words, however, should be considered as a simple declaration of intent because they do not address the problem of how to concretely avoid the dynamics of centralization of power, which Fanon himself considers necessary to conduct the anti-colonial struggle. Fanon does not question—or only does so superficially—whether the organized counter-violence that will decide the rules of the future social order will not end up proving to be simply a new, irresponsible, oppressive, and organized triumphant violence.<sup>62</sup>

From a more philosophical point of view, a similar critical view to Fanon was convincingly supported by Tzvetan Todorov in *The Morals of History*, first published in 1991 and translated into English in 1995. Todorov suggested that there are deep similarities “between colonialist and anti-colonialist discourse” in *The Wretched of the Earth*. “According to Fanon,” he wrote, “only the actors change in the move from colonialism to anti-colonialism: their attributes, like their actions, remain the same. In both instances, radical difference is affirmed and universality is rejected,” and “there is a belief that all the good people are on one side, and all the bad on the other.” Moreover, Fanon attributes to colonialists and anti-colonialists the same characteristics: “If the colonizers were motivated by nationalism, nationalism will be used in its turn to advance decolonization. If colonialism is ‘violence in its natural state’, and ‘the agents of the government speak the language of pure force’, anti-colonialism must do the same.”

If the difference between the power of colonists and the power of the colonized is just a change of rulers, one cannot understand why the same characteristics should be considered a defect when they belong to the colonists and a virtue when they belong to the decolonized; and why the power of the natives should be better than the power of the foreigners: “exploitation and repression do very well without national difference, and one reaps what one has sown.” Todorov concludes that, instead of running the risk of imitate colonists’ oppression in order to get rid of colonialism, it is better to follow Pascal’s words of wisdom: “Must one kill in order to prevent bad people from existing? This is creating two bad people instead of one (*Pensées*, 911).”<sup>63</sup>

An unwarranted hindsight suggests to us that Pascal’s statement has often hit the mark. We know the positive outcomes of the nonviolent struggles for the emancipation of Black peoples in the United States and South Africa; we have noted how vigorous anti-communist dissidence was in the former Soviet bloc countries (I am thinking, for example, of the intellectuals of Charta 77 and Solidarnosc); and vice versa, we have seen that the military victories of the oppressed tend to transform dreams of freedom into nightmares, as has happened in a number of countries in Indochina, South America and Africa. After all of this, it is impossible to be insensitive to Arendt’s words when she states that rebellion does not necessarily mean using violence, and that the “volcanic outbursts” of enslaved peoples does not free them from slavery. In light of these experiences, furthermore, one should ask oneself whether Fanon’s seductive idea that violence functions as a valve for venting the frustrations and harassment suffered can really be considered functional to building a new society. It seems appropriate to ask whether, rather than surrendering to the impulse of counter-violence as Fanon proposes, liberation from oppression and the construction of a truly renewed society might not mean controlling such an impulse, and channeling it toward immediately creative goals, following the example offered by the theory that guided the struggles of Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel, and many others. One should ask in our own turbulent times, whether or not the most effective reaction to oppression—that which can truly eliminate it—is to avoid imitating the oppressor, rejecting his violent world and the use of his tyrannical means to create something truly revolutionary.<sup>64</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> David Macey, *Frantz Fanon* (New York: Picador, 2001), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Nigel Gibson, *Dialectics got the upper Hand. Fanon, Violence, and the Quest[ion] of Liberation* in Gavin Rae and Emma Ingala (ed.) *The Meaning of Violence. From critical Theory to Biopolitics*. (London–New York: Routledge, 2019), 103.

- <sup>3</sup> Homi Bhabha, *Foreword*, in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), xiii.
- <sup>4</sup> Messay Kebede, “The Rehabilitation of Violence and the Violence of Rehabilitation. Fanon and Colonialism,” in *Journal of Black Studies* No. 5 (2001): 539–562, 539.
- <sup>5</sup> Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: an Historical Introduction* (Malden-Oxford-Victoria: Blackwell, 2001), 277.
- <sup>6</sup> Tsenay Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy* (London-New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 77; Ato Sekyi-Out, *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience* (Cambridge-London: Harvard U.P., 1996), 86–87.
- <sup>7</sup> Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, 451.
- <sup>8</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Richard Philcox, with commentary by Jean-Paul Sartre and Homi K. Bhabha. (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 4.
- <sup>9</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 6.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 6.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 11.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 20–21. See also Bhabha, *Foreword*, xxxvi–xxxviii; and Stefano Visentin, “Un popolo innumerevole. Frantz Fanon e l’invenzione di una nazione,” in *Consecutio rerum* No. 8 (2020): 131–158.
- <sup>13</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 11.
- <sup>14</sup> See the letter of resignation as a psychiatrist that Fanon wrote to the French resident minister of Algeria in Fanon 1964, 60–62.
- <sup>15</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 50.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 50.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 168.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 178. See also Kebede “The Rehabilitation of Violence and the Violence of Rehabilitation. Fanon and Colonialism”, 540–546.
- <sup>19</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 51–52. On the notion of violence and the discrepancies between the English translation and the original French version, see Kathryn Batchelor, “Fanon’s *Les damnés de la terre*: Translation, De-Philosophization and the Intensification of Violence”, in *Nottingham French Studies*, No. 1 (2015): 7–22.
- <sup>20</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 32. See also *Ibid*, 47; Fanon, *L’an V de la révolution algérienne* (1959), translated as *A dying Colonialism*, introduction by Adolfo Gilly (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1965), 25.
- <sup>21</sup> Richard Bernstein, *Violence. Thinking without Banisters* (Cambridge–Malden: Polity Press, 2013), 107–109.
- <sup>22</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 86.
- <sup>23</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 89. On this point see Peter Worsley, “Frantz Fanon and the Lumpenproletariat,” *The Socialist Register*, IX (1972), 204.
- <sup>24</sup> Gibson, *Dialectics got the upper Hand. Fanon, Violence, and the Quest[ion] of Liberation*, 108.
- <sup>25</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 26–27.
- <sup>26</sup> Gibson, *Dialectics got the upper Hand. Fanon, Violence, and the Quest[ion] of Liberation*, 103.
- <sup>27</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 96.
- <sup>28</sup> Gibson, *Dialectics got the upper Hand. Fanon, Violence, and the Quest[ion] of Liberation*, 117.
- <sup>29</sup> Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, 468–469; Richard Bernstein, *Violence*, in *Political Concepts. A critical Lexicon*, (<http://www.politicalconcepts.org/bernstein-violence>) October 2012, 112.
- <sup>30</sup> Majid Sharifi and Sean Chabot, *Fanon’s New Humanism as Antidote to Today’s Colonial Violence*, in Dustin J. Byrd e Seyed J. Miri (ed.) *Frantz Fanon and Emancipatory Social Theory. A View from the Wretched* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2020), 260.
- <sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, “On Politics and Violence: Arendt Contra Fanon”, in *Contemporary Political Theory*, No. 7 (2008): 97.

- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, 98.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid, 98.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid, 106.
- <sup>35</sup> Young, *Postcolonialism: an historical Introduction*, 298. See also Fanon, *A dying Colonialism*, 55–56.
- <sup>36</sup> Bernstein, *Violence. Thinking without Banisters*, 124. Bernstein also lists other reasons why Fanon should be considered a critic of violence, but they are beyond the scope of this essay.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid, 172.
- <sup>38</sup> Bernstein's chapters about Fanon deal also with other issues I cannot discuss in this article.
- <sup>39</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (San Diego–New York–London: HBJ Book, 1969), 14.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid, 14.
- <sup>41</sup> For example, Ibid, 65.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid, 19–20. Arendt quotes Barbara Deming *On Revolution and Equilibrium*, in *Revolution: Violent and Nonviolent*. See also Bhabha, *Foreword*, xxi.
- <sup>43</sup> Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, in John Dreimanis (ed.) *Max Weber's Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2008), 156. Arendt herself cites this passage from Weber in *On Violence*, 35.
- <sup>44</sup> Arendt, *On Violence*, 40.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid, 44.
- <sup>46</sup> This does not mean that a cohesive political community cannot employ violence, especially directed outward. One can say that violence, according to Arendt, is the instrument by which already constituted powers defend the space of relations that, being political, are non-violent, against hostile forces. See Christopher Finlay, "Hannah Arendt's Critique of Violence," *Thesis Eleven*, No. 97 (2009): 26–45.
- <sup>47</sup> Arendt, *On Violence*, 56.
- <sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Frazer, *Power and Violence*, in Patrick Hayden (ed.) *Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts* (London–New York: Routledge, 2014), 155–166.
- <sup>49</sup> Arendt, *On Violence*, 21.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid, 4.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid, 80.
- <sup>52</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London–New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 94–95.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid, 112.
- <sup>54</sup> Arendt, *On Violence*, 79.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid, 48.
- <sup>56</sup> Richard Bernstein, "Rethinking the social and the political," in *Philosophical Profiles. Essays in a Pragmatic Mode* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 238–259.
- <sup>57</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), 4.
- <sup>58</sup> Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, 77.
- <sup>59</sup> Arendt, *On Violence*, 67–68.
- <sup>60</sup> Judith Butler, *Sense of the Subject* (New York: Fordham U.P., 2015), 191. See also Cocks Joan, "On Commonality, Nationalism, and Violence: Hannah Arendt, Rosa Luxemburg, and Frantz Fanon," in *Women in German Yearbooks*, No. 12 (1996): 43.
- <sup>61</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 127.
- <sup>62</sup> On the concept of people in Fanon, however, see Visentin, "Un popolo innumerevole. Frantz Fanon e l'invenzione di una nazione," 152–153.
- <sup>63</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Morals of History* (Minneapolis–London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 56–57.

- <sup>64</sup> Kebede, "The Rehabilitation of Violence and the Violence of Rehabilitation. Fanon and Colonialism," 554–562.

**How to cite this article:** Castelli ALiberation through violence in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*: Historical and contemporary criticisms. *Peace and Change*. 2022;00:1–16.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/pech.12554>