



Midnight Reflections on Some of the Work of Frantz Fanon

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Abstract: This article emphasizes the continuing importance of Fanon's analysis of 'the pitfalls of national consciousness.' Other considerations, such as the potential role of oil that appeared in *el Moudjahid* (1958) and that had a bearing on the development of Algeria and the Maghreb, are briefly touched upon. Their long term positive as well as negative impact is a matter of contemporary debate that is not considered in this essay.

Where to begin? The remarks that follow recapitulate certain elements of the presentation I offered at UMass Boston's fourth annual Social Theory Forum conference on "The Violences of Colonialism and Racism, Inner and Global," while omitting others.

The terrible relevance of Fanon, which I spoke about at our conference, is a necessary starting point. It is designed to emphasize the continued urgency of the problems he described, not only with respect to the nature of colonialism, but also the "pitfalls of national consciousness," a theme to which he repeatedly returned in different contexts.

Fanon's unsurpassed ability to define and, in so doing, defy, the injustice embed-

ded in racism and colonialism remains unique and universal. Who can read the burning pages of *Black Skin, White Masks, A Dying Colonialism, Toward the African Revolution*, and above all, *The Wretched of the Earth*, without feeling that these uncommon texts had been issued as part of a global alert, demanding that people awaken from the deep sleep of indifference and a dead-end politics to allow for a meaningful survival? Who can pore over Fanon's arguments about colonizer and colonized without thinking of Palestine and Iraq? And who can hear his categorical denunciations of nationalism and its discontents, including the proliferation of corrupt leadership, without recognizing the all too familiar phenomenon across the very landscapes

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that Fanon so painstakingly worked?

The Algerian revolution itself, the incubator of Fanon's exposé of colonialism and the vicious war it unleashed, is far from forgotten. The France of those scarred years may appear distant but not to those who resist burying the record, and who continue to demand justice for past crimes of war. In this, French experience is hardly unique. The will to forget and to edit historical memory is by now a recognized phenomenon in states with histories of 'uncivil war,'¹ and notably where question of responsibility for torture persist. This too has a terrible relevance in contemporary American politics and policy as the foreword to the first U.S. translation and publication of Henri Alleg's, *La Question*, makes clear.² Alleg's work is a first hand account of the arrest and torture of the editor of the newspaper, *Alger Republicain*. Its appearance in France in 1958 caused a sensation, as its author sought to bring his experience to public attention and so spare others the suffering and degradation to which he had been exposed.

In an afterword prepared for the English edition of his work, Alleg reviewed the export of French interrogation techniques after 1962, observing that there was little reason to assume that 'the question,' a synonym for torture, would soon cease. Confirmation of Alleg's prognosis was all too readily available. He traced the export of French expertise in the 'question,' but they were not alone in this enterprise as the U.S. provided the political backing, the requisite masking as well as the international cover for the same practice. Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo are recent and far from

unique cases. But it is not only torture that persists, its 'normalization' and legitimation are now a matter of public record, with the approval of certain Congressional representatives as well as academic accomplices. Under the circumstances, there is little reason for surprise at the disclosures of a Pentagon study according to which there is evidence of increased toleration of 'the question' in the ranks.³

For Fanon, the use of torture was an inescapable facet of colonialism. As he wrote in *Toward the African Revolution*, "torture in Algeria is not an accident, or an error, or a fault. Colonialism cannot be understood without the possibility of torturing, of violating, or of massacring."⁴ Its roots lie in the dehumanization of the colonized, in the degradation of a politics of 'shock and awe' that blind its perpetrators far more than its victims. But as Fanon wrote with a dogged persistence, anti-colonial movements were not immune to the conditions enabling such abominations. They were features of repressive systems that were among the risk factors to which nationalist movements were susceptible. Fanon did not shy away from the subject, and it remains an integral part of the broad and penetrating critique of nationalism that was among his most important political contributions to the analysis of decolonization.

In the Algerian case, such a critique was prefaced by the analysis of what Fanon perceived to be one of the major flaws of some in nationalist circles, namely, their failure to check the symptoms of a Manichean outlook that reproduced a deliberately divisive colonial pattern.

Fanon's legacy rests on his ability to expose the arc of individual and collective

¹The reference is to the book by James D. Le Sueur, *Uncivil War, Intellectuals and Identity Politics during the Decolonization of Algeria*, University of Nebraska Press, second edition, 2005.

²Ellen Ray, Foreword, to Henry Alleg, *The Question*, translated from the French by John Calder, Preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, Introduction by James D. Le Sueur, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 2006.

³Not all Troops Would Report Iraq Abuse, Study Says," *The New York Times*, May 5, 2007, p.A5.

⁴*Toward the African Revolution*, trans. by Haakon Chevalier, Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1967, p.67 first published in 1964 as, *Pour la Revolution Africaine*.

suffering that was legitimized by colonial warrant. Its destruction was conceived as the preface to a new dawn, the emergence of a more just society freed of the abuse of repression. It was in *A Dying Colonialism* that Fanon articulated his and what he suggested was the FLN's vision of the future Algerian nation. The vision failed to materialize; the emergent state took a different direction, one which Fanon followed and indeed, participated in and warned against in *The Wretched of the Earth*, under the heading of, "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness."

What Fanon termed the "primitive Manicheism of the settler-Blacks and Whites, Arabs and Christians," was a rude imitation of colonial habit. Its correction was urgent, a matter of necessity to avoid the disillusionment of the committed militant who would soon recognize "that while he is breaking down colonial oppression he is building up automatically yet another system of exploitation. This discovery is unpleasant, bitter and sickening; and yet everything seemed to be so simple before: the bad people were on one side, and the good on the other. The clear, unreal, idyllic light of the beginning is followed by a semi-darkness that bewilders the senses."⁵

The simple and distorted vision prevented Algerians from recognizing the reality of their own struggle and coming to terms with the fact that it included French and Europeans as well as Algerians. Further, such distortions prevented Algerians from confronting the equally compelling reality that "many members of the mass of colonialists reveal themselves to be much, much nearer to the national struggle than certain sons of the nation."⁶

Fanon's starting point was that there was no monolithic French community in

Algeria, and the FLN as well as other historic nationalist organizations were in contact with those they recognized as anti-colonial in outlook. Further, there were French living in Algeria whose commitment to Algerian independence led to collaboration with the FLN, including the risks of similar fates in terms of arrest and torture. Similarly, French settlers, the archetype of the settler colony as representative of a homogeneous bloc emerged punctured. The same phenomenon was found among Europeans living and working in Algeria, some of whom joined in solidarity with Algerians struggling for independence.

By extension, Fanon called for a more stringent assessment of the French Left, a position that combined an unambiguous endorsement of those in solidarity with Algerian liberation, with greater recognition of the role played by those who fell short of this but nonetheless were "constantly forcing the extremists to unmask themselves, and hence progressively to adopt the positions that will precipitate their defeat."⁷

It was in *A Dying Colonialism* that Fanon offered his views and those of the FLN—or at least the radical factions within it with which he was in tune—on the composition of the nation in the making. Freed of a Manichean divisiveness, they reflected a glorious vision of a people united by their commitment to a common national purpose, with neither religion nor ethnic origin as relevant factors. As Fanon argued, "for the F.L.N., in the new society that is being built, there are only Algerians. From the outset, therefore, every individual living in Algeria is an Algerian. In tomorrow's independent Algeria it will be up to every Algerian to assume Algerian citizenship or to reject it in favor of another."⁸ The vision included the Algerians of French origin, as it

⁵ *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington, Grove Press, Inc., New York, p. 115. Originally published in Paris in 1961, as *Les Damnés de la Terre*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁷ *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. by Haakon Chevalier, Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1965, p. 150. First published in Paris in 1959 as *L'An V de la Révolution Algérienne*.

did those of other European stock; and it included non-Muslim Algerians, as well. For those Algerian Jews who were urbanized professionals as for those Arabized Jews whose origins in the country went back thousands of years, national identity was not in question. They felt and willed themselves to be Algerian, Fanon wrote, reproducing the positions of a group of Jews from Constantine in 1956, who not only affirmed their roots in Algerian history, but warned against being “duped by those who, not so long ago, were offhandedly, contemplating the total extermination of the Jews as a salutary step in the evolution of humanity.”⁹

A Dying Colonialism was published in 1959. Two years later, *The Wretched of the Earth* appeared. It did not challenge the vision offered earlier, but in its scathing critique of the inherent pitfalls of nationalism, it clearly mapped out the features of a future politics that would render such an outcome unlikely. Here was the warning of political symptoms that would corrode the visions of early nationalists. The account signaled a profound wariness concerning the potential for abuse in nationalist movements gone astray, in the perils of single party systems, in the betrayals of nationalist movements emptied of social content, in a leadership prepared to jettison its mass following to perpetuate itself in power and maximize its profits at any cost.

“The Pitfalls of National Consciousness” offered a succinct statement of such concerns and it remains among Fanon’s most valuable and prophetic political writings. There, as Edward Said wrote, Fanon’s vision of the future Algerian state was that of a secular, all inclusive society, an agnostic pluralism that reflected not only the composition of the nation but the democratic

character of the future state. In this framework, one party rule had no place. Neither did the primacy of the military over the political-civilian leadership. On both counts, reality did not live up to the vision, and not only after independence.

No reader of Fanon’s collected works could fail to make the connection between his piercing critique of the one party state in Africa, and that which emerged in the Algerian period of the struggle for independence. By virtue of the role he played in that anti-colonial struggle, Fanon was privy to its internecine battles. He knew the history and the hidden story. He surely knew of what had transpired at the Soummam Congress in 1956, where the struggle over the nature of the leadership and indeed, the party itself, was played out. It was at Soummam, where the differences between internal and external factions, the military versus the political wings of the FLN, were in full view, albeit only to party intimates. Soummam was also the stage for the struggle involving one of the major theoreticians of the party, Abbane Ramdane, militant opponent of the militarization of the party who justly feared for the future of the Algerian state. In 1957 Abbane Ramdane was assassinated by those within the party cadres who represented what would later become the security services of the exterior branch. For critics of the regime, the murder of Ramdane was the ominous turning point in the “ascent of the power of the military” and what followed from it, as well as a sign of the struggle among clans that was not to cease.

Ramdane’s death was followed by others that were to be disappeared in official national archives. At the time, as Mohamed Harbi, a prominent radical insider whose testimony to the nationalist struggle is invaluable, remarked on the fact that “it took five months for the clandestine newspaper, *el Moudjahid* to concoct a communique that, in May 1958, announced the death of Abbane Ramdane,”¹⁰ the figure he described

⁸ Ibid., p. 152; and see Alice Cherki, *Frantz Fanon, a Portrait*, Cornell University Press, translated by Nadia Benabid, Ithaca and London, 2006, p. 135.

⁹ *A Dying Colonialism*, p. 157.

as the “veritable ‘political head’ of the FLN.” The concoction held. Ramdane was effectively ‘disappeared,’ as were other critical figures of this bitter phase of the revolutionary period, gone from official and unofficial accounts of the liberation struggle.

In their place, the army emerged as the hero of the resistance, a canonization of the political struggle whose victims had been duly buried.¹¹

Fanon was a major figure in *el Moudjahid*, whose militant contributors and regulars wrote anonymously. There was no mention of Ramdane’s veritable fate in its pages; nor elsewhere in Fanon’s writings. Those who knew him, however, recalled his sense of loss at the death of this historic figure.¹² On May 29, 1958, *el Moudjahid* carried a front page announcement of Ramdane’s death, indicating that he had died from wounds suffered as a result of a confrontation between Algerian resistance and the French military.

The period between the Soummam Congress of 1956 and the Tripoli programme of 1962, formulated after Fanon’s death but embodying some of his ideas, were formative political years.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon was to write that “the single party is the modern form of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, unmasked, unpainted, unscrupulous, and cynical.”¹³ And then again, that “it becomes more and more clearly anti-democratic, an implement of coercion.”¹⁴ Pointing to Africa, he underlined the gulf between rich and poor that marked those “poor, underdeveloped countries,” adding that “the army and the police constitute the pillars of the regime; an army and a police force (an-

other rule which must not be forgotten) which are analysed by foreign experts....”¹⁵ The ‘pillars of the regime’ was part of the title of a dramatic account of Algeria that appeared in 1995, cited below. The pillars in question address the very same questions that concerned Fanon, and more.

Fanon was circumspect in discussing the details of the Algerian struggle. In retrospect, he offered little by way of the long term impact of colonialism in the economic as well as political deconstruction of the Algerian state and society. But this limitation did not inhibit the power of his warnings about current developments in the political milieu of Algeria.

In a telling note to the introductory chapter of his book, *In Theory*, Aijaz Ahmad referred to the Algerian revolution, observing that “the moment of decolonization brought to power that core of externally based military officers and leaders of the FLN which became the social basis of the emergence of a bureaucratic bourgeoisie as the new ruling class.” Then, referring to Fanon’s work, he referred critically to its “gigantic ambiguities,” while affirming that it reflected “the formative phase of that conjuncture, while some sections of *Wretched of the Earth* appear to foretell precisely that outcome.”¹⁶

Among the outcomes that Fanon foretold was the emergence of the one party regime and its accompanying dangers. They came to pass. In 1962, at the time of the French withdrawal, as Eqbal Ahmad wrote in 1997, “an ugly struggle for power ensued among Algerian nationalists. The winners—Ahmed ben Bella supported by Colonel Houari Boumedienne and his troops—favored one party, authoritarian, and populist rule, which was then in vogue from Egypt to Ghana... The democratic option was thus closed to Algeria at the moment of

¹⁰ Reporters Sans Frontieres, *Le Drame Algerien*, Editions la Decouverte, Paris, 1995, p.89.

¹¹ See “La confiscation de l’histoire,” *Ibid.*, pp.68-70, for further details.

¹² Cherki, *Ibid.*, p. 105-6.

¹³ *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 133.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, *idem.*

¹⁶ Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory*, Verso Books, London, 2000, p. 325, n.27.

its liberation. The stage was set for the establishment of a military-bureaucratic oligarchy which rules the country to this day."¹⁷

There was another warning that Fanon issued, this one directed at the sycophantic elements of the national bourgeoisie. "For them, nationalization does not mean governing the State with regard to the new social relations whose growth it has been decided to encourage. To them, nationalization quite simply means the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period."¹⁸ The description here too, as in the case of the risks of the one-party, was prophetic and uncommon among chroniclers of decolonization who failed to recognize what, in effect, were the rudiments of dependent development.

In Fanon's view, the Algerian national bourgeoisie pretended to play an historic role that was doomed from the start. It accepted to act the "Western bourgeoisie's business agent," instead of committing itself to the nationalist agenda of development.¹⁹ But as Fanon also realized, there was no such agenda. Worse still, he argued that nationalist parties were generally ignorant of their own economies. "The objective of nationalist parties as from a certain given period is, we have seen, strictly national. They mobilize the people with slogans of independence, and for the rest leave it to future events. When such parties are questioned on the economic programme of the State that they are clamouring for, or on the nature of the regime which they propose to install, they are incapable of replying, because, precisely, they are completely ignorant of the economy of their own

country."²⁰ And again, he insisted that "nationalism is not a political doctrine, nor a programme. If you really wish your country to avoid regression, or at best halts and uncertainties, a rapid step must be taken from national consciousness to political and social consciousness."²¹

Pointing to the steps to be taken was not, in itself, a guide to the kind of program that Fanon found lacking. But the leadership of the party was not silent on the question of the economy. To judge by some of the issues of *el Moudjahid* in 1958, for example, the Algerian leadership developed a keen interest in the future of petroleum for development. The issue of July 22, 1958, had extensive discussion of the Algerian-FLN response to French efforts to exploit a pipeline project with Tunisia, emphasizing the importance of blocking such attempts by a show of solidarity with Tunisia and Morocco. In 1956 French companies had discovered oil in the Sahara. Algerians were neither indifferent nor unaware of the immense reserves that existed. Indeed, the anonymous author(s) of the special issue of *el Moudjahid* of July 1958 dared to raise the question, "Independence...by petroleum?" And immediately following the question, which was more of an affirmation than a query, its author(s) went on to declare that the petroleum of the Maghreb belonged to its people and had to be exploited to raise their living standards in the context of a liberated economy.

The rest is history, but it is important to realize that some part of it was conceived in this very early period. Was it apparent then that the results would mean the development of a rentier state, a regime bent on development without public participation and with political repression?

Le Drame Algerien—a testament to the cruel war between the Algerian state and the forces of the Islamic Front (FIS) cited

¹⁷ Eqbal Ahmad, "Algeria Began Badly," in Carolee Bengelsdorf, Margaret Cerullo, and Yogesh Chandrani, eds., *The Selected Writings of Eqbal Ahmad*, Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 103.

¹⁸ *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 124.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, idem.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

earlier that had an estimated 40,000 casualties when it was written—included a chapter under the title, “The 5 Pillars of the System.” The reference was to the pillars of the regime, two of which included oil rent and the military, or more precisely, the military, security and police apparatus of the state. Echoes of Fanon’s warnings no less than those of *el Moudjahid*, were striking.

Two years before the publication of the above work, there was another sober assessment of Algerian development. This one did not refer to the connection between oil and politics. It pointed, instead, to the concentration of power that had accumulated in the hands of the state and its effect on the population. Referring to the FLN’s intention to make Arabic the national language, Edward Said described what followed:

The FLN then proceeded politically to absorb the whole of Algerian civil society: within three decades this alignment of state and party authority with a restored identity caused not only the monopolization of most political practices by one party and the almost complete erosion of democratic life, but, on the right wing, the challenging appearance of an Islamic opposition, favoring a militantly Muslim Algerian identity based on Koranic (shari’ah) principles. By the 1990s the country was in a state of crisis, whose result has been a deeply impoverishing face-off between government, which abrogated the result of the election as well as most free political activity, and the Islamic movement, which appeals to the past and orthodoxy for its authority. Both sides claim the right to rule Algeria.²²

Said did not fail to make the connection with Fanon’s writings in “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” or to remind readers of what Fanon had foreseen.

The warnings deserve continued scrutiny, they are now part of the record that continues to haunt the ‘wretched of the earth.’

²² Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1993, p. 267.