CLASSIC BOOK REVIEW:
Franz Fanon; The Wretched of the Earth

Fanon published his most famous text, *The Wretched of the Earth*, in 1961, coincidentally the year the Apartheid republic came into being. It is appropriate to review Fanon now, as he has recently seen a resurgence of popularity in South Africa. Fanon's analysis of the post-colonial elite and the national bourgeoisie are being taken very seriously, not only by a group of left academics, but by populist political forces, in particular the Economic Freedom Fighters. As the EFF takes inspiration from Fanon's writings, and attempts – not always accurately – to apply his analysis to the South African context – there is a particularly good reason to re-read Fanon and see what lessons can be learnt from his seminal writing on anti-colonial resistance.

Another good reason to reassess Fanon is the resurgence of scholarship drawing on Fanon to explain the upsurge in popular protest against the ANC government (itself an anticolonial liberation movement), and the rise of new social movements in what is understood to be a 'neocolonial context' characterised by a 'brutally corrupt' comprador elite managing the state on behalf of international capital. 'White left' academics including Richard Pithouse, Michael Neocosmos and Peter Alexander look to the marginalised *lumpenproletariat* for a new 'rebellion of the poor', and have established a Fanon reading group based at Rhodes University in Grahamstown (see http://readingfanon.blogspot.com/2011/08/rebellion-of-poor-south-africas-service.html). A new generation of black academics, including Raymond Nyapokoto and Kayode Adesemowo, have also embraced Fanon and explore his writings on emancipatory politics from a black consciousness perspective. Dismissive of liberal democracy and disappointed with the profound and persistent inequality in South African society, they understand black South Africans to still be oppressed and living in a 'zone of nonbeing'. Like the EFF, they look to Fanon for both analyses of neo-colonialism, and strategies for change.

For this new journal, on resistance studies, Fanon has a much broader significance. Historically, he has inspired two generations (at

least) of movements involved in resistance to colonial rule and psychological oppression. Of particular importance, and particularly controversial, are his writings on violence and related strategies of resistance to colonial oppression, as articulated in the first essay in *The Wretched of the Earth*, 'On Violence':

> The colonized subject discovers reality and transforms it through his praxis, his deployment of violence and his agenda for liberation"(24)[1]

The question is whether *The Wretched of the Earth* – written in the context of the extreme violence of Algerican colonial rule and anti-colonial war of liberation - still resonates, and if so, what its relevance is to current day resistance, to the many struggles of ordinary people around the world, in post-colonial and other contexts. As this is a journal of resistance studies, this is the focus of this review: it does not purport to be a review of Fanon's philosophy nor of his body of work. It is a reflection on what *The Wretched of the Earth* says about strategies of resistance, what resonance they have in the present, and nothing more.

For this review, I read the 2004 version of *The Wretched of the Earth*, which begins with a beautiful and incisive essay, 'Framing Fanon', by Homi K Bhabha. Bhabha writes that "Fanon, the phantom of terror, might be only the most intimate, if intimidating, poet of the vicissitudes of violence. But poetic justice can be questionable even when it is exercised on behalf of the wretched of the earth" (11). Bhabha's foreword to this the edition, is worth reading on its own. However, there is no pain in re-reading Fanon's collection of essays; as evocatively and dramatically written as they are, they are as engaging as when first published as a collection in 1961.

The nature of colonial oppression

Determining an effective strategy of resistance depends on a clear understanding of the oppressor and a correct analysis of the context of resistance to oppression. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon describes in beautiful but bitter language the segregation of colonial society:

[1] As I read this edition in an electronic (kindle) version, the reference in brackets is not to a page number but to the % of the text indicated in the electronic publication.

> The colonist's sector is built to last, all stone and steel. It's a sector of lights and paved roads, where the trash cans constantly overflow with strange and wonderful garbage, undreamed of leftovers….the colonist's sector is a sated, sluggish sector, its belly is permanently full of good things……..the colonized's sector….is a disreputable place inhabited by disreputable people (19)

Beyond the description of the reality of colonial oppression, Fanon has great insight into the structure of colonial society, and the mechanisms of control and division. From the understanding of torture and other brutal methods used by the colonial security forces to contain resistance; to the more subtle instruments of Western education, religion and culture,

> The Church in the colonies….does not call the colonized to the ways of God, but to the ways of the white man, to the ways of the master, the ways of the oppressor (20)

Fanon accurately describes the 'pillars of support' of colonial society. The co-optation of collaborators, the fomenting of ethnic divisions – all these strategies of the colonial oppressor are understood and made clear.

But what is the strategy of resistance to oppression? It is to 'eject the colonist outright from the picture' (20). Because the 'government's agent uses a language of pure violence' (19) does it make sense to resist with pure violence? Fanon's advocacy of violence is not primarily a strategic one: it is a psychological one.

The vicissitudes of violence:

In his famous essay *On Violence*, Fanon's starting point is that, given the violence of colonial rule, 'decolonization is always a violent event'. However, his analysis is not that armed struggle is inevitable, nor that some wars are just, or that the violence of the oppressed is inherently defensive – all common justifications for the use of violence. Instead, Fanon argues positively that the oppressed are liberated through this violence. It is the process of armed struggle itself, and the participation of the colonized subject in these acts of violence that this struggle entails,

that creates a 'new man' freed from the colonized's mind-set of 'submission and inhibition'(19). Bhabha thus understands Fanonian violence as "a search for human agency in the midst of the agony of oppression" (9); and Jean-Paul Sartre, who wrote the preface to the 1961 edition, understands Fanonian violence as something that "draws the fiery first breath of human freedom" (9). Sartre justifies his condoning of Fanon's notion by dismissing nonviolence as ethically impossible: "even your nonviolent thoughts are a condition born of age-old oppression" (9).

Fanon is not ignorant of other methods of struggle, and in some writing he does acknowledge the importance of building trade unions and other mass movements around local demands. He notes that the 'reformist' nationalist movement usually uses 'extremely peaceful methods: organizing work stoppages in the few factories located in the towns, mass demonstrations to cheer a leader, and a boycott of the buses or imported commodities.' He understands that these methods of struggle do 'put pressure on the colonial authorities'; yet he dismisses them as a strategy of 'containment' in that they 'also allow the people to let off steam'(26). He is explicit that mass mobilisation on its own will not achieve the desired change; the elite would like to see this, but

> at the moment of truth – for them, the lie – they brandish the threat of mass mobilisation as a decisive weapon that would as by magic put 'an end to the colonial regime'(26).

For Fanon, it is only the armed struggle which can lead to liberation.

Fanon outlines the trajectory of many anti-colonial struggles; some of them lead to compromise, while others lead to liberation. In the early stages, there is usually a vague national framework and a set of minimum demands, but no clarity on the social and economic agenda. The hopes of the people are raised, (27); and indeed, there is sometimes a contained process of decolonization. In other contexts, there is harsh repression of mass mobilisation, with the arrest of nationalist leaders – but "far from breaking the momentum, repression intensifies the progress made by the national consciousness" (28). Here Fanon shows a clear understanding of the concept of 'backfire' as outlined by Brian Martin as a key strategy of nonviolent movements; the idea that the violence of the oppressor

'backfires' against him as widespread sympathy for the movement and international opprobrium for the oppressor grow, is described in many anti-colonial contexts; the one most familiar to South Africans is the Sharpeville massacre of 1960. However, instead of using the international condemnation of state brutality to increase the pressure on the oppressive regime, as Martin would advocate, Fanon argues that this is the 'point of no return' which justifies the use of violence, and necessitates armed struggle: "The existence of an armed struggle is indicative that the people are determined to put their faith only in violent methods" (31)

For Fanon, though, this use of violence is not a strategic response to an intransigent opponent, who 'understands nothing but the language of violence'. For Fanon, violence is a process of psychological liberation from oppression; in the process of the liberation struggle, violence and work merge into one, offering purpose to life:

"For the colonized, this violence represents the absolute praxis. The militant therefore is one who works...The group requires each individual to have performed an irreversible act" (31) "To work means to work towards the death of the colonist" (31) "The colonized man liberates himself in and through violence. This praxis enlightens the militant because it shows him the means and the end" (31).

The explicit call to violence can at a stretch of the imagination be regarded as metaphorical; that when Fanon writes that "The work of the colonized is to imagine every possible method for annihilating the colonist" (33) he does not literally mean annihilating all colonists, but the destruction of the colonial regime or administration; when he writes that "for the colonized, life can only materialise from the rotting cadaver of the colonist" (33) he does not advocate the killing of human beings but the metaphorical corpse of the colonial state. However generously one interprets Fanon's evocative and provocative writing, and whatever impact this has on the colonists, there is no doubt that Fanon understands this as an important and necessary process for the colonized to go through in order to achieve liberation:

"For the colonized, this violence is invested with positive, formative features" (33); one of these is the building of a new nation: "The armed struggle mobilizes the people, ie it pitches them in a single direction, from which there is no turning back. When it is achieved during a

war of liberation the mobilization of the masses introduces the notion of common cause, national destiny and collective history into every consciousness. Consequently, the second phase, ie nation building, is facilitated by the existence of this mortar kneaded with blood and rage" (33)

Violence in practice is 'totalising and national' and contributes to elimination of regionalism and tribalism; it is also, at the individual level "a cleansing force" as

> It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them and restores their self-confidence.

Perhaps even more significant, and controversial, Fanon argues that the process of armed struggle is a democratising and levelling one, as it involves the participation of all:

> Even if the armed struggle has been symbolic, and even if they have been demobilized by rapid decolonization, the people have time to realize that liberation was the achievement of each and every one and no special merit should go to the leader. Violence hoists the people up to the level of the leader….When they have used violence to achieve national liberation, the masses allow nobody to come forward as 'liberator'…enlightened by violence, the people's consciousness rebels against any pacification…..The praxis which pitched them into a desperate man to man struggle has given the masses a ravenous taste for the intangible. Any attempt at mystification in the long term becomes virtually impossible (33)

Prefigurative strategies and emancipatory politics

Why is Fanon so determined that this revolutionary praxis must be violent? Why cannot the mobilization of the masses through other forms of struggle lead to the same outcome? Surely there are other strategies that break the psychological oppression of the oppressed, and that develop the self-confidence of the masses – in particular non-cooperation with authorities, and the creation of organs of popular power?

Fanon hints at some of these prefigurative strategies; drawing on his experience of the Algerian war of independence, he looks to liberated zones where the peasantry create a new social order. In such situations, the individualist values of Europe are replaced with the values of the collective. At local level, there are expressions of a new politics, a truly democratic politics of popular power. Fanon speaks of 'liberation at local level' as 'on every hilltop a government in miniature is formed and assumes power' (42). While his focus is on peasant struggles and rural guerrilla warfare, with a good example of this being Frelimo's liberated zones in Mozambique, there were many such instances of the formation of structures of peoples power in South Africa; many of them in urban townships, while the apartheid state still held state power through force of arms at the centre. Through this prefigurative process of gaining power at the grassroots, Fanon argues that the 'colonized intellectual' learns about the power of ordinary people:

> The colonized intellectual….will also discover the strength of the village assemblies, the power of the peoples commissions and the extraordinary productiveness of neighbourhood and section committee meetings (21).

Other insights into strategies of resistance other than armed struggle are touched on by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*. One of these is security force defection – and the importance of trying to divide the oppressor's security forces, through challenging their loyalty to the colonial state. Fanon notes that at a certain point in the war of liberation, some soldiers desert the colonialist ranks, while

> others explicitly refuse to fight against a people's freedom, are jailed and suffer for the sake of the people's right to independence…. (46).

It is a pity that he did not explore further how this could be a conscious strategy of the liberation forces.

Another interesting idea explored by Fanon is that of non-cooperation with colonial authorities. This non-cooperation takes a variety of forms. One of these is the retention of precolonial traditions or cultural practices; in South Africa, praise-singing, beer-brewing and other 'cultural practices' took on the character of resistance to authority. How-

ever, tradition changes meaning through struggle, and as the struggle intensifies, Fanon warns that "what was a technique of passive resistance may, in this phase, be radically doomed" (66). Another example given by Fanon is that 'laziness' of the colonized – another form of passive resistance to colonial rule: "The colonized indolence is a conscious way of sabotaging the colonial machine" (84).

In some situations, however, non-cooperation becomes a conscious strategy, and takes on the form of active resistance to colonial rule:

> This is where non-cooperation or at least minimal cooperation clearly materializes" writes Fanon, and "can be applied to the colonized's attitude towards the colonizers laws, his taxes and the colonial system (84).

Hence the refusal to pay hut and poll taxes; the extensive rent boycotts, and in its most organised form, the 'Defiance of Unjust Laws' campaign in South African in 1952. Fanon's warning here is also strategic: the administration of colonial laws and taxes is not usually performed by the European colonizers, but by local collaborators (87). The relationship of the movement to those who collaborate with the authorities is another complex issue; extensively debated in South Africa, but probably relevant in many contexts of oppression.

Contradictions of nonracialism:

While Fanon's writing on violence would seem to indicate a simplistic binary of oppressor and oppressed, of colonizer and colonized, of black and white, elsewhere he warns against such a simplistic perception of oppressor. In the process of struggle, he notes that "The species is splitting up before their very eyes" (46) as oppressors can change sides, and even "volunteer to undergo suffering, torture and death." The problem is that these examples

> defuse the overall hatred which the colonized feel towards the foreign settlers. The colonized welcome these men with open arms and in an excess of emotion tend to place absolute confidence in them (46)

– one need only remember the absolute love and admiration for Joe Slovo, a white communist, from millions of black South Africans. Through this process, some colonialists move 'infinitely closer' to the

nationalist struggle than 'certain native sons' and "The racial and racist dimension is transcended on both sides" (46). The collaboration of certain of the oppressed means that "Not every black is given a vote of confidence", and at the same time, because some of the oppressors have changed sides, "one no longer grabs a gun or a machete every time a colonist approaches."

What is the result? For Fanon, the clarity of consciousness gained through violence may be lost, as "Consciousness stumbles upon partial, finite and shifting truths". This is, for Fanon and for the oppressed, "extremely difficult"; it requires leadership with "rigorous organization" as well as a certain "ideological level"(46). A strategy of inclusive nationalism could lead to a 'new humanism' which is premised in nonracialism and the transcendence of racial categories – but this would be in contradiction to the strategy of identifying and attacking the colonist or settler as 'the enemy'. The latter, a more dangerous populist strategy, is the one more easily adopted by the followers of Fanon.

The other aspect of Fanon's writings on resistance strategies that deserves mention is his focus on rural or peasant struggle; the importance of the struggle moving away from the coastal cities of the colonies, and into the interior.

In 'Grandeur and Weakness of Sponteneity', Fanon does acknowledge the role of labour organisations and other forms of organisation of the urban elite; he notes that "It is the repeated demonstrations for their rights and the repeated labor disputes that politicize the masses" (36). He describes the roles of union officials, students and intellectuals in the formation of nationalist parties. However, he is critical not only of the inherent weaknesses of the 'elite' politics of nationalist movements, but also of strategies focussed on the proletariat in a "highly industrialized capitalist society". This is the 'great mistake' of the nationalist parties of the colonies: their focus on the minority rather than the peasant majority. For Fanon, "the urban proletariat is relatively privileged….in the colonized countries, the proletariat has everything to lose" (36); in the urban centres, "modernism is king" (36). Fanon therefore turns to the peasantry, the rural masses, and the marginalized shanty-town dwellers; as he argues that "political unrest in the towns will always be powerless to change and overthrow the colonial regime" and it is only the rural masses

who can secure liberation, taking back the land from foreigners through violent struggle (41).

Even when he wrote this, during the African anti-colonial wars of liberation in the 1950s, it was contested whether the revolutionary impetus would come from the peasantry, and considered highly unlikely that it would come from the lumpenproletariat. In South Africa, a peculiar context where a national bourgeoisie did emerge a hundred years ago, and the peasantry converted into a rural proletariat, it did not seem relevant even during the liberation struggle. Now, in the context of globalised struggles over land and labour, and new social movements contesting power in different sites of struggle, the idea of a revolutionary leadership coming from the peasantry is perhaps less likely than before.

Other themes, strengths and limitations of The Wretched of the Earth

The Wretched of the Earth is a collection of essays which deal with a range of topics related to colonial oppression; this review has focussed on the strategies of resistance, as relevant to the theme of the Journal of Resistance Studies. Fanon's classic is worth reading in its entirety, for its insights into post-colonial society, the role of trade unions, and the national question among others. He also documents, in 'Colonial War and Mental Disorders', case studies of the mental disorders of the oppressed in colonial society, detailing the effects of warfare, violence, torture, rape and post-traumatic stress on individuals caught up in the war of independence in Algeria. These fascinating but deeply disturbing case studies are counteracted by the essay 'On National Culture', wherein he gives a platform to the beautiful poetry of Keita Fodeba and others.

Ultimately, Fanon's valuable insights on colonial oppression and post-colonial society are overshadowed by the deeply problematic nature of his analysis of resistance. The most problematic aspect of this analysis is his reliance on, in fact his valorization of, violence as the only means of liberation from oppression.

Studies since the era of anti-colonial struggle in which Fanon was writing, including those of Maria Stephan, show that there is no positive correlation between the violence of the struggle and the outcome, as

Fanon liked to imagine. The disastrous civil wars in post-independence African countries, including Angola, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and currently in South Sudan, provide a strong counter-argument to Fanon's idea of a unifying national liberation being achieved through violence. Moreover, there is little evidence that armed struggle is a democratising or levelling force, as even in the most popularly-based guerrilla movements, warfare is inherently an undemocratic process and the organisation of armies is hierarchical and authoritarian.

The strategies of the Brazilian *favelas*, the Movement of landless workers (MST), the Streetnet International and the Slumdwellers International, the landless peasants of India marching across the country demanding land rights in the 'Ekta Parashad' movement – these new social movements are both inspired by, but fundamentally different in strategy, from Fanon's anti-colonial wars of liberation. What can they draw from Fanon? The idea of empowerment of the poorest of the poor through struggle; the marginalized, the landless, the slumdwellers and the *lumpen-proletariat*, taking control over their own future; the democratisation and decentralisation of the revolution; the warning of cooption by the new elite. But the notion that violence is a necessary praxis, that liberation can only be achieved through violence, is no longer – if it ever was - strategically valid. Much of Fanon's writing is in the context of anti-colonial struggle, and is limited in its nationalist focus and the focus of resistance against 'foreigners'. This is easy populism which is easily misinterpreted, and thus dangerous in misdirecting struggles for economic justice against particular racial groups or national minorities.

There are profound insights in The Wretched of the Earth; not least of which is the understanding of the power of the oppressed to bring about their own liberation; and that the people's revolution is an "awesome mixer and grinder" (22) which has the potential to lead to the creation of a new kind of human society. The idea of a new humanism, of emancipatory politics which come from the oppressed, has a lasting value: similar ideas from Paulo Freire saw the oppressed capable of analysing their own conditions and bringing about change in their society without help from a vanguard. As Fanon wrote, "For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man."

My concern is how the movements of today interpret Fanon: do the 'subaltern, decolonizing thinkers' have something to teach us? If so, it is not the use of liberatory violence, but the idea of people not needing a vanguard or an intellectual leadership to understand their reality and to be liberated. Perhaps it is wise to end with quote from *The Wretched of the Earth* which points to the limitations of anti-colonial independence struggles, but also points positively towards an alternative society, one which is transformed through the work of the people:

"Independence is not a magic ritual but an indispensible condition for men and women to exist in true liberation, in other words to master all the material resources necessary for a radical transformation of society" (88)

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