

Frantz Fanon's Philosophy of Violence and the Participation of Intellectuals in the Advancement of Social Liberation in Africa

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to compare the philosophy of decolonization and violence of Frantz Fanon to social processes in the present African societies, and to determine how it might be applicable in addressing the social decay in Africa. In this article, it is observed that there is a seeming semblance between the Fanonian philosophy of violence and the operations of revolutionary groups in Africa. In conclusion, this article contends that in a philosophical analysis manner that African intellectuals and intelligentsia have the obligation and should involve themselves in guiding society to obtain freedom from oppressors.

Key Words: Frantz Fanon, violence, revolution, social liberation, Africa, philosophy

Introduction

Frantz Fanon, a Martinique born supporter of Algerian resistance and social liberation advocate whose profession was in the field of psychiatry, is well-known for his efforts to enunciate an emancipation philosophy to address the problem of deprivation of the African masses. This type of philosophy was constructed based on his personal experiences of oppression, exploitation and discrimination of the Blacks faced at the instance of the Europeans. His experiences further gave him a conviction that there was need for a coordinated, consistent and obvious method of overthrowing the oppressors. He was very unpretentious in his attitude to the white oppressors, which resulted in his advocacy for the use of violence in dismantling the structures of oppression constructed by the white oppressors. His philosophy is emancipative, liberative, and restorative. Fanon (1965) in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* insisted that “violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organized and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them” (p.188).

The struggle against oppression was the central thesis of Fanon’s philosophy of violence, which is a dehumanized treatment prevalent in present African society, where inequality and injustices are systemic, where laws are enacted to serve the interest of the few. These observed anomalies are some of the causes of various violent groups across Africa. Revolutionary groups and militia groups from North through West through East to South Africa employ violence as the only means of revolutionary attainment of social freedom, liberation, and emancipation. Across Africa there are revolutionary groups namely El-shabab, Muslim Brotherhood, Boko Haram, Independent People of Biafra (IPOB), Niger Delta militants, Bakassi Freedom Fighters, to mention but a few. Our cognition reveals that Fanon, having observed the persistent oppression and deprivation of the colonized, instructively proposed a violent revolt which would noticeably dismantle this structure of oppression. But he advised that the process of emancipation, though violence-oriented, must be guided and directed by the leaders of the colonized. He aptly insisted that it must be organized and educated by the leaders of the colonized. The major import of this was to ensure that the masses understand social truths and their situations thereby requiring coordination and articulated.

Flowing from this, and in connection to the violent revolution, groups emerged with the purpose of throwing up the revolutionary issues of social injustices and ineptitude of the political leaders (the oppressors), namely unequal, unbalanced, one-sided, unstable and unsustainable distribution of national resources. Most importantly, the study deduces that, the revolution should be properly led and actualized by the intelligentsia, to ensure its success, so that the common agitators will not hit wrong target and blindly destroy what has been properly established.

Pertinently Kukah observes that oppressors have created a general frustration in citizens thereby leading to violence. Accordingly he posits that, anyone who stands up against the state today in Nigeria, and other nation states in Africa, whether by way of sermon, an editorial opinion or street protest, will not be doing anything new or considered subversive (Kukah, 2016, p.10). Further, he argues that the evil effect of bad governance, corruption, total lack of security and welfare has become part of our daily lives. In responding to the plight of the northern Nigerians, specifically, he laments that there exists in the northern Nigeria today;

an elite that takes pride in seeing fellow citizens live in abject poverty and squalor, an elite that is happy to be the only educated and enlightened ones in their villages and neighbourhoods, elite that pride itself of being the richest in their communities while the majority cannot afford to feed their families, our governors have turned their States into fiefdoms. They steal with impunity. They arrogantly convert States' resources to their own. They have deliberately destroyed the public schools system which most of those who have found themselves in Boko Haram sect are supposed to attend. They denied them access to education. They deprived them from living a decent life (Kukah, 2016, p.11).

From the foregoing, one can say that our leaders, and their self-centred agenda, are the problems of African continent. This colonial mentality and uneven distribution of resources for the common good of all, necessitated various agitation groups to rise up in to anticipation of their emancipation and restoration of their humanness. It is in this context that there is a seeming semblance between Fanon's philosophy of violence and the operations of revolutionary groups in Africa.

An Excursus of Fanon Philosophy of Violence

As a psychiatrist, Fanon carefully applied his psychological knowledge to the study of the colonial phenomenon. He did not just see colonialism as resulting from political and economic interest. He went far from this to probe colonialism from its euro-centricity and the negation of the other it engendered. Colonialism and neocolonialism were matters of euro-centricity – the feeling of European superiority over other nation-states in Africa.

Fanon examined the impact of “colonial hegemony” on the colonized communities in terms of their cultural and general well-being. He argues that colonialism alienated the people and communities from themselves, and not merely from their homeland. In his lecture on “Racism and Culture” presented at the African Writers Conference in 1956, Fanon did not just stop at the physical sense of racism.

He believed there was more to colonialism and racism than super-structures and infra-structures. The Whites, he argued, were not merely racists; they contained and subsumed “the Blacks and their homelands.” It is because they were rich and in control of the “super- and infra-structures,” the Whites dominated the life and wealth of the colonized people. He indicted the Whites for using force to acquire the wealth of the colonized. They proclaimed the colonized as savages and barbaric, with an inferior culture that needs to be replaced by the colonizer’s superior one. They employed the divide and rule method and use force to keep the people down. Also by negating the culture, beliefs, religion, and ideologies of the colonized, they forcefully instilled inferiority complex in them. By using wrong names on them they made them feel worthless.

Fanon has outlined the names used on the colonized in his book *Wretched of the Earth*. The colonized were made to see themselves as socially and economically inferior and therefore develop the feeling of inequality. This feeling of inequality engendered by colonialism, according to Fanon, helps fire the desire of the peasants to revolt. Therefore, the psychological violence in a way was not only for maintaining the colonizers in existence; it also flames the desire of the colonized for freedom. This is because the indigenous people would naturally want to throw away their inferior status. The very degradation (physical and psychological) caused by psychological violence, awakens the people for the need to revolt. In response to this, the native or peasant “laughs to himself every time he spots an allusion to the animal world in the other's words, for he knows that he is not an animal; and it is precisely at the moment he realizes his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure its victory” (Fanon, 1965, p.42). Fanon stresses the need to recreate this degraded psychological and economic status of the people, because violent revolution requires that the people should continually harbor violent thoughts and deeds.

Colonialism and racism as experienced in Africa were not merely a physical phenomenon, like some social analysts would want to posit, but much more. The containment of the imperial Whites, did not only affect the physical, but also tremendously work havoc on the psychological, economic, political and social aspects of the life of the colonized. The Martinique, which was Fanon’s birthplace, according to Helmi Sharaway (2014), was “so contained by France that it actually declared itself part of the latter” (p.173). Fanon (1965) observed that the people were depersonalized –alienated from themselves and their communities and their souls negated. This “negation of the African soul” by the colonists is not just a material or social act. Fanon (1965) maintains that it is an act of depersonalization that can only be reversed through cleansing revolutionary violence. This is because colonialism itself is an act of complete violence and thus can only be overcome by revolutionary and spontaneous violence, which is the violence of liberation and emancipation.

In his book, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), Fanon explains that, the White Masks denote an “insidious oneness” between the colonizers and colonized. This Whiteness that became a mask on African people and the colonized becomes a mark that cannot be erased, except through absolute violence, which would lead to the destruction of the society and the state associated with this mark. It is only in this way that the colonized can gain new humanity. This is the reason he linked liberation and emancipation with a new humanity.

Fanon (1965) primary concern was with the decolonization process, which he understood to be total “substitution of one ‘species’ of mankind by another” (p.1). Decolonization is a “raw, repressed and reckless state in the lives and consciousness of colonized men and women” (Fanon, 1965, p.1). Fanon recommended violence to the colonized as the only way they can regain their freedom from oppression and subjugation and thereby gaining back their self-respect. Fanon (1965) asserts:

The naked truth of decolonization evokes for us the searing bullets and bloodstained knives which emanate from it. For if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists. That affirmed intention to place the last at the head of things, and to make them climb at a pace (too quickly, some say) the well-known steps which characterize an organized society, can only triumph if we use all means to turn the scale, including, of course, that of violence (p.36).

He argues that violence is the only way to regain back or to erase the image, the colonizers have created of the Blacks. Decolonization for him is always a violent process; it is the process of recreating of a new person (Fanon, 1965). Since colonialism comes through violence, the process of decolonization must follow the same pattern – violence. For this process of decolonization to succeed the destruction of colonialism must be total. By total destruction here, he means a destruction and ending of neocolonialism. Fanon (1965) says:

To break up the colonial world does not mean that after the frontiers have been abolished lines of communication will be set up between the two zones. The destruction of the colonial world is no more and no less than the abolition of one zone, its burial in the depths of the earth or its expulsion from the country (p.40).

He believes that violence revolution is a necessary way to confront colonialism, because from its inception colonialism has been a violent phenomenon. The colonizers used force to gain entrance and possession of the lands of the colonized and they used force to maintain their stay there. Thus, it is only through force that they can be overthrown. Fanon held the belief that the colonizers would not be persuaded to leave peacefully, until there is a violent revolution. The violence employed by the colonizers is not merely physical; they also used psychological violence (Fanon, 1965).

Fanon dismissed the philosophy of non-violence as popularized by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. He sees all nonviolent appeals as a distraction of the colonized and admonishes them to continue in the search for a new humanity through the only possible way which is violence (Fanon, 1967). Fanon also looked skeptically at the transition from one “State” to another. For him, the freedom of the State does not translate to the freedom of the people. Most countries are just independent by name but are still indirectly colonized. The leaders, who were waiting patiently to take the place of the White settlers, took advantage of the opportunity with both hands and took the reins and canes from the colonial masters (Fanon, 1967). Fanon (1965) maintains that the native never ceased “to dream of putting himself in the place of the settler – not of becoming the settler but of substituting himself for the settler” (p.51). Therefore, decolonization was a dream come true for the African leaders, who successfully substituted themselves for the colonizers and followed the corrupt footsteps of their former masters.

The colonizers, according to Fanon, have corrupted the leaders of the decolonized state, making them to tend to put their own interest above that of others, thereby perpetrating what the colonizers had started. These leaders still depended for almost everything on their colonial masters, thereby helping the colonizers to indirectly rule their former colonies. Because of this tendency, he believes that the goal of unifying the African continent has been hindered by the activities of an underdeveloped African leadership (African bourgeoisie). He explains, “African unity, a vague term... reveals its true face and crumbles into regionalisms” (Fanon, 1965, p.106). Fanon therefore successfully predicted the many ethno-regional conflicts that are currently rocking African countries. All these stem from the “corruption and cooptation of Westernized nationalist parties led by urban elites.” (Fanon, 1965, p. xxxii). He argues vividly that this new national bourgeoisie became the lot of African leaders when “the European elite decided to fabricate a native elite; they selected adolescents, branded the principles of Western culture on their foreheads with a red-hot iron, and gagged their mouths with sounds, pompous awkward words that twisted their tongues.” (Fanon, 1965, p. xlvi).

Frantz Fanon and the Condition of Africa

Africa as a continent is developing, and her development is tied to western European societies. Through colonialism and imperialism, the development of Africa had been steadily truncated. Fanon views this impediment as “imperial repression.” A bulk of Fanon concentration was on the depraved state of African people and Africa. There are situations of the unemployed and marginalized in cities and societies which deteriorate and as popular uprisings become a regular phenomenon in Africa and other developing world continents. The picture of oppression and deprivation as shown in Algeria was experienced by Fanon and this epitomized the state of affairs in Africa. A traversal of the length and breadth of Africa reveal that the condition of livelihood of ordinary African is nothing but a deprived condition characterized by corruption, indignity, ineptitude of leaders, insensitivity to the plight of the citizenry. Most African leaders have great affinity between the leadership with foreign colonial masters. The practice of government and the art of governance in Africa are hinged on the dictates of these foreign powers. These dictates come in the form of neocolonialism where African leaders merely substitute themselves with colonial masters. In this respect, the decolonization occasioned by these African leaders was nothing but following the corrupt footsteps of their former colonial masters.

The colonizers, according to Fanon, have corrupted the leaders of the decolonized state, making them to put their own interest above that of others, the ordinary masses, thereby perpetrating what the colonizers had started. This is obvious in the roles of western colonizers in Africa by the British, Portuguese, French and Germans as well as other colonizers. One sees wars and ravages across Africa, civil war in Nigeria, war and starvation in Darfur region of Sudan, war and starvation in South Sudan, war and genocide in Libya; perpetuation in office as evident in Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Kenya, Congo, Ethiopia, The Gambia, and other African countries. Because of this tendency, Fanon believes that the goal of unifying the African continent has been hindered by the activities of an underdeveloped African leadership (African bourgeoisie). He explains, “African unity, a vague term... reveals its true face and crumbles into regionalisms” (Fanon, 1965, p.106). He therefore successfully predicted the many ethno-regional conflicts that are currently rocking African countries.

Further, he informs that this new national bourgeois became the lot of African leaders when “The European elite decided to fabricate a native elite; they selected adolescents, branded the principles of Western culture on their foreheads with a red-hot iron, and gagged their mouths with sounds, pompous awkward words that twisted their tongues.”(Fanon, 1965, p.xlii). The native elites and bourgeoisie were, therefore, unfit to take up the reins of power of their nations. Fanon (1965) explains:

In the underdeveloped countries, we have seen that there was no genuine bourgeoisie but rather an acquisitive, voracious, and ambitious petty caste, dominated by small-time racketeer mentality, content with the dividends paid out by the former colonial power. This short-sighted bourgeoisie lacks vision and inventiveness (p.119).

From history, the colonized elites, or what Fanon calls the ‘national bourgeoisie,’ where afforded the opportunity to travel abroad to gain knowledge of the political environment there. These elites came back and tried to adapt these European formulas in order to establish political systems that would galvanize the common people and pressure the colonial masters to leave. After a successful decolonization, the leaders forgot the masses’ demand for better living conditions and instead elevated the conditions of the few oppressors. Their view of the masses was based on the inherited belief that the peasants were less politically conscious, lacked discipline, love money, individualistic, prone to rage and displayed anarchistic tendencies (Fanon, 1965). It is said that members of the African bourgeoisie serve as “active collaborators with foreign monopoly capitalist interest” in Africa (Segun, 2007, p.63).

Africa as a whole reflect the dual economy and divided worlds theory that Fanon postulated as regards the unequal developmental conditions that exist side by side issues like poverty and malnutrition. For Fanon (1965), “the colonial world is a world cut in two” (p.36). He illustrated the demarcation between the two worlds:

The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity. Obedient to the rules of pure Aristotelian logic, they both follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity. No conciliation is possible, for of the two terms, one is superfluous. The settlers' town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown, and hardly thought about. The settler's feet are never visible, except perhaps in the sea; but there you're never close enough to see them. His feet are protected by strong shoes although the streets of his town are clean and even, with no holes or stones. The settler's town is a well-fed town, an easygoing town; its belly is always full of good things. The settlers' town is a town of white people, of foreigners... The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute.

They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. It is a town of niggers and dirty Arabs (Fanon, 1965, p.37-38).

This extensively quoted excerpt as captured by Fanon depicts the evil inherent in colonialism. Across Africa we have seen the oppressive tendencies of the colonizers which are evident in the activities of the neocolonialists (the bourgeoisie). For the depraved, the oppressed African people (the masses) always desire for his liberation and his emancipation from the hands of oppressors. The burning desire is vociferously igniting with violence but this act of violence must be properly directed and guided. And those who could galvanize and successfully set the pace of revolution are the intellectuals.

The Discourse: Participation of Intellectuals in the Advancement of Social Liberation in Africa

Fanon's philosophy of violence distinctly was not to be carried out haphazardly, but with caution and targeted to attain the desired end, which is social liberation and emancipation. The question raised here is, what is the justification for the participation of intellectuals in the social liberation and emancipation? Is it not possible for the intellectuals to hijack the process for their own selfish interest?

These questions are pertinent, but it is obvious from Fanon's postulations, that constant frustration, marginalization, oppression, discrimination and subjugation could lead to misdirection by the agitators; and in the course of liberation, could lead to misapplication of violence. However, the only option left for the agitators is co-opting the intellectuals and other intelligentsias to participate in the revolution to curb the excesses of the agitators.

[The] classic attitude of the colonized intellectual and the leaders of the nationalist parties is by no means objective. In fact they are not sure that this reckless violence is the most effective way of defending their own interests. Another thing is that they are convinced that violent methods are ineffective. For them, there is no doubt, any attempt to smash colonial oppression by force is an act of despair, a suicidal act (Fanon, 1965, p.25).

Fanon, however, did not suggest that the intellectuals have no part to play in the revolution, for they have a revolutionary element burning inside, and it is this revolutionary element that this work appeals to. According to Albert Einstein, “the world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing” (Enotes, 2017). African society is in chaos today, not because it is inhabited by the worst people on earth, rather it is because her intelligentsias and intellectuals fold their hands and merely watch the unfolding of events, instead of playing their part in liberating African society from decay and participating the revolutionary movement already in existence.

The role of the intellectuals in revolution cannot be overemphasized because they play an advisory role as well as streamlining the excessive application of violence. Although the masses have started the revolution, the intelligentsias should understand the need to join the revolution, particularly when recourse is made to the level of injustice and untold effect of corruption in Africa. This is call for action that will in turn free us from bad governance. The intelligentsias are regarded as agent of change and their social mission is to revolutionize. In fact, they remain a major source of radical change because they possess diverse wisdom, insight and foresight capable of applying their wealth of knowledge for the purpose of moving the society forward. Significantly, they helped to awaken the society to the reality and posit the way forward. This is possibly why the Vietnamese word for intellectual is “*trí thức*”, which is a combination of “mind” and “awaken.” An intellectual is thus, one who possesses knowledge, who is awakened and is willing (has the mind) to use it for the benefit of the society. This implies that the word intelligentsia has to do with those saddled with social responsibility.

The intelligentsia in the past and present had labored to ensure the unity of Africa. It has also labored and is still laboring through series of researches to identify, expose and stop what will hinder Africa’s development. Africa is blessed with a lot of reputable intelligentsias in various walks of life with revolutionary elements. They should not sit on the fence and watch the poor masses attempting to wrest African countries free from domination and suppression. They should be at the forefront coordinating the activities of the agitator with their venerable wisdom and knowledge which are capable of guiding the revolutionary force away from its present excesses and making it something worth pursuing. What vividly comes to mind is the role of Zimbabwean pastor, Evan Mawarire, who led anti-Mugabe protest in Harare. As an educated pastor, he tagged his protest “Thirsty Protest Movement” which grew into the largest street protest against President Robert Mugabe in several years (The Guardian, 2017).

Furthermore, the student should be at the middle of the revolutionary movement because they possess special characteristics and abilities to mobilize the masses. The students have more time and youthful vigor to mobilize as well as motivate the liberation struggle. They are best fitted for this mobilization role, because they have little or no economic responsibility and are therefore less likely to compromise for fear of economic reprisal or job termination.

This situation makes students to possess more freedom of speech, which includes the freedom to discuss controversial issues and to carry out protests rallies, demonstrations, and boycotts and so on. They are in the best position to serve as the engine room of the revolutionary spirit. Students also employ more diplomatic method than any other group, of a wide range of communication networks through which revolutionary information and ideas could be sent to friends, relatives, and fraternity brothers, acquaintances at club meetings, classmates, and conference attendees and so on. Kwame Nkrumah (1969) who started his revolutionary leadership as a student acknowledged that students in history have “provided the spark needed to set in motion demonstrations, strikes, boycotts and armed insurrections” (p.88). According to Gian Tru Trung, students “have been the initial shock troops who worked to build the mass parties, trade unions, farmers and women's movements and organizations for the struggles of our people. They, and no other group, have played that role historically” (Hebrew Vision News, 2015). Students have played crucial roles in most revolutions in history.

Consequently, the students as well as the well-established African intellectuals, have to see the need to join forces with the youths, to ensure that oppression and subjugation in all its forms are totally dismantled. They will serve as the eyes of the revolutionaries, to direct and guide them on their course. The right target for their attacks ought to be sit-tight government officials, for they are the reason why colonialism still persists, and why the masses still remain alienated from themselves and the society. They are the reason for the excruciating suffering the masses undergo daily. The move to end oppression and bad governance would therefore be targeted at overthrowing the government and not the masses who are co-sufferers of the injustice meted on them by self-centered and insensitive governments.

It is the duty of the intelligentsia, therefore, to coordinate the different aggrieved groups to form a mass that would be powerful enough to put forth a worthwhile revolution that would ultimately overthrow the ill-equipped government, who lean closer and tighter on the imperial leaders than on the masses. It is the intelligentsia that ought to formulate a proper and adequate *modus operandi* for the revolutionary force, so as to increase its potency. Over the years the revolutionary struggle has not yielded the desire impact due to non-involvement of the intelligentsias. This work urges them to heighten their revolutionary spirit and let the fire of the revolutionary burn in them. Joining in the revolution does not amount to treason; it is rather a way of saving the boat of the continent from sinking. The revolutionary force does not only need the physical machineries, it also needs intellectual ones and this can only be sufficiently provided by intellectuals. This will make the revolution to be strong and potent enough as to totally engulf the present oppressive system and put forth a new one that would have the people at the center of its heart.

The revolutionary force is a reaction against the neocolonialists found in Africa and it is aimed at the creation of a new Africa. When a new Africa emerges – Africa that is connected to the people; Africa that is truly independent; Africa that looks inward rather than outward; Africa that is more an exporter of finished products than raw materials; Africa with a human face, with a humane mind, where the national treasury would be used for the benefit of all – that is the moment different agitations for the creation of united Africa. The role of the intelligentsia is to educate the different agitators that there is need for building system of government that would be responsive to the need and aspiration of the masses. Karl Marx in his advocacy for the use of violence in changing deplorable and oppressive condition retorted: “Violence is simply a guide to action and a means to ameliorate the suffering of the masses” (Eyo et al, 2011, p.8). By advocating violence, Marx supports not the destruction of conditions which are beneficial to man, but conditions which are destructive to the populace. This essay reminds the intelligentsia and directs them on the use of violence for the benefit of the poor masses.

Conclusion

The article centers on social liberation and emancipation for Africa from the standpoint of Frantz Fanon’s philosophy of violence, which clearly was enunciated in his work *Toward the Decolonialization* and *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon’s philosophy is known as the decolonization theory. He tried to justify the use of violence against colonization. This is because he observed and maintained that colonialism was sustained by violence and oppression and insisted that the colonizers often inscribes the colonized subject with the ideas of backwardness and lack of rationality. In his book, *Black Skin, White Mask*, Fanon opined that “every collectivity must exist a channel an outlet through which the forces accumulated in the forms of aggression can be released” (p.112, 145).

In all these, Fanon was cautious to advise that intellectuals should be co-opted to participate in the revolution for success to be recorded. The article, however, identifies that the role of the intellectuals was to ensure that violence is not misapplied to a wrong target. His work, being seminal in the discourse of social liberation and emancipation of Africa, aims at restoration of African natural dignity, to liberate African people from oppression and restore true African personality. Fanon (1964) opines emphatically and aptly thus, “It is only a liberated individual who undertakes to build the new society” (p. 103). This excerpt of Fanon is a clarion call for intellectuals to participate in the building of a new Africa.

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