
AN ANSWER TO THE QUESTION: WHAT IS DECOLONIZATION? FRANTZ FANON'S *THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH* AND JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S *CRITIQUE OF DIALECTICAL REASON**

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This essay argues that Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of "dialectical reason", as elaborated in his Critique of Dialectical Reason (1960), had a decisive impact on the composition of Frantz Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth (1961). The relationship between the two works has not before received a thorough textual exposition. Such an exposition, it is suggested, also entails revising the view of the nature of Fanon's work that has become entrenched in anglophone scholarship. Instead of a self-grounding theorist who more resembles the postcolonialists who would succeed him, this essay presents a view of Fanon as a situated theorist, drawing on those resources that could best help him to articulate the task at hand. The notion of "dialectical reason" allowed him to break from his previous understanding of decolonization as the attainment of reason through struggle, and see the "praxis" of revolution as, itself, self-realizing reason. To perceive this allows us better to seize on the thinking that guides his discussions of objectification under colonialism, anticolonial violence, and the role of the national bourgeoisie, and, thus, to clear up a number of controversies.

INTRODUCTION

The central claim of this essay is that the account of decolonization set out in Frantz Fanon's epochal work *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les damnés de la terre*, 1961), was shaped by his understanding of the notion of "dialectical reason" developed by Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1 (*Critique de la raison dialectique*, 1960). It will be argued that the absorption of the theoretical architecture, as well as particular concepts from Sartre's sprawling work, did not merely assist Fanon, but were fundamental in enabling him to

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take the broad, speculative view of unfolding decolonization that has been so valuable for successive generations of readers. Fanon received from Sartre's work a conception of reason as immanent in social revolution, and, with it, the means to distinguish true from false decolonization. This claim will be strengthened by differentiating the conception of reason in *Wretched* from that which presides in *A Dying Colonialism (L'an V de la révolution algérienne, 1959)*, written two years earlier.

This essay is not novel for claiming the significance of the *Critique*. It joins a discussion begun by David Macey in his intellectual biography of Fanon. In view of the clear circumstantial and textual evidence that Fanon closely read Sartre's work, however, it is noticeable that considerations of the *Critique*–*Wretched* nexus have been relatively few and mostly brief. This is largely a consequence of the ways in which Fanon's corpus of writing has tended to be approached and the nature of his intellectual project characterized amongst anglophone readers. To draw attention to the importance of his reading of the *Critique* is to move away from a view of Fanon as a “theorist” who seeks to be the progenitor of his own method. This is not to say that we should regard his work as derivative. Rather, this essay proposes Fanon as a thinker of decolonizing praxis, drawing on those resources which best help him with the task at hand. In this respect, the essay is aligned with approaches to the history of political thought that understand texts as at once cognitive and performative.¹ The performative aspect is especially prominent in *Wretched*—the evidence of Fanon's commitment to ongoing African decolonization and an urgency to synthesize his thoughts brought on by diagnosis with terminal cancer in early 1961.

Continuously in print since it was first published, the Grove edition of the first English translation of *Wretched* has sold over a million copies.² It was read by just about all significant anticolonial and civil rights figures in the 1960s and 1970s.

¹ In the domain of anticolonial intellectual history, I follow David Scott's lead: David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC, 2004), 51–7. The history of intellectuals and French decolonization has been considered by Paul Clay Sorum, *Intellectuals and Decolonization in France* (Chapel Hill, 1977); and James D. Lesueur, *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics During the Decolonization of Algeria* (Philadelphia, 2001). In their *Political Theories of Decolonization: Postcolonialism and the Problem of Foundations* (Oxford, 2011), Margaret Kohn and Keally McBride read anticolonial literature across contexts in order to distil broad tendencies in theorizing decolonization.

² The publication history of *Les damnés* has yet to be written. Nigel Gibson, “Relative Opacity: A New Translation of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*—Mission Betrayed or Fulfilled?”, *Social Identities*, 13/1 (2007), 69–95, gives a useful overview of the history of the English translation.

Stuart Hall has called it the “Bible of decolonisation”;³ not because it provides an index of decolonizing movements, but for encapsulating the aspiration to decolonize across the Third World.

It has also fared well in the universities, and particularly the anglophone academy. Monographs and articles on Fanon’s work have appeared continuously since his death. Looking back on anglophone scholarship in their 1996 collection *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Renée T. White discerned five stages in his reception: applications and reactions to his work immediately after its publication; a mythologizing stage, in which Fanon’s ideas became the expression of his extraordinary biography; a period when his significance in political theory was central; a period during which Fanon becomes a postcolonial theorist *avant la lettre*; and a fifth stage, in which the editors situate their own volume, where the aim is “to explore ways in which he is a useful thinker.”⁴

Since that volume, this fifth stage has become entrenched: a compendium of key critical essays edited by Nigel Gibson was followed by his own monograph on Fanon and further monographs on ethics and critical theory,⁵ and a plethora of edited essay collections and journal special issues have appeared.⁶ During the same period two editions of Macey’s biography and a translation of Alice

³ Quoted by Homi Bhabha in his foreword to Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York, 2008), xvi.

⁴ Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Renée T. White, “Introduction: Five Stages of Fanon Studies”, in Sharpley-Whiting Gordon and White, eds., *Fanon: A Critical Reader* (Oxford, 1996), 7. Two then recent monographs are cited as further examples: Lewis Gordon’s *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* (New York, 1995); and Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience* (Cambridge, MA, 1996).

⁵ Nigel Gibson, *Rethinking Fanon: The Continuing Dialogue* (New York, 1999); Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination* (Cambridge, 2003). Jean-Marie Vivaldi, *Fanon: Collective Ethics and Humanism* (New York, 2007); Reiland Rabaka, *Forms of Fanonism: Frantz Fanon’s Critical theory and the Dialectics of Decolonization* (Lanham, MD, 2010).

⁶ Anthony C. Alessandrini, ed., *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives* (London, 1999); Max Silverman, ed., *Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks: New Interdisciplinary Essays* (Manchester, 2005); Elizabeth A. Hoppe and Tracey Nicholls, eds., *Fanon and the Decolonization of Philosophy* (Lanham, MD, 2010); George J. Sefa Dei, ed., *Fanon and Education: Thinking through Pedagogical Possibilities* (New York, 2010); Nigel Gibson, ed., *Living Fanon: Global Perspectives* (New York, 2011). Timothy Bewes, Laura Chrisman, Scott McCracken, eds., *After Fanon, New Formations*, 47 (2002); Jean Khalifa, ed., *Frantz Fanon Special Issue, Wasafiri*, 44 (2005); Vikki Bell, ed., *Fanon: The Wretched of the Earth 50 Years On, Theory, Culture and Society*, 27/7–8 (2010); Kurt B. Young, ed., *Veneration and Struggle: Commemorating Frantz Fanon, Journal of Pan African Studies*, 4/7 (2011).

Cherki's memoir–biography have appeared,⁷ as well as edited collections of Fanon's writings and new translations into English of his two most studied works.⁸ And this is only collections and monographs dedicated exclusively to his work.

Although, generalization across this breadth is to be made with due caution, one encounters few essays which do not conform to Gordon, Sharpley-Whiting and White's description of "doing work *with* and *through* Fanon".⁹ Typically, a Fanon studies essay will summarize his thinking on a subject ("for Fanon . . .") using short citations. The purpose will be to clarify his concepts and their significance and/or to show how they can give an explanation for another, usually postcolonial, event or text. In short, Fanon, is treated like other, usually Western European, "theorists" such as Foucault, Adorno or Althusser: someone whose thought is original, coherent and comprehensive enough to bear abstraction from his specific purposes. As Gordon puts it, "Fanon's thought emerges as a form of critical philosophy".¹⁰

The aim of this essay is not to discredit such approaches: if synthesizing and abstracting from his corpus can provide useful theoretical explanations, or if his work "travels", as Edward Said has it,¹¹ then that is fine. I do seek, however, to bring into question a presupposition that underpins much of Fanon studies, and which finds an explicit articulation in the important monographs of Gordon, Sekyi-Otu and Gibson: that there can be said to be a particular Fanonian *method*.¹² This can have the effect, for example, of making the discreet and topic-specific essays of *A Dying Colonialism* appear as though they were case studies that make concrete the arguments of *Wretched*. I will show that there is a significant shift in Fanon's approach in *Wretched*, and that this can clearly be demonstrated by conceptual changes and a different organizational approach. It cannot be explained only with reference to his growing pessimism about the prospects of decolonization, as has been commonly been argued.

⁷ David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Life* (Granta, 2000); Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Biography*, 2nd edn (London, 2012) (further references are to the first edition); Cherki, *Frantz Fanon: A Portrait*, trans. Nadia Benabid (Ithaca, 2006).

⁸ Azzedine Haddour, ed., *The Fanon Reader* (London, 2006). Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York, 2004); Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

⁹ Gordon, Sharpley-Whiting and White, "Introduction", 7, original emphasis.

¹⁰ Gordon, *Fanon*, 35.

¹¹ Edward Said, "Travelling Theory Reconsidered", in Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London, 2001), 436–52.

¹² Sekyi-Otu was the first extensively to argue for a theoretical unity in Fanon's works, reading his texts "as though they formed one dramatic dialectical narrative". See Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*, 4–5. Gibson has been the most strident in making such claims: "What makes Fanon's work of a piece is Fanon's dialectic". Gibson, *Fanon*, 3.

There is a strong possibility, however, that such pessimism spurred the enthusiasm with which Fanon read Sartre's *Critique*. So this essay should not be understood as prioritizing his reading *over* his experiences as an anticolonial activist. It proposes a vision of a theorizing activist, assured of his grasp of the logic of events, seizing on resources in Sartre's work in the course of providing his fellow decolonizers with the means to distinguish their true purpose. A particular, and historically distinct, *idea* of "decolonization" emerges, which Fanon distinguishes from heuristic uses of the term that merely bundle together parallel movements of national liberation.

Of course, Fanon did not invent the term "decolonization". Although it is often noted, the fact that the term came to widespread usage at the time of the events that it describes is not generally considered to be greatly noteworthy. The term is usually traced back to essays by the German economist Moritz Bonn in the 1930s. Todd Shepard points out that *décolonisation* was employed by Henri Fonfrède as early as 1836, and by communists and social scientists in the 1920s.¹³ It is also noted that the term came into general usage in the 1950s, and was first associated with events in the unravelling French imperial system. Shepard argues that, far from being incidental, this emergence signalled a great shift in the discourse of French republicanism. Previously, the colonization of Algeria had been considered part of the inevitable spread of French republican values. The upsurge of usages of "decolonization" signals a moment when republicanism turns away from an imperial scope, and the values of "liberty, equality, fraternity and the Rights of Man" become aligned with the policy of extending the "right" to national self-determination.¹⁴ Shepard thus considers the term to be a quasi-calculated "invention" that could preserve the righteousness of the Republic in the face of anticolonialism. Shepard's study reminds us that the term has a history of uses which are entwined in the historical fabric it is meant to shine a light on. Fanon's effort is utterly of its moment: an intervention in the contests of agency and influence during the postcolonial transition.

This essay begins by pointing out that the concept "decolonization" appears in several guises in *Wretched*. Fanon ventriloquizes the voices of the competing actors as he surveys the scene. That usage which, *Wretched* proposes, constitutes "true" decolonization is shown to be grounded on notions of "reason" and "enlightenment", which are in turn reliant on positing the intelligibility of "praxis". This is a conception deeply informed by Sartre's "dialectical reason". Before proceeding with a prolonged textual analysis, the essay demonstrates that notions of reason and enlightenment play a very different role in *A Dying*

¹³ Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY, 2008), 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

Colonialism. Working through the ways that Fanon absorbs Sartre's blueprint of revolutionary process, it becomes clear that it is largely in the first chapter that the direct influence of Sartre's dialectic can be discerned, in particular the dialectic of the "practico-inert" and "group-in-fusion". The problem for decolonization, as Fanon presents it, is that the revolutionary group was not quite fusing, and so Sartre's presentation of the post-revolutionary institutionalization of the group is not directly pertinent to the plan of *Wretched*.

DECOLONIZATION AS ENLIGHTENMENT, ENLIGHTENMENT AS PRAXIS

Reading the opening sections of *Wretched*, we can observe that that the term "decolonization" is used in several distinct senses. It is used in a neutral sense to refer to the period during which sovereignty is transferred: "During the period of decolonization, the colonized's reason is appealed to" (33; 46).¹⁵ It is used to refer to rearguard manoeuvres undertaken by the colonial powers to head off insurrection and transfer power with the minimum impact on their strategic interests:

a veritable wholesale panic takes hold of the colonialist governments in turn. Their purpose is to capture the vanguard, to turn the movement of liberation toward the right, and to disarm the people: quick, quick, let's decolonize. Let's decolonize the Congo before it turns into another Algeria. Vote the constitutional framework for all Africa, create the French Communauté, renovate the same Communauté, but for God's sake let's decolonize, let's decolonize ... (55; 69)

Free indirect speech focalizes the colonizer's perspective, who is, thus, the subject of the process: decolonization is an action taken by the colonizer upon the colonial territories and peoples.

The third usage is that which is usually regarded as being the one that Fanon himself advocates: decolonization is the process by which the colonized liberate themselves politically and psychically through violent rebellion and the forceful seizure of sovereignty. This is particularly strong in the opening pages, in which Fanon makes a number of definitional claims, such as: "[decolonization] can, if we want to describe it with precision, be summed up in the well-known phrase: 'The last shall be first, ~~and the first last~~.' Decolonization is the verification of this phrase" (28; 40). Here, by implication, the

¹⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London, 2001); Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris, 2002). Page references are given parenthetically in the text. Two page numbers separated by a semicolon refer first to the English translation, and second to the French original. The reasons for this are given in the next footnote.

predication is reversed: decolonization is an action taken by the colonized upon the colonizer. They are to be decolonizers.

As the dominant voice in the work evidently identifies with this side of the struggle, it is not always easy to keep in mind that this usage is one of several. In the temporal space of “decolonization”, colonizer and colonized vie to be the principal decolonizing agent. Although this space has been opened up by a critical mass of movements for national sovereignty within fragile European empires, the fact of the attainment of sovereignty does not indicate which of the parties has been victorious.

The fourth usage—the one to which, I will be arguing, we should pay the most attention—implies quite different criteria. Here it is a question of the grounds for distinguishing between the *forms* of decolonization:

On the level of political tactics and of History, a theoretical problem of prime importance is being posed by the current epoch: when can one affirm that the situation is ripe for a movement of national liberation? What should be the first actions taken? Because decolonizations have assumed many different forms, reason hesitates and is prevented from saying which is a true decolonization, and which a false decolonization. (46; 59)

The plural is particularly significant. While there may be a diversity of events that display a decolonizing character, “decolonizations”, they are not all necessarily true instances. We therefore need to know what Fanon means here by “reason”. Without this faculty, he continues, anticolonialists risk falling into a “blind voluntarism with the terribly reactionary risks that go with it” (46; 59). They cannot presume that the sheer drive to displace the colonizer and assume the nation is truly a decolonizing one.

Reading through the work, we find that when Fanon wants to identify true decolonizing activity he tends to draw on concepts of “reason” and “enlightenment” or corollary word forms. Given that he was educated in a milieu of French republicanism this is, perhaps, not surprising: like that previous revolution, decolonization is to be the realization of an immanent human Reason. There is a significant obstacle in drawing this conclusion, however. Colonialism has justified its conquests under the banner of a civilizing “enlightenment”, and so such terms have acquired a dark hue. At the decolonizing moment, they lose their ideological authority:

All the Mediterranean values—the triumph of the human individual, of enlightenment [*clarté*], and of Beauty—become lifeless, colourless knick-knacks. All those speeches seem like collections of dead words. Those values which seemed to ennoble the soul are revealed as unusable, simply because they do not concern the concrete conflict in which the people is [*sic*] engaged. (36; 49)

How is this to be understood alongside a passage such as this: “The colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence. This praxis enlightens [*illumine*] the agent because it indicates to him the means and end” (68; 83)? The colonial lexicon of reason and enlightenment is shown to be emptying of substance, and yet the same family of terms is called on to describe the pursuit of a new order. It seems that we need to distinguish not only true from false decolonization, but also that desiccated reason of Enlightenment (*clarté*) from that which enlightens (*illumine*) decolonizers.

It will not have escaped notice that “enlighten” has traction in the second passage precisely because it *does* involve the people’s “concrete conflict”. The difference between the orders of usage thus would seem to rest on a third term, “praxis”.¹⁶ The Greek concept comes to Fanon through the Marxian tradition, and had not appeared in any of his previous works. The reason for this is almost certainly that he absorbed it from the first volume of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, where the term occupies a central place.

The *Critique* is Sartre’s second monumental philosophical work following 1943’s *Being and Nothingness*. Written during his Marxist turn in the 1950s, in it the emphasis shifts from ontology to history. The earlier work concerns the splitting of reflective consciousness from self-identical being, and the dilemma of human agency in a secular age; the later, the intelligibility of history and the dilemma of human agency as it is constituted within given material circumstance. They share, thus, a concern with agency, but consider it in very different philosophical modes. Most relevant for this discussion is Sartre’s recasting of the concept of freedom. In *Being and Nothingness*, humans are considered free agents insofar as we are separated from spontaneous Being-in-itself by the negativity of consciousness: we are “condemned” to be the authors of our own destinies. In the *Critique*, humans come into the world as material entities in a milieu of scarcity, and we can only strive to free ourselves from material need by acting upon and shaping the world. This acting-upon is *praxis*. Sartre has turned the ontology in *Being and Nothingness* on its head: agency is not the transcendental precipitate of consciousness, but consciousness the precipitate of the attempt to master material

¹⁶ In her translation, Constance Farrington appears to have attempted to simplify or explain Fanon’s jargon. “Praxis” is variously translated as “rule of conduct” (68) “practice” (73) “action” (74) “knowledge of the practice of action” (118). I have indicated my modifications to give a sense of where and how the debt to Sartre gets obscured. I have used Farrington rather than Richard Philcox’s more recent effort, because this edition has been used by the great majority of Anglo-American scholarship on *Wretched*. Underscoring indicates those words/phrases I have modified; strike-throughs redundant insertions made by Farrington.

circumstance. With this materialist reorientation, “praxis” becomes the motive force of human reason, which, conceived thus, is inherently “dialectical”.¹⁷

Fanon would have readily appreciated the broader implications of this reorientation. He had read *Being and Nothingness* as a student in Lyon, and his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, is greatly indebted to Sartre, particularly his *Anti-Semite and the Jew* and *What is Literature?*. Despite this, he displayed a virulent irritation when the earlier Sartre turned his attention to matters of colonialism and race. In the fifth chapter, he decries Sartre for what he regards as a gross misreading of *négritude* poetry, particularly Sartre’s inability to contend effectively with the worldly dilemma that drives the poetry’s hyper-racialism. He treats *négritude*’s racial rhetoric as though it were always-already transcending itself towards a post-racial world view. Fanon does not believe that the fact of race as it was daily lived in colonial reality could be so easily got around, and this is the poetry’s force and contradiction.¹⁸

So it is not surprising that, a decade later, Fanon, now deeply involved with the Front de libération nationale, would welcome the reorientation towards history. In his biography, David Macey claims that Fanon read Sartre’s *Critique* as soon as it was published in May 1960, though he does not provide evidence.¹⁹ Certainly, he had read the work by the time he met Claude Lanzmann and Marcel Péro in Tunis in early 1961.²⁰ Lanzmann recalled that Fanon discussed Sartre’s work “for hours and hours”, commented that “Sartre was god” and that he had spoken of giving lectures on the *Critique* to militants on the Algerian–Tunisian border, in which he “explained to them what he had liked in the *Critique* (published in that same year). He had gone to shape the theoretical foundations of those groups”.²¹ Simone de Beauvoir and Alice Cherki have also recorded their memory of Fanon’s

¹⁷ “The dialectic as the living logic of action is invisible to a contemplative reason: it appears in the course of *praxis* as a necessary moment of it; in other words, it is created anew in each action . . . and becomes a theoretical and practical method when action in the course of development begins to give an explanation of itself”. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London, 2004), 38; Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique* (Paris, 1960).

¹⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 89–119.

¹⁹ Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, 450.

²⁰ Annie Cohen-Solal, *Jean-Paul Sartre: A Life*, trans. Norman Macafee (New York, 2005), 431. In an interview with Sartre’s biographer in 1983, Lanzmann dated the meeting to the summer of 1960. This is very unlikely as the conversation he recalls concerned events postdating that time. Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, 579–80 n. 15, suggests that the meeting in fact took place in spring or early summer of 1961 after Fanon returned to Tunis from Moscow.

²¹ Quoted in Cohen-Solal, *Jean-Paul Sartre*, 431. Fanon’s presence in that border region at the time is confirmed by reports in *El Moudjahid*. Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, 453.

enthusiasm for the work.²² On 7 April 1961, Fanon wrote to his publisher, Maspero, to inform them of his intention to write *Wretched*, and requested that Sartre be approached to write a preface. He asked the publisher to tell Sartre “that each time I sit down at my desk, I think of him who writes such important things for our future.”²³

Although this has all long been known, critics of *Wretched* have been reluctant to investigate the relationship between the works in any textual detail. Scholarship is divided between those who acknowledge the presence of the *Critique* in *Wretched* in passing,²⁴ those who find value in contrasting or drawing parallels between the two,²⁵ and those who do not believe that the relationship is

²² In her account of Fanon in *Force of Circumstance*, Simone de Beauvoir comments that Fanon “had been passionately interested by *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, especially by the analysis of terror and brotherhood”. Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard (Harmondsworth, 1968), 583, see also 592, 595. See Cherki, *Frantz Fanon*, 160, 242 n. 8.

²³ Unpublished letter to Maspéro, quoted in Cohen-Solal, *Jean-Paul Sartre*, 433, and Cherki, *Frantz Fanon*, 230. Some sections of *Wretched* were drafted before Fanon had read the *Critique*, namely the fifth chapter and the second part of the fourth chapter. An earlier version of the first chapter appeared in *Les temps modernes* in May 1961. This includes references to events from late April. See Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, 454–5. A footnote in this chapter (67; 82) cites a passage from the end of a long footnote from the *Critique* in which Sartre argues that “serial” collectives require no empathy to bind them together (*Critique*, 300–3). He gives the example of the colonial situation, pointing out that if the logic of settler racism were taken to its conclusion the settlers would do away with the natives altogether, an impossible aspiration as it would destroy what he understands as colonialism’s economic *raison d’être*. Fanon is making the same point: colonial Manichaeism threatens genocide but must keep alive those it exploits. Closing the circle, Sartre picks up this aspect of Fanon’s argument in his preface to *Wretched*: “He [the settler] ought to kill those he plunders . . . this is not possible: must he not also exploit them?” (14; 24).

²⁴ Zahar sees the influence in Fanon’s account of Manichaeism and anti-colonial counterviolence. Renate Zahar, *Frantz Fanon: Colonialism and Alienation*, trans. Willfried F. Feuser (New York, 1974), 55, 76, 78. See Cauté in his emphasis on the need and scarcity as a primary cause of social violence as well as the hope for a group-driven postcolonial national contract. David Cauté, *Frantz Fanon* (London, 1970), 75, 92. See Jinadu on scarcity as a defining parameter of colonial conflict. L. Adele Jinadu, *Fanon: In Search of the African Revolution* (Enugu, 1980), 94–5. Other mentions: B. Marie Perinbam, *Holy Violence: The Revolutionary Thought of Frantz Fanon* (Washington, DC, 1982), 90, 107; Richard C. Onwuanibe, *A Critique of Revolutionary Humanism: Frantz Fanon* (St Louis, MO, 1983), 129 n. 34; and Emanuel Hansen, *Frantz Fanon: Social and Political Thought* (Columbus, OH, 1977), 29.

²⁵ Parallels are drawn at some length by Paul Nursey-Bray, who goes over Sartre’s theorization of praxis and group formation, claiming that this gives us a valuable insight into Fanon’s account of decolonization in *Wretched* and *A Dying Colonialism*. Paul Nursey-Bray, “Marxism in the Thought of Frantz Fanon”, *Political Studies*, 20/2 (1972), 152–68,

significant.²⁶ As he surveyed the circumstantial and textual evidence, it is not surprising that it is only Macey who has made resolute claims, going so far as to posit that the work's coherence "is supplied by a philosophical framework derived from Sartre"²⁷ He outlines the broad shape of Fanon's argument using concepts from the *Critique* to demonstrate this. The colonial "situation" has produced "serial" beings stratified by a "Manichaeism" divide of colonizer and colonized. Anticolonial violence is positive "praxis" which constitutes the national "group-in-fusion", breaking this colonial "practico-inert". The arrest of the revolutionary energy by the national bourgeoisie of the new state corresponds to the moment when the "fused group" objectifies itself, regressing into "seriality" (these concepts will be worked through below). He believes Fanon to be following Sartre's "theoretical model" so closely that built into his account of decolonization is the "inevitable disintegration of the national consciousness". This amounts to claiming that Fanon's discussion of the reactionary role of the national bourgeoisie is structurally determined by the framework of the *Critique*.²⁸

164–7. Very much aware of Fanon's enthusiasm for the *Critique*, Bernasconi characterizes the *Critique–Wretched* nexus as a matter of "echoes" (42). Fanon is shown to draw on specific insights (particularly as indicated in the footnote that cites the *Critique*) and points to correspondences in general terms. He acknowledges that the dialogue between Fanon and Sartre "would become even clearer if one were to give an exhaustive account of their differences" (42). Robert Bernasconi, "Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* as the Fulfillment of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*", *Sartre Studies International*, 16/2 (2010), 36–47, 42. Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*, 64–5, 68–70, provides a summation of Sartre's discussion of scarcity, Manichaeism and violence and then of the importance of praxis in breaking the practico-inert in a discussion of Fanon's and Hegelian dialectics in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, 21–2, 31–4, discusses Sartre's distinction between collectivity and group-in-fusion and attendant concepts in a section which engages primarily with *Black Skin, White Masks*.

²⁶ In *White Mythologies*, Robert Young spends an early chapter discussing the *Critique*. Though he briefly acknowledges Sartre's influence in a later chapter on Fanon, he comments that Fanon has "little time for the central contention of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* . . . that men as self-conscious agents create the totality of history". Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London, 1990), 120. He revises this view in his introductory essay to the translation of Sartre's *Situations V*, where he claims that the section on colonialism in the *Critique* is "the inspiration for the opening chapter [of *Wretched*]". Young, introduction, in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, trans. Azzedine Haddour *et al.* (London, 2001), xix. Gibson also acknowledges Sartre's influence—"Sartre provided some of the theoretical language and framework for thinking about the [*sic*] violence and fraternity"—but does not elaborate, and rejects any notion that Fanon is a "crude devotee" of the *Critique*. He claims that Fanon has his own vision which surpassed Sartre's. Gibson, *Fanon*, 227 n. 2.

²⁷ Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, 470. He repeats the claim at 478.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 487.

Much of the argument to be set out here accords with Macey, although my purpose and approach are quite different. Macey glosses the parallels between the texts in the course of presenting a broad account of the formation of the argument of *Wretched*. The purpose here is an extended textual analysis that will make evident the centrality of Sartre's conception of dialectical reason to Fanon's idea of decolonization, as part of a reconsideration of the kind of theoretical activity taking place. With that said, there is a significant difference in our understandings of the *Critique*–*Wretched* nexus, which might stem from a broader disagreement. (As Macey's discussion is necessarily brief, it would be presumptuous to overstate this.)

The claim that the malign influence of the national bourgeoisie corresponds to that stage in Sartre's account in which the group institutionalizes itself and becomes a new serial entity appears to be premised on the notion that the movement of the group into seriality constitutes a backward step. Macey seems to have misunderstood the dialectical motion of macro-social transformation laid out in the *Critique*. Sartre does not speak of the group "laps[ing] back into seriality".²⁹ Rather, groups voluntarily take a "pledge" to institutionalize the commitment of the revolutionary phase. This is the attempt to sustain their "immanent-transcendent" state beyond the moment of their destruction of the former "practico-inert". It is a *new* serial framework, produced by the group's willing negation of itself. French revolutionaries produced a liberal capitalist practico-inert, they did not "lapse back" into an aristocratic one; the Bolsheviks produced a state absolutism, not a Czarist one.

It will be argued here that, in *Wretched*, the coalescing group does not really achieve the "immanent-transcendent" state that Sartre describes. The national bourgeoisie is not the anticolonial group's petrification; rather, it is a direct continuation of the colonial artifice, stymying the formation of the group before such a stage could be countenanced. In this respect, Fanon's appropriation of Sartre is *timely*: he does not draw on Sartre in order to provide a definitive account of decolonization's failure, but, writing in 1961, is urging his fellows to renew their efforts towards genuine revolution.

To make this position comprehensible to readers unfamiliar with the *Critique*, the architecture of Fanon's account leading up to this point will need to be carefully reconstructed. Before that, however, it will be helpful to look at the role that concepts of reason and enlightenment play in his 1959 study, *A Dying Colonialism*. This will enable us to perceive more clearly the impact that Sartre's conception of dialectical reason would have.

²⁹ Ibid.

DECOLONIZATION AS DEMYSTIFICATION IN A *DYING COLONIALISM*

Commentators often cite passages from *A Dying Colonialism* and *Wretched* alongside one another as though they substantiate a single vision of decolonization. In many respects, this appears to be the case. Fanon did not need the concept “Manichaeism” in order to be able to see that in the colonial world there is “always an opposition of exclusive worlds” (*DC*, 131; 119).³⁰ He did not need the concept “practico-inert” to be able to perceive “the rigour with which the immobilizing of the native city . . . is organized” (52; 35). And he did not need the concepts “seriality” and “group-in-fusion” to grasp that “In an initial phase, it is the action, the projects of the occupier that determine the centers of resistance around which a people’s will to survive becomes organized” (47; 29). Gibson is right to say that “Fanon did not need Sartre to tell him what was going on”.³¹

What concerns us is not the consistency of his observations considered as discrete remarks, but their configuration in the course of representing a historical process. And here we can distinguish a fundamental difference between the two works. In both, concepts of reason and rationality serve to define successful decolonizing activity. In *A Dying Colonialism*, decolonization *demythifies* the mystifications of the colonial order and so clears the way for the achievement of rationality, which, we must surmise, is transcendental, a priori, objective and so forth. In the later work, decolonizing “praxis” *itself* is an act of self-realizing reason.

Each of the case studies of revolutionary practice in Algeria in *A Dying Colonialism* support two central contentions:

- (1) In the colonial context “the practice of tradition is a disturbed practice” (130; 118)
- (2) “The truth objectively expressed is constantly vitiated by the lie of the colonial situation” (128; 115).

Fanon contends that the “traditional” culture which Algerians thought they were trying to protect against colonial imposition, and a concomitant resistance to “European” science and technical knowledge, were not cultural particularities to be celebrated, but reactionary impulses induced by the colonial system. He argues that the necessities of struggle were revealing to the Algerian people

³⁰ Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York, 1967); Fanon, *Sociologie d'une révolution (L'an V de la révolution algérienne)* (Paris, 1972). Page references are given parenthetically in the text.

³¹ Gibson, *Fanon*, 227.

that their traditions had become mystifications whose primary function was to maintain their subjugation. This urgency led them to instrumentalize all available resources, traditional and scientific, in pursuit of the national cause. This had the effect of breaking taboos on science and redynamizing culture. Thus the use of the veil in conducting covert operations strips it of its “exclusively traditional dimension”, and it is “abandoned in the course of revolutionary action” (63; 47). The radio, scorned as the amplifier of the colonizer’s culture, is transformed into a fighting instrument, “stripping from the instrument its traditional burden of taboos and prohibitions” (94; 79). The same pattern is observed in the adoption of medical science in the fourth chapter. The third chapter argues that the need to improvise within battle conditions had stretched and broken traditional family roles, precipitating the “*emergence of the citizen, the patriot, and the modern spouse*” (114; 100; original emphasis).

In this version of decolonization-as-enlightenment, political autonomy and the capacity to reason are co-dependent. The need to make use of technical instruments in struggle necessarily leads to grappling with their scientific properties. It is through such an education that the fighting Algerian “adopts modern forms of existence and confers on the human person his maximum independence” (116; 102). Thence “the person is born, assumes his autonomy, and becomes the creator of his own values” (101; 85).

Decolonization is enlightening in the Kantian strain of “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity”.³² It destroys “infantile phobias” (110; 95), “infantile attachments” (101; 85) and “old superstitions” (143; 133). The “new humanity” that Fanon speaks of in the conclusion is not so much new, as the fulfilment of Enlightenment’s claim to a transcendent reason. It is a return to and extension of French Revolutionary humanism: “We witness in Algeria a renewal of the progress of man” (30; 13).

THE COLONIAL PRACTICO-INERT

At times in *Wretched* it might appear that reading the *Critique* only confirmed Fanon’s view of decolonization as the path to an a priori reason cleared by the instrumentality of struggle. Take the passage we considered earlier on “praxis”: “The colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence. This praxis enlightens the agent because it indicates to him the means and end” (68; 83). Or, the notion that anticolonial violence “demystifies once and for all the most alienated members of the colonized race” (70; 86). When placed in their context within *Wretched’s* dialectical narrative, however, we will see that such remarks are

³² Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: “What Is Enlightenment?”*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (London, 2009), 1.

part of an attempt to articulate a reason specific to the situation of decolonization, one whose parameters continually move with events. The aim is no longer to show that decolonization leads to reason, but to render it “intelligible”: decolonization “cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we discern the movements which give it historical form and content” (*WE*, 27; 40). This change sees Fanon bring his understanding of decolonization into line with the terms that Sartre uses to develop his notion of “dialectical reason”. The opening hypothesis of that work is that human history is “intelligible” because humans act in a world that we have created.³³ This is to seek philosophical grounds for materialism as “History itself becoming conscious of itself” (*CDR*, 40; 134). To be able to perceive how Fanon absorbs this premise, we first need to work through the conceptual means by which Sartre hopes to establish the intelligibility of history.

Sartre begins with a notion of “scarcity”, the inescapable fact of all human history. It is the material limit within which all social relations must be negotiated. As humans have a unique capacity to shape their material world, this limit is immanent in human history. Sartre uses two related concepts, “praxis” and “project”, to analyse this capacity. In banal terms we can say that praxes are to projects as means are to ends. A particular praxis is never discrete, but executed in a sequence that aims to realize an overarching project. In order to secure our livelihood within a milieu of scarcity we conceive of projects which we believe will adapt our environment to provide continuously for our needs, and then undertake specific material praxes towards this.

To realize projects that will free us from scarcity, humans create tools, infrastructure and institutions along with the relevant know-how and social relations. These come to constitute a self-sustaining social–material order that Sartre terms the “practico-inert” (which is used both as noun and as modifier). To understand practico-inert systems is to perceive how the human shaping of the material world sets the parameters for future actions. If one generation decides that a train line should be laid to a rural cattle station, this entails a number of ongoing conditions: the railway will need to be maintained, successive generations of farmers will need to be trained, demand in the city will need to be continuous. This in turn requires a complex of institutions and habits: corporations for rail maintenance, colleges of agriculture, a metropolitan taste for beef. World cattle markets, other freight methods, Hinduism and a variety of other things could threaten the rail line and the farming community it serves. Defensive measures such as tariffs, subsidies and xenophobia might arise to preserve this particular practico-inert system.

³³ Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Page references are given parenthetically in the text.

Sartre stresses foremost the agency of practico-inert materials. We do not tell our house what to do, it tells us: “a *house* must be *inhabited*, that is to say, looked after, heated, swept, repainted, etc . . . This vampire object constantly absorbs human action, lives on blood taken from man and finally lives in symbiosis with him” (169; 238; original emphasis). Take the English country house, a relic of the political economy of late feudalism, which now burdens its inheritors with maintenance. This early modern “practico-inert” is only preserved in the twenty-first century by the “project” of heritage, creating the new “praxis” of estate tourism.

Over time, a practico-inert order will accumulate innumerable materialized praxes that form a network of inbuilt demands which no particular group of humans has agreed on. It becomes “praxis without an author” (166; 235), pursuing its own unarticulated project for which individuals are its “inert means” (264; 315). All that is required is our complicity, a point Sartre illustrates using the example of people queuing for a bus. The consent needed to form an orderly line and to respect the priority of those who have arrived earlier comes only from the need that each member has to get to where they are going. Each is interchangeable, and so experiences the queue as though an integer in a mathematical series. From this Sartre abstracts the concept of “seriality”. The “serial collective” is constituted within a particular practico-inert, and each individual must learn how to fulfil the roles demanded of them by the diverse series they inhabit.

If the variety of human projects were united, and all praxes indefinitely complementary, there would be, once and for all, a stable social order and no occasion for moral judgements like “good” and “evil”. But we cannot currently imagine this. Human communities inevitably encounter other human communities with whom they have no prior arrangements, and are liable to worry that those others might threaten their livelihoods. This is intensified by the knowledge that the others can do to us what we can do to them. Empathy, in the context of scarcity, is the basis of Manichaeic ethics (132; 208). When we perceive that other humans are also project devisers and conduct praxes which could collide with and threaten our own, we simultaneously entertain the possibility that they are radically evil and are aware of this potential in ourselves. Such Manichaeic antinomies get absorbed into practico-inert systems, and so seriality comes into contradiction with itself.

* * *

Fanon asserts at the start of *Wretched* that “Decolonization is the meeting of two congenitally antagonistic forces which in fact draw their originality from that sort of substantification that is secreted and nourished by the colonial situation” (la rencontre de deux forces congénitalement antagonistes qui tirent précisément

leur originalité de cette sorte de substantification que secrète et qu'alimente la situation coloniale) (27–8; 40). This reads awkwardly, and has proved difficult to translate. The chief difficulty comes with the term “substantification”. If Fanon just said that the two groups, colonizer and colonized, were in some way products and/or producers of the colonial situation the passage would be more straightforward. The unmodified Farrington reads, “Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification which results from and is nourished by the situation in the colonies” (27–8). Richard Philcox, in his recent translation, renders it: “Decolonization is the encounter between two congenitally antagonistic forces that in fact owe their singularity to the kind of reification secreted and nurtured by the colonial situation.”³⁴ Farrington appears to want to leave things more or less as they are, attempting to simplify the jargon and to decompress the grammar. In rendering “que secrète” as “which results from”, she loses the organic sense of something living “secreting” the substantification. Philcox retains the organic verb but makes a substantial conceptual alteration, replacing “substantification” with “reification”. We therefore read the passage thus: the colonial situation secretes and nurtures a particular kind of reification, and this reification gives shape to the two opposing forces of colonized and colonizer.

Philcox appears to be persuaded by critics such as Edward Said and Timothy Bewes who have contended that Fanon’s claims about the objectifying effects of the colonial situation are strongly suggestive of György Lukács’s concept of reification.³⁵ Said even speculates that Fanon was directly influenced by Lukács, whose *History and Class Consciousness* appeared in French translation in 1960. Said’s account would seem to equate “reification” with “objectification”, which has the effect of flattening the concept. It is hard to see how this concept, no matter how far it travels, can have a meaningful use if the phenomenon that it refers is not at least analogous to the effect on consciousness of the ubiquity of commodity production and consumption.³⁶ Certainly the colonial situation which Fanon describes is part of a system of commodity production, but the crude racial Manichaeism of the colonial context cannot easily be drawn into

³⁴ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Philcox, 2.

³⁵ Said, “Travelling Theory Reconsidered”, 436–52; Timothy Bewes, *Reification, or, The Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (London, 2001), 69–74, 81–5. In his review of Philcox’s translation, Gibson also cites these two passages together, commenting that it “is undoubtedly clearer and more precise with ‘reification’ connecting to the following sentence quite neatly”. Gibson, “Relative Opacity”, 74–5. Perhaps, but this does not necessarily make it an effective translation.

³⁶ György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA, 1971), 85.

parallel with the process of reification, in which relations between exploiter and exploited get concealed by the commodity's fetish character.

To what, then, does "substantification" refer? The constitution of the opposing forces in the substances "colonizer" and "colonized" by the colonial situation correlates more closely to Sartre's notion of the practico-inert as the symbiosis of humans and their manufactured habitat. Colonizer and colonized are the secretions of the material world brought into being during the material praxis of colonial conquest and settlement; that is, of a colonial practico-inert.³⁷ Unlike his near contemporaries, Fanon does not begin his investigation with a psychological profile of the colonizer and colonized, nor an economic analysis of colonial trade, nor a history of colonialism. He pays attention to its material constitution:

The colonial world is a compartmentalized world", he declares, and

if we penetrate into the details of this compartmentalization we will at least have the benefit of making evident the lines of force that it comprises. This approach to the colonial world, its ordering and its geographical lay-out will allow us to mark out the lines on which a decolonized society will be reorganised. (29; 41)

The description of the colonial city that follows has appeared in countless books, articles and postcolonial primers, but it is worth reading again in light of the above exegesis:

The zone inhabited by the colonized is not complimentary to the zone inhabited by the colonizers . . . The colonizer's town is a solid town, all stone and steel. It is a brightly-lit town, covered with asphalt, and the garbage-cans swallow unknown leftovers, never seen, or even dreamed of. The colonizer's feet are never visible, except perhaps in the sea, but then you're never close enough to see them. His feet are protected by strong shoes though the streets of his town are clean and even, with no holes or stones. The colonizer's town is a well-fed town, an easy-going town, its belly is always full of good things . . .

The colonized's town, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the Medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of ill fame. You are born anywhere, anyhow. You die anywhere, from anything. It is a world without spaciousness, men live there one on top of the other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. It is a starved town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The colonized's town is a squatting town, a town on its knees, a prostrate town. It is a town of niggers and dirty

³⁷ A caveat is needed: Sartre uses the term "reification" intermittently throughout the *Critique*. He reworks the concept into the transhistorical mode of his discussion of the practico-inert. Reification, for Sartre, is "the way in which the praxis of individuals is circumscribed by the practico-inert order, which gives their actions a character of 'mechanical rigidity'" (see 176; 244). One could posit that "substantification" and "reification" are analogous after all, if it is considered to be the way praxis is circumscribed by the practico-inert.

arabs. The look that the colonized turns on the colonizer's town is a look of lust, a look of envy . . .

This world divided into compartments, this world cut in two is inhabited by two different species. (30; 42)³⁸

The colonial city demands to be *inhabited* in particular ways. It absorbs the daily praxes of those who dwell in its mutually exclusive zones. Syntactical parallels (“place of ill fame”/“men of ill fame”; “men live there on top of one another”/“their huts are built one on top of the other”) and anthropomorphisms (“its belly is always full of good things”, “a squatting town”) emphasize the symbiosis of humans and materials.

The magnitude of the challenge of decolonization thus appears in its proper scale. It cannot just be a matter of dismissing the colonizer. The colonial situation is a praxis without an author: these are “serial” life forms, beholden to the material order which reproduces them. It hardly presents the benign aspect of the bus queue. Most of the first chapter, “Concerning Violence”, is taken up with discussing the various ways in which the constant presence of violence keeps the two species of the colonial world separate.

When we grasp that violence is praxis sedimented in the materials of the colonial situation and this cannot be undone by a change of heart, we understand why Fanon believes counterviolence to be essential in decolonization. While only superficial commentators have insisted that Fanon is an “apostle” of violence, few have focused on Fanon’s stated purpose of making anticolonial violence “intelligible” (27; 40). It is not a strategy the colonized decide on amongst many; it is part of the structure of their historical situation. Hence comments such as:

The violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world, which has ceaselessly drummed the rhythm for the destruction of native social forms and broken up without reserve the systems of reference of the economy, the customs of dress and external life, that same violence will be claimed and taken over by the colonized at the moment when, deciding to embody history in actions, the colonized mass surges into the forbidden quarters. (31; 44)

If this seems to contradict the claim that anticolonial violence is not a decision, we must note that the entity making this decision is the “colonized mass”. How can an intention be ascribed to a mass which seems to be acting spontaneously? To address this, we can return to the *Critique* and the discussion in it of the spontaneous rebellion of the “group-in-fusion”.

³⁸ Here I have consulted the solutions of Philcox’s translation, 5–6.

DECOLONIZATION AS A GROUP-IN-FUSION

The relationship between the practico-inert and the group-in-fusion is dialectical. We cannot focus in on the circumstances and processes to which these concepts refer without understanding that each is constituted in a motion surpassing the other. There cannot be a group-in-fusion which is not the negation of a practico-inert, and so its manifestation must follow the contours of that given practico-inert. As with Hegelian dialectic, the group-in-fusion “sublates” the material profile of the practico-inert that is being negated.³⁹ Those relations which had previously been mutually alienating are the condition of possibility for the unity of the group. This is a crucial point. Sartre believes that it explains how it is possible that people who were formerly “other” to each other in seriality can discover a coherence in common action.

What initiates group praxis? Here Sartre’s earlier existential conception of freedom appears in modified form. Though we may be forced to commit ourselves to the obscure project of the practico-inert, this does not annul the inherent freedom of praxis. It is just that in practico-inert conditions, freedom is locked into the materials which conscript us.⁴⁰ There is, thus, a difference between the limits of the practico-inert and the limits of human possibility. This is the disjunction between our intuition of freedom when acting materially on the world and the actions it currently requires of us: “the man who looks at his work, who recognises himself in it completely, and who also does not recognise himself in it at all” (226; 285).

How does such an awareness develop amongst a collective? Day-to-day it is extremely unlikely, as we are caught up in the manifold tasks required to perpetuate the order of things. If I have a sense of dissatisfaction as I go about my business, it does not necessarily mean that I will relate it to the discontent of others, also immediately engaged. Local phenomena, like, say, the Hinduism of other labourers competing for work, might prevent me, a committed beef-eater with an uncle working on a cattle station, from relating my discontent to theirs. Yet points of vantage on the seemingly isolated activities of other individuals do become available. This is the perspective of the “third party”. Take an intellectual on holiday who notices from the vantage of his hotel room two labourers separated by a fence, one a gardener, the other a road worker. He can see that their mode

³⁹ “Groups constitute themselves as determinations and negations of collectives. In other words, they transcend and preserve them” (348; 384).

⁴⁰ “Not that freedom ever ceased to be the very condition of acts and the mask which conceals alienation, but we have seen how, in the practico-inert field, it became the mode in which alienated man has to live his servitude in perpetuity and, finally, his only way of discovering the necessity of his alienations and impotencies” (401; 425).

of labour shares certain properties, and that they differ from his. In so doing he is prompted to reflect on the division of labour and class relations that place his leisure at a remove from their labour, and can begin to induce the serial complex as a whole. The workers only have a relation through the onlooking intellectual as “third party” (see 103–6; 184–7). A second gardener smoking a cigarette at the gate might find, upon seeing the road worker, a consciousness of the serial totality forming, but it is not qua gardener that she would do so. In social reality such positions open up perpetually, but detached from praxis.

In group fusion the third-party perspective comes down to earth and unites with praxis, producing a peculiar state of being which Sartre describes as “immanent-transcendent”. The description of this complex process produces some of the work’s knottiest passages. Sartre takes as his example the storming of the Bastille, and the section dealing with the reconciliation of the third party and praxis looks at the gathering of people in the Quartier Saint-Antoine and their subsequent flight before the king’s forces. Three things happen in quick succession. (1) An external threat brings malcontents together in one place. (2) As they enter the space of the gathering they see those already gathered from an external perspective, but also are aware that they are joining with them, and have no choice in doing so. (3) The immediacy of the threat forces them to undertake directly some kind of activity as a group in order to protect themselves. It is as serial entities that they come together, and finding a common praxis in reaction to the threat to their serial being, they undergo an ontological mutation (372; 403). Suddenly the perception of others in their immediacy coincides with each person’s own internal sense of what is required. The person who shouts “To the Bastille!” has no pre-assigned authority, but moves with the wishes of everyone in the group, and everyone in the group recognizes this as their wish and spontaneously moves with it. The coalescing of individual praxes into a single group praxis and towards a mutual project effects a “totalization”. As the members of the group work on their material surrounding they now recognize themselves in it. The project is materialized and made available as an object to group consciousness.

* * *

Fanon concludes “Concerning Violence” by summarizing the process through which violence brings the people of the future postcolonial nation together in a unified and coherent manner:

But it so happens that for the colonized this violence, because it constitutes their only work, invests their characters with positive and creative qualities. This violent praxis is totalizing [Cette praxis violente est totalisante], since each individual forms a violent link in the great chain, a part of the great organism of violence surging up in reaction to the first violence of the colonialist. The *groups* recognize each other and the future nation

is already indivisible [Les groupes se reconnaissant entre eux et la nation future est déjà indivise]. The armed struggle mobilizes the people; that is to say, it throws them in one way and in one direction. (73; 89–90, my italics)

It is quite remarkable to find the fidelity with which Fanon uses the *Critique's* concepts of “totalizing”, “praxis” and “group”. He has grasped the dialectical movement which allows spontaneous group action to be uniformly totalizing: the “great organism of violence” is thrown “in one way and one direction” because it is mediated by “the first violence of the colonialist”. This creates a spontaneous mutual recognition which, Fanon immediately goes on, “introduces into each man's consciousness the ideas of a common cause, of a national destiny and of a collective history” (73; 90). From group praxis manifests the group idea, the group *project*, “nation”. This is not an isolated instance of the deployment of “group” in this sense. In the next chapter Fanon will remind us that “The national unity is first the unity of a group” (105; 128).

Of course it does not necessarily follow that the content of the chapter leading up to this is in keeping with these summary remarks. At the risk of overstating the correlation, we can point to various moments in which the description of conditions leading to the coalescing of the decolonizers corresponds to the stages of group formation outlined in the *Critique*:

- (1) Consciousness of transcending the practico-inert: the colonized have developed a cultural life in which they break the colonial practico-inert in acts of symbolic transcendence (see in particular 43–5; 56–8). This also permeates their dreams:

The first thing which the native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond the limits. This is why the dreams of the native are always muscular dreams, dreams of action and of aggression . . . Under the period of colonization, the colonized never stops achieving his freedom from nine in the evening until six in the morning. (40; 53)

- (2a) Serial condition as mediation and means: as the colonized are constituted within a field of violent praxis, this permeates their being in colonial seriality, and will be the means for their breaking this condition:

He of whom we have never stopped saying that he doesn't understand anything except the language of force, decides to express himself by force. In fact, as always, the colonizer has shown him the way he should take if he wants to liberate himself. (66; 81)

- (2b) Reaction to external threat: just as the gathering crowd in the Quartier Saint-Antoine recognized each other in flight, the postcolonial nation recognizes itself reacting to the defensive manoeuvres of the colonial state: “the rural masses, on the defensive for the last three or four years, suddenly

felt themselves in deadly peril and decided to oppose the colonialist forces savagely” (91; 114; see also 54; 68).

- (3) Immanence-transcendence: once catalysed, the national group takes on an immanent-transcendent character. Every action “there” is also “here”, because each totalizes the same project: “the aim and, the programme of each spontaneously constituted group is local liberation. If the nation is everywhere, then she is here” (105; 127–8); “Each fighter carries his warring country between his bare toes” (107; 130).⁴¹

It is only once he begins to make the career of the national group-in-fusion intelligible that Fanon comes to make definitive claims about the enlightened character of violent decolonizing praxis:

Working means working for the death of the colonizer. The assumption of violence allows both strayed and outlawed members of the group to return, to regain their place, to reintegrate. Violence can thus be understood as the perfect mediation [La violence est ainsi comprise comme la médiation royale]. The colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence. This praxis enlightens the agent because it indicates to him the means and end. (67–8; 83)

We can see more clearly now that “enlighten” does not mean that the decolonizers have emerged from “self-incurred immaturity” and now access an autonomous reason. Only in a process of praxis manifesting one’s project can violence be said to be enlightening.

Fanon has stayed true to his stated purpose of demonstrating that decolonization is intelligible and, thereby, of providing the means of distinguishing true from false decolonization. Decolonization-as-enlightenment does not reach at its end a form of thought; it externalizes and makes available to consciousness (i.e. “totalizes”) the decolonizing project. Enlightenment is the movement by which the group reorganizes itself through immanence-transcendence and becomes conscious of its intent outside its former seriality. There are no longer claims about decolonizers adopting medical science, or

⁴¹ This echoes many passages in the *Critique*. For example: “Earlier we said that the series was nowhere, that is always *elsewhere*; the group, in contrast, is always here and insofar as we know it to be elsewhere too, it constitutes this elsewhere *as the same here*” (CDR, 394; 419–20; original emphasis). In his preface to *Wretched*, Sartre appears to recognize traces of his own argument: “At this moment the Nation does not shrink from him; he finds her wherever he goes, wherever he ~~may be, she is~~” (WE 19; 29). Paige Arthur’s suggestion that “it is better to read [Sartre’s preface to *Wretched*] with the *Critique* than it is to read it with *The Wretched of the Earth*, because the ambivalence of the *Critique* tempers the excesses of the preface”, shows that those in Sartre studies can be equally culpable of missing the significance of the exchanges between the two thinkers. Paige Arthur, *Unfinished Projects: Decolonization and the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (London, 2010), 94.

creating a liberal citizen. In fact, what the decolonizers find after the “idyllic light [clarté]” of Manichaeic group violence is a “penumbra which dislocates consciousness” (116; 139). They now abandon “the simplifications which had characterized their perception of the dominator” (116; 139). The challenge which faces the colonizers is not hanging onto reason, but *continuing* its motion beyond the Manichaeic vigour of the decolonizing group.

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As it turns out, Fanon is not really able to address this challenge. In the two chapters which follow “On Violence”, he describes the various ways in which the national group-in-fusion fails quite to realize itself. From the standpoint of chapters 2 and 3, we see that the discussion of the rational character of decolonizing violence had been somewhat ideal. In these succeeding chapters there is the sober recognition that decolonizing group formation will not smoothly follow the trajectory of its essential movement. Lurking was what Fanon and others were already calling “neocolonialism”.

At the start of the third chapter, “The Misadventures of National Consciousness”, Fanon writes that the failure of national liberation movements to overcome various sectarian divisions (class, race, tribe) is “the historical result of the incapacity of the national middle class of under-developed countries to rationalize popular praxis, which is to say to extract its reason” (119; 145). The clarifying clause shows transparently the change in Fanon’s conception of reason from *A Dying Colonialism*. Realizing that it looks as though he is saying that the national middle class has not processed the popular revolt using an a priori reason, he quickly points out that by “to rationalize” he means “to extract” the reason inherent in popular praxis.⁴² This notwithstanding, it seems that this extraction is in some way integral to the realization of a true decolonization. What follows is the famous discussion of the malignant influence of the national bourgeoisie, the bastard child of the colonial administration, which uses the moment of decolonization to assume the colonial state. Fanon implores fellow decolonizers not to be deceived into believing that this constitutes some necessary “phase”, nor to conceive of themselves as a Leninist vanguard. It seems that decolonization is faltering because the third-party perspective has not come down to earth.

⁴² Fanon, via Sartre, joins a tradition that looks back to Gustave le Bon’s *Psychologies des foules* and anticipates Tony Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire*. Laclau has recently renewed the case for the “intelligibility” of popular action. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London, 2005), 224.

In chapters 2 and 3, Fanon gives an account of the lack of “rhythm” between peasant rebels and the party elite. He sees two primary reasons for this: (1) trained to be functionaries in the colonial system, the national bourgeoisie can install itself directly into existing structures of governance, leaving the colonial practico-inert unaltered; and (2) the peasantry are not organized, having no prior relation to the party and the urban proletariat. Fanon considers three solutions. The first is voluntaristic: the national bourgeoisie is to “repudiate its own nature insofar as it is bourgeois” (120; 146). The second calls for the unification of the urban party and the rural revolutionaries through a linking “native intellectual”, who makes a brief but brilliant appearance in the second chapter (99–101). This man, who has risen from the bottom, is incarcerated in the early stages of decolonization for his conspicuous application to the rebellion. Upon release, he flees to the provinces, where he rejoins his people and their struggle. Having so dramatically entered the narrative, however, he does not surface again until the fourth chapter. Or if he does, then only as the corrupted leader of the ruling postcolonial party, his humble origins forgotten as he is bent to the interests of the national bourgeoisie and neo-colonial corporations (133–4; 160–1).

The third solution is even less promising. The masses need “enlightening”; not in the sense of coming into consciousness of the enlightening nature of their praxis, but through indoctrination: “the leaders of the rising understand that they must enlighten the groups; instruct them, indoctrinate them” (108; 130); the national bourgeoisie “have been incapable of enlightening the people as a whole” (127; 153); “we must develop their [i.e. the people’s] brains, furnish them, change them, make them into human beings” (158–9; 187); “the level of consciousness of the youth must be raised; they must be enlightened” (162; 190). The doctrinaire tone seems born of frustration that the national group-in-fusion has failed to articulate its project to itself. These are rearguard measures to keep the people in line with an understanding of their circumstances that is external to them. When, at the end of the third chapter, Fanon writes that “the living expression of the nation is the moving consciousness of the whole people; it is the coherent and enlightened praxis of men and women” (165; 193), it now rings false.

The disagreement with Macey presented towards the start of this essay should now be more comprehensible. Macey appears to misunderstand the nature of the problem presented by the national bourgeoisie when it is considered in the terms of Sartre’s dialectic of seriality and group fusion. This leads him to overstate the influence of the *Critique* and to make the misleading claim that *Wretched’s* argument falls into contradiction with its intent.⁴³

⁴³ “The fundamental ambiguity of *Les Damnés de la terre* is that, whilst Fanon constantly prophesies the victory of the people, the theoretical model he adopts necessarily implies

On my reading, Fanon's account of decolonization veers from the sequence of revolutionary praxis set out in the *Critique*. In Sartre's work, after the group has broken from its seriality, it seeks to preserve its transcendence, and does so by proclaiming a mutually binding "pledge". This is a linguistic act which articulates as principles the mode of conduct discovered in immanent-transcendent praxis. It is "the eternal, frozen preservation of its rising" (436; 452–3). In *Wretched*, the third party, the protean national bourgeoisie, has not descended to the level of the people and the moment of the national pledge is being missed. Fanon's optimism does not lie in any concrete expectations, but in his hope that there yet remains the possibility for a true fusion of the group towards a substantively new national formation.

It makes sense, therefore, that he would next address the question of national culture. It is as though he must seek the bonding agent which historical conditions have not yielded of themselves. Fanon struggles to form a convincing account of a national culture that would serve this purpose. What we find is a tautological back-and-forth between the "people" who are the "fluctuating movement" (183; 215) of the nation and the native intellectual (who now appears as the artist) who has a responsibility to represent that movement to them. In practice, this seems to mean that culture has a doctrinaire function. Fanon praises Keita Fodeba's "African Dawn" on the grounds of its "unquestioned pedagogic value" (186; 220).

More promising is the conclusion. The vocabulary shifts away from enlightenment and reason and towards "Man", and a consideration of what kind of "Man" decolonization is bringing into being. Fanon is well aware that it would be banal if all he were to say is that "Man" will now be truly universal and not just a metonym of "white man". What he in fact calls for is a *qualitative* transformation of life forms, a social existence which does not repudiate "the sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward" (254; 304), but which recognizes that there is a spiritual malaise emitting from that continent's political economy, and which cannot be separated from its history of colonial brutality and its internal and external imperial wars, and particularly the ethos of unremitting production. The Third World, at all costs, must not persist with a European system in which commodity production structures civic life, must not impose "upon the brain rhythms which very quickly obliterate it and wreck it" (254; 304).

This concluding humanism, for which Fanon has been widely celebrated and which some have tried to distinguish from what they suppose to be his advocacy of violence, needs to be seen as the culmination of an attempt to think through

that the group unity on which that victory is based cannot be sustained." Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, 487.

what decolonization would lead to. It is not inclusiveness and universality within the current conjunction of world social and political relationships and capitalist life forms. It is breaking the colonial practico-inert as a material structuring of being-in-the-world, arresting the endless escalation of production for its own sake that has sustained the colonial enterprise, and producing new lives.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this essay has not been to suggest that the course of the argument of *The Wretched of the Earth* is determined by those resources drawn from the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. I have attempted, rather, to bring into focus the kind of theoretical practice taking place in it. The scale and high abstraction of Sartre's account of social transformation through dialectical reason assisted Fanon in conceptualizing the logic of decolonization across the emerging Third World, and, with this, in making general claims for that which would be required to truly break from colonialism. The idea of decolonization that this produced has remained compelling long beyond the persuasiveness of the particular substantive claims presented over the course of *Wretched*. Perhaps this indicates why so many readers are prepared to overlook the outdated doctrinaire tone adopted at moments.

The activist nature of Fanon's argument has often been grounds for dismissing it. It is claimed, for instance, that his millenarian vision blinded him to the actual problems that would afflict postcolonial nations.⁴⁴ This prevented him, say, from considering the role of Islam in postcolonial North Africa or the ruptures caused by ethnic filiation in sub-Saharan Africa. We have seen that Fanon's conception of decolonization was timely and deliberately speculative, urging his fellow decolonizers rationally to transform themselves as they transformed their

⁴⁴ Darwin comments that for Fanon "only the complete exclusion of all foreign influence from the new state was sufficient proof that decolonization had occurred. On such utopian criteria decolonization would still be an aspiration, not an accomplished fact". John Darwin, "Decolonization and End of Empire", in Robin W. Winks, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 5, *Historiography* (Oxford, 1999), 543). Shipway refers to "Fanon's at times almost-messianic vision of a decolonization that never was". Martin Shipway, *Decolonization and its Impact: A Comparative Approach to the End of the Colonial Empires* (Oxford, 2008), 6. Cooper argues that Fanon's vision of decolonization is of an ideal "True Anticolonialism", that "different groups among a colonized population might bring their own histories and their own interests to a complex engagement with colonial power is lost in a powerful rhetoric". Frederick Cooper, "The Dialectics Decolonization: Nationalism and Labor Movements in Postwar French Africa", in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, 1997), 407–8.

circumstances. Measuring this against a retrospective and heuristic conception of decolonization as the set of events that produced a plethora of sovereign nations with myriad local inertias and contradictions is to treat the molten potentiality as though it were an act of palm reading.

That his urgency remains compelling perhaps indicates that this project is not finished, even if its name is no longer “decolonization”. The challenge for future scholarship on the history of decolonization as an idea is to recover the broader field of articulations and contests over the term. Not as a field of discourse registering history, but as acts of agency attempting to intervene in history and steer a course.