

## Peter Hallward, 2010. *Fanon and Political Will*

Fifty years after his death in 1961, what remains most alive in Frantz Fanon's political theory and general philosophy? The particular categories that defined the immediate context of the last years of his life (decolonisation, nationalism, redemptive violence) belong primarily to an historical era that ended, in the 1970s, with the last victorious wars of national liberation. The central notion at work in these categories, however, is both much older than this historical sequence and surely much 'younger' than its still-limited set of political consequences. This notion is perfectly familiar, even a cliché, a notion whose widely alleged anachronism might appear to have smothered its revolutionary origins and implications. It is the notion of autonomous political *will*. More precisely, it is the theory and practice of a militant 'will of the people' conceived in terms that enable it to be both inclusive and decisive.<sup>1</sup>

This idea of a 'will of the people' is the notion that Rousseau and the Jacobins put at the divisive centre of modern politics. It is the practice that, after Hegel and Marx, Lenin confirmed as the critical element of modern revolutionary experience.<sup>2</sup> It is the norm that Fanon's own revolutionary contemporaries (Mao, Castro, Che Guevara, Giap, Mandela...) preserved as their guiding frame of reference. It is also the notion, practice and norm that has been most thoroughly forgotten, if not repressed, by the discipline that in recent decades has largely appropriated Fanon's legacy: the discipline of post-colonial studies. A preliminary requirement of any 'return to Fanon' worthy of the name must involve the forgetting of this forgetting, in order to remember an older and no doubt 'simpler' confrontation between the mobilisation of popular political will and the myriad forces that seek to pacify and 'devoluntarise' the people.

This confrontation between active volition and imposed resignation stages the central drama of Fanon's work, early and late. Connecting his early existentialist account of individual freedom with his later emphasis on patriotic duty and commitment, *volonté* or voluntary action is the term that links Fanon's psychological and his political work. Mobilisation of the will of the people quickly becomes the guiding priority of what we might call his 'political psychology.' It integrates his strategic defence of violence and 'terror' with his affirmation of a concretely 'universal humanism'. It connects his French republican inheritance and his subsequent internationalism. Mobilised and united, the unflinching will of the people explains the triumph of the Algerian revolution and anticipates its pan-African expansion; demobilised and dispersed, it clears a path towards neo-colonial reaction. The same alternatives continue to define the spectrum of anti-imperialist struggle to this day.

Fanon should be read, in short, and without apology, as one of the most insightful and uncompromising political voluntarists of the twentieth century. A glance through the formulations that recur in the texts that Fanon wrote on behalf of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) in the 1950s is enough to lend this characterisation some initial plausibility. Collected in the posthumous volume *Toward*

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<sup>1</sup> For a preliminary overview of the general concept, see Hallward, 'The Will of the People: Notes Towards a Dialectical Voluntarism', *Radical Philosophy* 155 (May 2009), 17-29.

<sup>2</sup> As far as I know, Fanon never cites Rousseau, Lenin or Mao, and his knowledge of Marx is notoriously superficial: reference to these thinkers here is justified on the basis of analogy, not influence. It's no accident that C.L.R. James, for instance, was struck by the similarities between Fanon and Rousseau. Jane Gordon explores some of these similarities in her 'Of Legitimation and the General Will: Creolizing Rousseau through Frantz Fanon', *The C.L.R. James Journal* 15:1 (Spring 2009), 17-53.

*the African Revolution*, these articles are peppered with dozens of references to the 'will of the people' and the 'national will of the oppressed peoples', their 'will to independence', their 'will to break with exploitation and contempt', and so on.<sup>3</sup> First and foremost the Algerian revolution 'testifies to the people's will', and the resulting situation is defined above all in terms of 'the armed encounter of the national will of the Algerian people and of the will to colonialist oppression of the French governments' (AR, 64, 130). Any consideration of revolutionary Algeria as Fanon describes it in the late 1950s must recognise 'the will of twelve million men; that is the only reality' (74). And as this will to independence advances towards realisation of its purpose, so then affirmation of 'a national will opposed to foreign domination' will become the 'common ideology' of the African liberation movement as a whole (153).

Fanon's voluntarism is hardly less emphatic in the approach to psychology he begins to develop in his first book, *Black Skin White Masks* (1952). If as he (twice) observes 'the tragedy of the man is that he was once a child', if the beginning of every life is always 'drowned in contingency', so then it is through the deliberate and laborious 'effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom, that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world' (BS, 180-181). There are no 'objective' factors – no ethnic or cultural inheritance, no racial essence, no historical mission – that should determine the course of such scrutiny and creation. Since in 'the world through which I travel I am endlessly creating myself', so then my only duty is to avoid 'renouncing my freedom through my choices [...]. I do not have the right to allow myself to be mired in what the past has determined. I am not the slave of the Slavery that dehumanized my ancestors' (BS, 179). Solidarity with others can only be a matter of freely assumed commitment, rather than an automatic orientation inherited by a community or a race. Fanon's goal here, after Sartre, is to 'teach people to become aware of the potentials they have forbidden themselves', to remind them of the need to 'hold oneself, like a sliver, to the heart of the world', and thereby 'to stand up to the world' (BS, 57).

In the ancient philosophical struggle that pits will versus intellect as rivals for acknowledgement as the primary faculty of the mind, Fanon's allegiance is clear. The role of an engaged intellectual or artist, first and foremost, is 'to interpret the manifest will of the people' and to help clarify, concentrate and realise it (WE, 247). The effort to understand what is currently the case is secondary in relation to a determination to prescribe what ought to be the case. 'In every age, among the people, truth is the property of the national cause. No absolute verity, no discourse on the purity of the soul, can shake this position' (WE, 50).

## I

Needless to say, like any consistent voluntarist, Fanon is critical of distorted conceptions of will that turn it into one of its several opposites – instinctive reflex, unthinking 'fervour', reckless impulse, etc. Fanon condemns a 'blind will toward freedom' (WE, 59), for instance, precisely because he recognises the minimal requirements of a consequential voluntarism. These requirements are easily derived from the concept itself (and most of them were anticipated by the first philosopher to grapple with the problem of a popular or 'general' will, Rousseau).

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<sup>3</sup> AR, 159, 113 and passim. By the same token, the only 'hope of French colonialism is to shatter the national will' (AR, 74), and 'colonialism resorts to every means to break the people's will [...]. French colonialism since 1954 has wanted nothing other than to break the will of the people, to destroy its resistance, to liquidate its hopes' (DC, 98, 101).

A consistent voluntarism requires, first, that political will indeed be considered as a matter of volition or *will*, rather than compulsion, coercion or instinct. Voluntary action is a matter of free deliberation and prescription. Political will is thought through: it subsumes a 'spontaneous' enthusiasm or rebellion in an organised mobilisation or a disciplined campaign. It affirms the primacy of a conscious decision and commitment, independent of any 'deeper' (i.e. unconscious) determination, be it biological, historical, technological...

Second, a fully or universally emancipatory account of political will – i.e. a 'humanist' account in Fanon's sense of the word – just as obviously requires that this be the general will of the *people* as such, and not of a particular group whose privileges or interests set them apart from the people.

Third, will is not just opposed to reflex or impulse: it is equally opposed to mere imagination or wish. Political will persists to the degree that it is able to realise or 'actualise' its prescription, i.e. to overcome the resistance of those opposed to that prescription. 'The colonised have this in common, that their right to constitute a people is challenged' (AR, 145), and in the face of this challenge the will towards popular self-constitution advances towards victory or defeat. Victory requires the assembly and unity of the people, and mobilisation of a force capable of vanquishing 'the enemies of the people'. Like any kind of will, political will is a matter of determination and struggle, one that either continues and prevails or else slackens and fails. The work of 'total liberation' that Fanon anticipates 'is bound to be hard and waged with iron determination [...]. The colonial peoples must redouble their vigilance and their vigour. A new humanism can be achieved only at this price' (AR, 126). Under the pressure of anti-colonial war, Fanon rediscovers the strategic principle that guided Robespierre, Lenin and Mao as they waged their own wars to end war: a truly inclusive or universal humanism will be achieved only through resolute struggle with its adversaries, and not through an extension of existing forms of tolerance, representation, or recognition.

The rest of this essay will work through Fanon's approach to these general requirements of political will, starting with the last: as his every reader knows, a version of this third requirement was forced on Fanon the moment he became aware of the colour of his skin.

## II

There are two general ways of extinguishing the will of a people. The most reliable and secure method is to lull them into a deferential passivity, such that the possibility of a voluntary insurgency never arises. Under suitable conditions, this sort of 'hegemonic' approach may only require manipulation of those ideological apparatuses – education, the media, consumption, entertainment... – required to guarantee the 'manufacture of consent.' The alternative is more direct and more abrasive, and involves the use of whatever military force is required to disperse, divide or pacify a group of people; the 'primitive accumulation' of imperial power, no less than what Marx called the primitive accumulation of capital, has almost invariably involved reliance on such force.

The colonialism that Fanon devoted his life to dismantling combines both strategies. Conquest alone allows colonialism to begin. Colonialism can only continue, however, through colonisation of the mind and the consolidation of a far-reaching 'inferiority complex'. Colonialism 'holds a people in its grip' by controlling its future and

by distorting and destroying its past, and by 'emptying the native's brain of all form and content' (WE, 210). Once established in its position of military superiority, the colonial culture produces, through a whole range of media, an unending 'series of propositions that slowly and subtly—with the help of books, newspapers, schools and their texts, advertisements, films, radio—work their way into one's mind and shape one's view of the world of the group to which one belongs' (BS, 118). Successful colonisation leads the oppressed to identify with the world view of the oppressor. 'The black Antillean is the slave of this cultural imposition. After having been the slave of the white man, he enslaves himself' (BS, 148).

Colonialism thus takes hold of a territory to the degree that it encourages 'passivity' and 'despair', if not 'resignation' or 'fatalism' among its indigenous inhabitants (DC, 82, 84). 'A belief in fatality removes all blame from the oppressor; the cause of misfortunes and of poverty is attributed to God', and the oppressed person is led to accept 'the disintegration ordained by God' and 'bows down before the settler and his lot' (WE, 54-55). Carried to its successful completion, colonial mind-control removes even the fantasy of emancipation. 'The settler's work is to make even dreams of liberty impossible for the native' (WE, 93), to the point that to will an end to colonialism involves nothing less than the libidinal equivalent of 'suicide' (WE, 211).

As doctor Fanon diagnoses it, in other words, colonialism is first and foremost a massive project to break the will of the colonised people. It is no accident that the dominant theme of colonial characterisations of the colonised is an insistence on their apparent lack of volition and self-control. Colonial racism depends on a systematic representation of the colonised population as 'the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces'. The 'native' is a being of pure instinct, of dangerous reflexes and depraved impulses (WE, 41; cf. 250). In Fanon's post-war Europe, 'the Negro has one function: that of symbolizing the lower emotions, the baser inclinations, the dark side of the soul' (BS, 147). In colonial Algeria the stakes are higher, for obvious reasons, and the 'native' impulse that comes to the fore is less an unbridled sexual appetite than a murderous belligerence. As far as the colonial authorities are concerned, 'the Algerian is a congenital impulsive', and his 'impulsiveness is largely aggressive and generally homicidal' (WE, 296-298). As described by colonial psychiatrists, Algerians are characterised by a more or less complete absence of volition and reflection, by their 'credulity' and 'persistent obstinacy', a 'mental puerility' that is 'always impulsive and aggressive', trapped in a form of life that is 'essentially vegetative and instinctive', etc. (WE, 300-301). Confronted with the native or Negro, colonialism sees a merely 'natural' rather than a social or civilised being, and concludes 'you can't get away from nature' (DC, 26). The political response to such a characterisation is predictable, and little different from the response recommended by classical (i.e. racist) European liberalism, from Locke through Burke to Tocqueville and Mill. 'It was a sub-prefect who has now become a prefect who voiced the conclusion to me', Fanon remembers. "'We must counter these natural creatures," he said, "who obey the laws of their nature blindly, with a strict, relentless ruling class. We must tame nature, not convince it." Discipline, training, mastering, and today pacifying are the words most frequently used by the colonialists in occupied territories' (WE, 303).

But for all its literally 'inhuman' brutality, colonial oppression in its classical (i.e. racist) form is undermined by one fundamental weakness which favours the eventual empowerment of the oppressed. Its brutality is, again literally, *obvious*; it is rooted more in flagrant coercion than in subtle deference. It is thus easier to judge and condemn. Whereas in non-colonised capitalist societies the hegemonic cultural and educational system, 'the structure of moral reflexes handed down from father to son', compounded by innumerable 'expressions of respect for the established order, serve to create around the exploited person an atmosphere of submission and of inhibition which lightens the task of policing considerably. In the capitalist countries a multitude of moral teachers, counsellors and "bewilderers" separate the exploited from those in power.' But in 'the colonial countries, on the contrary, the policeman and the soldier, by their immediate presence and their frequent and direct action maintain contact with the native and advise him by means of rifle butts and napalm not to budge. It is obvious here that the agents of government speak the language of pure force' (WE, 38). Colonial and racist forms of oppression thus lend themselves to conscious and deliberate or 'voluntary' forms of resistance. 'Since the racial drama is played out in the open, the black man has no time to "make it unconscious." [...] The Negro's inferiority or superiority complex or his feeling of equality is conscious. These feelings forever chill him. They make his drama' (BS, 116). The only appropriate response to such feelings is engagement in direct confrontation and struggle, rather than any attempt at refutation, re-interpretation, or re-representation (cf. DC, 51).

Fanon understood this well before the Algerian revolution began. Prior to his commitment to that revolution, however, he hadn't yet found an adequate vehicle for this anti-colonial consciousness, one that might allow the colonised to become (to quote Marx again) the 'authors and actors of their own drama.'<sup>4</sup> As a matter of course, the will of a colonised people can only become a political reality through its active mobilisation in a collective liberation struggle. The will of the people only becomes the basis of a revolutionary or emancipatory political practice to the degree that the one term informs the other: the 'people' become a political category insofar as they come to share a will to independence, and such a will is emancipatory insofar as it embraces the whole of an oppressed people. The only genuine emancipation is deliberate or voluntary self-emancipation. Fanon knows as well as Marx that 'it is the oppressed peoples who must liberate themselves.'<sup>5</sup> (By the same token, he knows that people whose liberation is thrust upon them – as with the figure of the bondsman or slave in Hegel's *Phenomenology* – remain unfree<sup>6</sup>). Decolonisation is precisely this, the conversion of an involuntary passivity into a possessed or assumed activity. Decolonisation 'transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them' (WE, 36).

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* [1847] (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1966), 109.

<sup>5</sup> AR, 105; cf. Marx, 'Rules and Administrative Regulations of the International Workingmen's Association' [1867], in *Collected Works of Marx and Engels* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975-2005), XX, 441.

<sup>6</sup> Hegel's 'Negro knows nothing of the cost of freedom, for he has not fought for it' (BS, 172).

### III

Once committed to their revolution, Fanon has confidence in the people. The people are adequate to the task of self-emancipation. This is both the presupposition of a revolutionary commitment and a lesson learned from militant experience. On the one hand, Fanon is confident that 'everything can be explained to the people, on the single condition that you really want them to understand.'<sup>7</sup> Understanding fosters autonomy. 'The more the people understand, the more watchful they become, and the more they come to realize that finally everything depends on them and their salvation lies in their own cohesion' (WE, 191). On the other hand, under the extraordinary pressure of events, 'in Algeria we have realized that the masses are equal to the problems which confront them' (WE, 193). No less than Rousseau, Fanon is confident that if the people are free to determine their own course of action, then sooner or later they will solve the problems they face.<sup>8</sup> Algeria's experience proves, Fanon argues, 'that the important thing is not that three hundred people form a plan and decide upon carrying it out, but that the whole people plan and decide even if it takes them twice or three times as long. [...] People must know where they are going, and why.' Of course, it takes time to determine a course of action, and 'the future remains a closed book so long as the consciousness of the people remains imperfect, elementary, and cloudy [...] awakening of the whole people will not come about all at once' (WE, 193-194). Nevertheless, this awakening is for Fanon both a fact and a norm: the Algerian people *are* awakening, and they *should* be trusted to decide on the course of their own trajectory. As he explains in one of the most striking passages of his book, such self-determination applies as much to post-colonial construction as it does to anti-colonial struggle:

In the same way that during the period of armed struggle each fighter held the fortune of the nation in his hand, so during the period of national construction each citizen ought to continue in his real, everyday activity to associate himself with the whole of the nation, to incarnate the continuous dialectical truth of the nation and to will the triumph of man in his completeness here and now. If the building of a bridge does not enrich the awareness of those who work on it, then that bridge ought not to be built and the citizens can go on swimming across the river or going by boat. The bridge should not be "parachuted down" from above; it should not be imposed by a *deus ex machina* upon the social scene; on the contrary it should come from the muscles and the brains of the citizens [...]. In this way, and in this way only, everything is possible (WE, 200-201).

For Fanon, then -- and this is where he is most distant from Lenin or Mao -- the people rather than their leaders or party is the only adequate subject of political will. A party has its role to play, but 'the party should be the direct expression of the masses. The party is not an administration responsible for transmitting government orders; it is the energetic spokesman and the incorruptible defender of the masses. In order to arrive at this conception of the party, we must above all rid ourselves of the very Western, very bourgeois and therefore contemptuous attitude that the masses are incapable of governing themselves' (WE, 188). For Lenin, of course, it is the party that guides the industrial proletariat who in turn guide the working classes and labouring people as a whole; the party provides the theoretical framework that allows people 'spontaneously' to recognise and learn from the lessons of their own experience.<sup>9</sup> Carried by his

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<sup>7</sup> Fanon understands the implications of the alternative position perfectly well: 'if you think that you don't need the people, and that on the contrary they may hinder the smooth running of the many limited liability companies whose aim it is to make the people even poorer, then the problem is quite clear [...]: you must keep the people out' (WE, 189).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract* 1:7, 2:3.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Vladimir Lenin, *What is to be Done?* [1902] (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1978), 154-155; Lars T. Lih, 'Lenin and the Great Awakening', in Sebastian Budgen et al., eds., *Lenin Reloaded: Towards*

commitment to the Algerian revolution, Fanon reverses the order of priority. 'While in many colonial countries it is the independence acquired by a party that progressively informs the infused national consciousness of the people, in Algeria it is the national consciousness, the collective sufferings and terrors that make it inevitable that the people must take its destiny into its own hands' (DC, 16).

Nevertheless, Fanon remains close to Lenin and Mao in his insistence that on the primacy of determination itself as the decisive element of politics: what matters is the popular *will*, precisely, rather than popular opinions, habits or culture. For Lenin, early and late, the priority is always 'to achieve unanimity of will among the vanguard of the proletariat as the fundamental condition for the success of the dictatorship of the proletariat', itself the condition of genuine popular empowerment and democracy.<sup>10</sup> Given the actual balance of class forces, 'victory over the bourgeoisie is impossible without a long, stubborn and desperate life-and-death struggle which calls for tenacity, discipline, and a single and inflexible will.'<sup>11</sup> For Mao, likewise, political initiative belongs to those whose 'unshaken conviction' and 'unceasing perseverance' enables them (to evoke one of Mao's metaphors) to 'move mountains'.<sup>12</sup> The goal is first to unify, concentrate and intensify the people's 'will to fight' against their oppressors, and then to establish a form of government that will most 'fully express the will of all the revolutionary people', if not 'the unanimous will of the nation.'<sup>13</sup>

In keeping with Rousseau's fundamental distinction between the general will of the people and the mere 'will of all'<sup>14</sup>, what is here decisive is a collective capacity to identify and will the general project or interest as such, rather than the aggregate interest or opinion of individuals as individuals. Lenin privileges the party because he conceives it as the agent most capable of willing and acting with the sort of clarity, unity and determination that political struggle requires; the proletariat, further, is that class whose economic circumstances and conditions of work (their coordination as employees of a large scale enterprise, their lack of any privately owned means of production) confront them with the truth of capitalist exploitation in its most unadulterated form, while freeing them from the 'vacillation' characteristic of small landowners and the petty bourgeoisie. The proletariat is in a position to see clearly what they are up against, in conditions that foster solidarity, discipline and resolve while discouraging compromise and reform; suitably led, they are positioned, in short, to act as the vanguard for labouring people as a whole. Inverting Lenin's distribution of roles, Fanon privileges the peasantry for much the same reasons: in the colonial situation, the peasantry is that sector of the wider population most capable of sustaining a revolutionary will.

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*a Politics of Truth* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 284-287. For Mao, likewise, 'the leading body of the Party [is] the concentrator of the will of the whole Party', which is in turn 'the representative of the interests of the masses and the concentrator of their will' (Mao Tse-Tung, 'Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party' [1945], *Selected Works* [Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1961-1977, 5 vols.], III, 209).

<sup>10</sup> Lenin, 'Preliminary Draft Resolution of the Tenth Congress of the RCP on Party Unity' [1921], *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968, one volume), 626. Via dictatorship of the proletariat, Lenin argues, democracy 'for the first time becomes democracy for the poor, democracy for the people, and not democracy for the money-bags', but precisely for this reason 'the dictatorship of the proletariat imposes a series of restrictions on the freedom of the oppressors, the exploiters, the capitalists [...]. Democracy for the vast majority of the people, and suppression by force, i.e., exclusion from democracy, of the exploiters and oppressors of the people – this is the change democracy undergoes during the transition from capitalism to communism' (Lenin, *State and Revolution* [1917], *Selected Works*, 324-325).

<sup>11</sup> Lenin, *'Left-Wing' Communism – An Infantile Disorder* [1920], *Selected Works*, 514.

<sup>12</sup> Mao, 'The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains' [1945], *Selected Works III*, 322.

<sup>13</sup> Mao, 'On New Democracy' [1940], *Selected Works II*, 352; Mao, 'On Coalition Government', *Selected Works III*, 263.

<sup>14</sup> Rousseau, *Social Contract* 2:3.

In Fanon's Algeria rather like Mao's China, it is the peasants rather than the urban workers who are best placed to 'smash all the trammels that bind them, and to rush forward along the road to liberation.'<sup>15</sup> In the colonies it is the urban working class, rather than the peasantry, that tends to vacillate under the pressure of anti-colonial struggle. Modern towns emerge here like 'little islands of the mother country' (WE, 121), and 'in the colonial territories the proletariat is the nucleus of the colonized population which has been most pampered by the colonial regime' (108). The peasant farmers, by contrast, are the first to confront the full reality of colonial oppression, and thus the first to draw the necessary consequences. 'The starving peasant, outside the class system, is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays. For him there is no compromise, no possible coming to terms; colonization and decolonization are simply a question of relative strength' (WE, 61). In colonial Algeria, unlike capitalist Europe, the peasants are the most 'disciplined element', the most 'virtuous' members of the people, in more or less exactly Rousseau's sense of the term. 'In their spontaneous movements the country people as a whole remain disciplined and altruistic. The individual stands aside in favour of the community' (112), whose members stand 'ready to sacrifice themselves completely' (127).

The revolution will thus find its first and most reliable partisans in the countryside. 'The country districts represent inexhaustible reserves of popular energy' (WE, 128), and here 'the peasantry precisely constitutes the only spontaneously revolutionary force of the country' (WE, 123). When isolated urban revolutionaries and intellectuals finally turn their attention to the rural areas they 'discover that the mass of the country people have never ceased to think of the problem of their liberation except in terms of violence, in terms of taking back the land from the foreigners, in terms of national struggle, and of armed insurrection. It is all very simple' (WE, 127). By the same token, when the revolution spreads from the countryside to the towns, it initially takes hold in those districts populated by destitute refugees from the countryside. Like their rural cousins, urban shackdwellers know that struggle offers the only way out, and 'by militant and decisive action they will discover the path that leads to nationhood' (WE, 129-130).

Fanon's confidence in the people, then, is not unconditional. He is confident in the people only insofar as they actively will and determine the course of their own political destiny. He has confidence in the people insofar as this involves sharing in their *self*-confidence, in the cultivation of their own political 'virtue' (to use Rousseau's term). In the case of an oppressed or colonised people, this means that affirmation of the category of the people is inseparable from participation in their will to self-emancipation. If the measure of successful decolonisation is given by the fact that 'a whole social structure is being changed from the bottom up', the 'extraordinary importance of this change is that it is willed, called for, demanded' (WE, 35-36). No other kind of change has any chance of success. Fanon knows as well as Lenin that you cannot 'turn society upside down [...] if you have not decided from the very beginning [...] to overcome all the obstacles that you will come across in so doing' (WE, 37).

In colonial Algeria, of course, these obstacles were first and foremost a matter of military force. Everything turns here on the moment 'when a decisive confrontation brought the will to national independence of the people and the dominant power face to face' (DC, 74). In Algeria and other European settler colonies, victory in *this* confrontation depended on a willingness to overcome the main basis of this power –

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<sup>15</sup> Mao, 'Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan' [1927], *Selected Works* I, 23-24.



ruthless and systematic political violence – on its own terms. Educated by the experience of fruitless decades of negotiated 'reforms', 'it is the intuition of the colonized masses that their liberation must, and can only, be achieved by force' (WE, 73). The Algerian revolutionaries thus find themselves obliged to resort to terror for same reason as the Jacobins in 1793 or the Bolsheviks in 1918: by 1956, the 'revolutionary leadership found that if it wanted to prevent the people from being gripped by terror it had no choice but to adopt forms of terror which until then it had rejected' (DC, 40; cf. WE, 37). Since 'colonialism is not a thinking machine nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties', since 'it is violence in its natural state', so then the partisans of the national liberation struggles came to the conclusion that 'it will only yield when confronted with greater violence' (WE, 61).

#### IV

Fanon and his contemporaries came to this conclusion at a time when colonial violence was both far more brutal than anti-colonial violence (as epitomised in the gruesome massacres carried out at Sétif, Moramanga, Sharpeville, and so on [WE, 72; cf. 89]) and far from invincible (as indicated by the remarkable victories won in the 1950s by 'people's war' in Vietnam, Cuba, and Algeria itself). Fanon reached his conclusions at a time when he was still confident that 'there is no colonial power today which is capable of adopting the only form of contest which has a chance of succeeding, namely, the prolonged establishment of large forces of occupation' (WE, 74). It would be a mistake to generalise Fanon's specific strategic emphasis here. Several familiar components of his account of the national liberation struggle apply more broadly, however, to an account of voluntarist political practice in general.

First of all, of course, political will proceeds through struggle against an enemy, a difficulty or an injustice. By definition, there is no will in the absence of constraint or resistance. Like it or not, I find myself thrown into a world structured in dominance and oppression, 'in which I am summoned into battle; a world in which it is always a question of annihilation or triumph' (BS, 178). A decision to participate in the struggle against colonial oppression already marks a critical stage in the process that 'expels the fear, the trembling, the inferiority complex, from the flesh of the colonised' (AR, 151; cf. DC, 19). Willingness to fight the 'superior' or 'master race' is already an immediate assertion of equality that undercuts the older value system. In combat, 'the native discovers that his life, his breath, his beating heart are the same as those of the settler [...]. All the new, revolutionary assurance of the native stems from [this]. For if, in fact, my life is worth as much as the settler's, his glance no longer shrivels me up nor freezes me, and his voice no longer turns me into stone' (WE, 45). Once it begins, the priority is simply to 'intensify the armed struggle' until justice prevails. 'All attempts at diversion by the adversary must be quelled' (AR, 162). Confronted by a colonial power, 'we must cut off all her avenues of escape, asphyxiate her without pity, kill in her every attempt at domination' (AR, 130). In such a situation, appeals to 'peaceful negotiation' and 'international mediation' are only so many attempts to confuse the issue.

More importantly, participation in struggle unites its participants and thus constitutes them as *a* people. The goal of anti-colonial struggle is not reformation or improvement of colonial situation but its elimination through 'the grandiose effort of a people, which had been mummified, to rediscover its own genius, to reassume its history and assert its sovereignty' (AR, 83-84). Victory in such a struggle 'not only consecrates the triumph of the people's rights; it also gives to that people consistency, coherence, and homogeneity' (WE, 292; cf. AR, 102-103). This capacity to assemble

and to form voluntary and cohesive associations is a central feature in any account of political will, and a large part of the anti-colonial project involves determination of 'the precise points at which the peoples, the men and the women, could meet, help one another, build in common' (AR, 178). As a rule, 'the masses should be able to meet together, discuss, propose, and receive directions' (WE, 195). Everything from the distribution of radio sets across to the countryside to the development of suitably patriotic forms of art and literature should contribute to 'the assembling of the people, a summoning together for a precise purpose. Everything works together to awaken the native's sensibility and to make unreal and unacceptable the contemplative attitude, or the acceptance of defeat.'<sup>16</sup>

National liberation can only be achieved by the people as a whole. Fanon has no more sympathy than Lenin for merely 'terroristic' or 'ultra-leftist' agitation undertaken by a neo-Blanquist clique, but he knows better than Lenin that 'an unceasing battle must be waged to prevent the party from ever becoming a willing tool in the hands of a leader' (WE, 184). Whatever is decided, 'the success of the decision which is adopted depends upon the coordinated, conscious effort of the whole of the people' (WE, 199): leaders and organisers exist to facilitate and clarify the process of making a decision, but not to take it themselves. 'No leader, however valuable he may be, can substitute himself for the popular will' (WE, 205). On the contrary, 'to hold a responsible position in an underdeveloped country is to know that in the end everything depends on the education of the masses.' To educate the masses politically, Fanon explains, is simply 'to try, relentlessly and passionately, to teach the masses that everything depends on them' (WE, 197). Fanon demands a similar commitment to direct participation on the part of that group whose 'spontaneous orientation' appears to favour detachment: intellectuals, artists, writers, who must all 'understand that nothing can replace the reasoned, irrevocable taking up of arms on the people's side.'<sup>17</sup> A 'national literature' worthy of the name can only be 'a literature of combat, in the sense that it calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation', and presents their 'will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space' (WE, 240). The popular struggle is not to be 'saluted as an act of heroism but as a continuous, sustained action, constantly being reinforced' (AR, 151). Although the former may prepare the ground for the latter, the temporality of political will is more fundamentally a matter of constancy and accumulation than it is of transformative instants or leaps.

Collective participation in violent struggle, however, certainly does involve crossing a point of no-return. As Saint-Just and Robespierre learned in their own way, there is no more secure a basis for a patriotic or general will than participation in a war of collective salvation in which the only possible outcome is victory or death. 'You could be sure of a new recruit when he could no longer go back into the colonial system' (WE, 85), and thus 'the practice of violence binds [the people] together as a whole [...]. The armed struggle mobilizes the people; that is to say, it throws them in one way and in one direction' (WE, 93). Thus thrown, the only 'logical end of this will to struggle is the total liberation of the national territory' (AR, 43). For the guerrilla soldiers

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<sup>16</sup> WE, 243; cf. DC, 68. 'We believe that the conscious and organized undertaking by a colonized people to re-establish the sovereignty of that nation constitutes the most complete and obvious cultural manifestation that exists' (WE, 245), precisely because (active, self-determining) culture is distinct from (passive, 'objective') custom or folklore (cf. WE, 204, 224, 233).

<sup>17</sup> WE, 226. It wouldn't be hard, of course, to trace the neo-Bolshevik streak in Fanon's psycho-aesthetic preferences, from the admiration he expresses for that self-possessed 'serenity' with which young Vietnamese 'fanatics' faced French firing squads (BS, 177) to his portrait of the ALN's major Chawki, a man with almost 'murderous hardness' in his eyes, a man 'difficult to deceive, to get around', who cannot be intimidated or distracted (AR, 181).

themselves, the solidarity born of an irreversible commitment sustains brooks no compromise. 'Henceforward, the interests of one will be the interests of all, for in concrete fact *everyone* will be discovered by the troops, *everyone* will be massacred—or *everyone* will be saved. The motto "look out for yourself," the atheist's method of salvation, is in this context forbidden' (WE, 47). There is no alternative to direct collective action. Since (for reasons explained by Rousseau) 'power can be transferred but not will,'<sup>18</sup> there is no substitute or representative who might take the place of the people themselves. This is a lesson that Lumumba learned to his cost, at the end of his own life-and-death struggle, when he made the fatal mistake of making an appeal to the United Nations (an institution that serves to 'crush the will to independence of people') rather than to his own loyal partisans, or to allies established through a genuine 'friendship of combat' (AR, 195-196).

Such self-reliance points to another basic feature of a voluntarist approach: its commitment to the here and now, and its consequent rejection of terms mediated through deferral, 'reform' or 'development'. What is at stake is a claim to that 'independence which will allow the Algerian people to take its destiny wholly in hand' (AR, 101), all at once, without waiting for recognition or approval from the colonial master. The goal is not to reform the colonial situation but to abolish it. The FLN does not seek to incorporate colonial 'modernisation' as a difficult but necessary chapter in the development of the nation: 'instead of integrating colonialism, conceived as the birth of a new world, in Algerian history, we have made of it an unhappy, execrable accident' (AR, 101). For the FLN, then, 'bargaining of any kind is unthinkable' (AR, 62), and 'this refusal of progressive solutions, this contempt for the "stages" that break the revolutionary torrent and cause the people to unlearn the unshakable will to take everything into their hands at once in order that everything may change, constitutes the fundamental characteristic of the struggle of the Algerian people.'<sup>19</sup> The will of the people, where one exists, not only demands but incarnates an unconditional sovereignty.

In this respect at least, Fanon's position might be better described as neo-Jacobin than as neo-Bolshevik: for Fanon, compared with Lenin, the exercise of political will is more fully independent of an 'objective' historical development, of any apparent laws or stages of economic development. Yes, says Fanon, 'decolonisation is proceeding, but it is rigorously false to pretend and to believe that this decolonisation is the fruit of an objective dialectic which more or less rapidly assumes the appearance of an absolutely inevitable mechanism' (AR, 170). Ultimately, there is nothing 'beneath' the will of the people that might guide its course. There are no historical or economic norms to which it must conform. Fanon offers no excuse or alibi: 'sooner or later a people gets the government it deserves' (WE, 198). Everything depends on us, and on 'the firmness of our commitment' (AR, 172).

This means, furthermore, that the self-determination of the will is itself a sufficient guide to action. Considered on its own terms, to will involves a 'total' and 'sincere' commitment to one's experience, without reserve, without second-guessing, without reflection upon unconscious or ulterior motives, mitigating circumstances, etc. This is the real reason for Fanon's famous objection, in *Black Skin White Masks*, to Sartre's interpretation of negritude as a merely transitional moment in a dialectic that

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<sup>18</sup> Rousseau, *Social Contract* 2.1.

<sup>19</sup> AR, 103. A similar determination is characteristic of what Fanon calls the 'Third World' state of mind: 'the flagrant refusal to compromise and the tough will that sets itself against getting tied up are reminiscent of the behaviour of proud, poverty-stricken adolescents, who are always ready to risk their necks in order to have the last word. All this leaves Western observers dumbfounded' (WE, 82).

subsumes it. Fanon is no less convinced than Sartre himself of the essential freedom and autonomy of consciousness. But in his critique of negritude as a form of consciousness *determined* by its place in a wider logic of development, Sartre forgets that 'a consciousness committed to experience is ignorant, has to be ignorant, of the essences and the determinations of its being'. Such a consciousness will not recognise any rationale for its experience that might figure as deeper than its own conscious self-determination.<sup>20</sup> On both the individual and the collective level, such 'wilful ignorance' is an irreducible aspect of the practical primacy of the will. On both levels, 'nothing is more unwelcome than the commonplace: "You'll change, my boy; I was like that too when I was young... you'll see, it will all pass."' The dialectic that brings necessity into the foundation of my freedom drives me out of myself' (BS, 103), just as submission to the logic of historical or economic 'development' drives the newly liberated nation back into the coils of necessity. Rather than submit to what is feasible, to what circumstances permit, the first duty of revolutionary activists is to commit to their vision and consolidate their will to achieve it – in Fanon's case, 'to turn the absurd and the impossible inside out and hurl a continent against the last ramparts of colonial power' (AR, 181).

It's no accident, finally, that Fanon's work should be concerned with both the individual and collective dimensions of political will. Willing (as voluntarists from Rousseau to Lenin appreciate) is an individual activity, but *political* will only begins with an individual's voluntary commitment to and participation in a collective project. Confirming Marx's point about the need to 'educate the educators' (i.e. to recognise the full 'coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing')<sup>21</sup>, Fanon observes that 'the thesis that men change at the same time that they change the world has never been so manifest as it now is in Algeria' (DC, 18). There can be no waiting for the political process to transform the individuals needed to sustain it (cf. WE, 304-305). As Rousseau might say, civic *vertu* is not first a public concern and only subsequently a private one; virtue is precisely the free and deliberate alignment of the private with the public, of the individual with the *patrie*. From the beginning, the project of national liberation involves an existential choice. 'Every Algerian faced with the new system of values introduced by the Revolution is compelled to define himself, to take a position, to choose'. Participation in the revolution thus triggers a literal renaissance: a new 'person is born, assumes his autonomy, and becomes the creator of his own values' (DC, 83). In this sense, 'the liberation of the individual does not follow national liberation. An authentic national liberation exists only to the precise degree to which the individual has irreversibly begun his own liberation' (AR, 103).

## V

In keeping with this voluntarist logic, the central sections of *The Wretched of the Earth* are best read, I think, as an outline of the basic steps involved in the constitution of a general or political will, i.e. the assertion and assumption of a disciplined collective project. 'An underdeveloped people must prove, by its fighting power, its ability to set itself up as a nation, and by the purity of every one of its acts, that it is, even to the smallest detail, the most lucid, the most self-controlled people' (DC, 12).

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<sup>20</sup> Sartre, in other words, has failed to live up to his own insistence on the autonomous transcendence of consciousness: if Sartre's diagnosis of negritude is correct, Fanon argues, then 'it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me' (BS, 102-103; Fanon is referring to Sartre's 1948 essay 'Black Orpheus').

<sup>21</sup> Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', §3.

The constitution of a general will begins with an initial moment of voluntary association and commitment, the 'spontaneous' assertion of national solidarity. Such an explosion of emancipatory revolt is marked by elation and enthusiasm. 'Every native who takes up arms is a part of the nation which from henceforward will spring to life [...]. They hold one doctrine only: to act in such a way that the nation may exist' (WE, 131). This moment of irreversible commitment is essential, and what follows is in a sense only a matter of discovering how best to sustain it. 'In undertaking this onward march, the people legislates, finds itself, and wills itself to sovereignty. In every corner that is thus awakened from colonial slumber, life is lived at an impossibly high temperature' (WE, 132-133).

Spontaneous solidarity and commitment, however, has its limits both in time and space. A second stage is required, in the face of colonial counter-insurgency, to convert local and immediate liberation to national and lasting independence. This is the moment of organisation and discipline – the moment, forever associated with Lenin's legacy, of 'iron determination'. Colonial machine guns and napalm force the popular mobilisation to change its tactics. The 'spontaneous impetuosity which is determined to settle the fate of the colonial system immediately is condemned, in so far as it is a doctrine of instantaneity, to self-repudiation' (WE, 134). If it's to prevail, the struggle must convert a local 'peasant revolt' into a coordinated 'revolutionary war' (135).

It is especially important to preserve the organised unity of the people and the national will to independence in the face of the next turn in the colonial screw. Confronted by a more disciplined adversary, the colonial or neo-colonial power reverts to the old strategy of divide and rule: it makes minor concessions here, hands out political favours there, while cracking down on 'isolated extremists' (WE, 138-140). Those waging the struggle 'must not waver. They must not imagine that the end is already won' (WE, 141). If they are sufficiently organised and disciplined, the people will be able to cope with the inevitable betrayals that accompany victory over the immediate enemy.

On this point, Fanon's last book testifies to some ambivalence. On the one hand, he reiterates his confidence in popular autonomy. 'When the people have taken violent part in the national liberation they will allow no one to set themselves up as "liberators" [...]. Yesterday they were completely irresponsible; today they mean to understand everything and make all decisions. Illuminated by violence, the consciousness of the people rebels against any pacification' (WE, 94-95). On the other hand, however, such illumination is a transitional phase in the dialectic of national self-determination. Memory of the national liberation struggle does not itself preclude the treachery of the post-colonial bourgeoisie. For Fanon no less than Rousseau or Robespierre, a popular or general will faces only one genuinely lethal threat: its corruption by the private interests of the rich and privileged. Fanon is insistent: 'we must repeat, it is absolutely necessary to oppose vigorously and definitively the birth of a national bourgeoisie and a privileged caste' (WE, 200). On the eve of anti-colonial victory in 1961, Fanon rediscovers a lesson learned by Lenin in the wake an anti-capitalist victory in 1917: in order to sustain a truly inclusive will of the people, in order to establish the rule of genuine democracy, the people must first smash its bourgeois simulacrum. Confronted with bourgeois betrayal, the only solution is a return to Lenin's point of departure. 'The combined effort of the masses led by a party and of intellectuals who are highly conscious and armed with revolutionary principles ought to bar the way to this useless and harmful middle class' (175), and thereby guarantee, by all means necessary, 'restoration of the country to the sacred hands of the people' (166). In the end, a struggle which 'mobilizes all classes

of the people and which expresses their aims and their impatience, which is not afraid to count almost exclusively on the people's support, will of necessity triumph' (246).

As anyone can see, fifty years after Fanon's death, a struggle which fears or fails to count on such support is sure to lose out to the neo-colonial forces that continue to shape our world.<sup>22</sup> Fanon's account of political will is limited, no doubt, by the particular circumstances under which it was devised. To some extent, at least, these circumstances encouraged him to qualify (rather than exaggerate) the voluntarist orientation of his approach. Under the pressure of a 'manichean' struggle, Fanon sometimes yields to the temptation of conceiving decolonisation in terms of an abrupt replacement (a 'total, complete, and absolute substitution' [WE, 35]) rather than a deliberate transformation. So long as the oppressors can be conceived as 'strangers in our midst', so then it might seem that their mere 'removal' or 'abolition' will eliminate oppression itself (WE, 40-41). Again like Lenin, Fanon's insistence on the 'invincible' will-power of the people risks converting affirmation of this power into its opposite – a quasi-automatic reflex, the guarantee of an 'inevitable' or 'definite' victory.<sup>23</sup> Whereas Lenin's conception of political will is marked by compromises with what he takes to be the determining force of historical development, Fanon sometimes goes too far in the opposite direction. In so far as he mainly conceives of oppression in simplified or 'undifferentiated' terms, grounded on the model of foreign military conquest, so then the solution he proposes suffers from symmetrical limitations.

Of course, Fanon was the first to understand that 'in an initial phase, it is the action, the plans of the occupier that determine the centres of resistance around which a people's will to survive becomes organised' (DC, 32). Fanon's struggle was directed against a violent settler regime; today, in most places, the primary mechanisms of oppression have taken on a different form. Fanon was wrong to believe that, as a general rule, 'between oppressors and oppressed everything can be solved by force' (WE, 72), but he was right and remains right to remind us that imperial and neo-imperial relations are founded primarily in violence. He was and remains right to insist that, in the end, only the determined and united will of the people offers any means of overcoming such violence.

If we've learned anything in the fifty years since Fanon's death, however, we've learned that the will to transform these relations needn't be bound by an obligation to fight on their terms, or by their means. Confronted with the legacy and persistence of colonial domination and capitalist exploitation, the fundamental political question remains: are there, or are there not, 'enough people on this earth resolved to impose reason on this unreason' (DC, 18)?

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<sup>22</sup> There can be no arguing with Fanon when he insists that, faced with the blackmail of neoliberal 'modernisation', 'we should flatly refuse the situation to which the Western countries wish to condemn us. Colonialism and imperialism have not paid their score when they withdraw their flags and their police forces from our territories. For centuries the capitalists have behaved in the underdeveloped world like nothing more than war criminals. Deportations, massacres, forced labour, and slavery have been the main methods used by capitalism to increase its wealth, its gold or diamond reserves, and to establish its power.' The formerly colonised peoples need to remember what they are entitled to, what they are 'due' – and the colonising capitalist powers need to remember 'that in fact *they must pay*' (WE, 100-103).

<sup>23</sup> See for instance DC, 19; AR, 169; WE, 84, 88.

**Abbreviations:**

BS: *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952], trans. Charles Lam Markmann [1967]. London: Pluto, 2008.

DC: *A Dying Colonialism* [1959], trans. Haakon Chevalier. Pelican Books 1970. [Translation of *L'An cinq de la révolution algérienne*, 1959].

WE: *Wretched of the Earth* [1961], trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove, 1968.

AR: *Toward the African Revolution* [1964], trans. Haakon Chevalier. New York, Grove Press, 1967.