

Is Decolonisation Always a Violent Phenomenon?

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SEHAR SHAHERYAR, MAY 9 2020

Based on his experience of the Algerian War of Independence, Frantz Fanon concluded in his seminal work *The Wretched of the Earth* that “decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon” (1961, p.27). This assertion has been critiqued for glorifying violence and has also been compared and challenged by proponents of non-violence. Gandhi also experienced and spearheaded decolonisation, but represents a vastly differing perspective, and according to Priyamvada Gopal, a more socially acceptable method of resistance (2013, p.115). However, Fanon lays out a convincing argument for why decolonisation and violence go hand in hand and instead dismisses non-violent resistance as the preservation of the capitalist, colonialist state (1961, p.48). Frazer and Hutchings show Fanon’s analysis of colonisation to be structuralist – he sees colonisation as a process that embeds new structures, rooted in white supremacy, into society that will need to be replaced (2008, p.95).

This essay will seek to explore Fanon’s justifications for violence, focusing on his argument that ‘violence is the only language spoken by the colonist’ and that violence is the only way to respond to an inherently violent system, the way in which non-violence only seeks to empower the elites and the idea of violence as a cleansing force for colonised people (1961 p.66). His arguments will be compared to contexts outside of Algeria, specifically in relation to Gandhi and a 21st century example. Ultimately, it will be argued that for true decolonisation, violence in some form is necessary, as thorough decolonisation will never be on the terms of the coloniser, or indeed the national bourgeoisies. Fanon’s argument is not perfect; however it is clear that he does not advocate for arbitrary violence, but for a radical overthrow of repressive regimes that rely on psychological and physical violence. The lessons from Fanon about the futility of assimilation and non-violence can and should be applied in the modern age.

The key theme in ‘On Violence’ is that the act of colonialism, and the maintenance of a colony depends on violence, with the natives and colonists ‘first encounter... marked by violence’ (1961, p.28). In this Manichean system, the two sides are diametrically opposed, and any colonial regime relies on a power imbalance and has no interest or desire to engage in reason or emotional arguments. Fanon argues that decolonisation is the replacing of one ‘species of men’ with another, and there must therefore be a change to the entire *tabula rasa* and structure of society (1961, p.27). Historical examples have demonstrated that colonial rule cannot be divorced from violence – even attempts at winning ‘hearts and minds’ of the subjects are inaccurate and disguise the violence and coercion that occurred (Dixon, 2009, p.376). Policies such as hearts and minds were indicative of a changing power dynamic, in which the colonist realised that natives would need to be co-opted, for example with locally-recruited counter insurgent forces (Dixon, 2009, p.359). This acknowledged the resentment of the repressed natives, and Dixon argues that counter-insurgency methods were deemed by the colonists to be successful examples of ‘minimum force’ (2009, p.353). The fact that the most passive version of colonialism still required brutality and repression demonstrates that Fanon is correct in arguing that the colonial system is dependent on violence.

On the other side, Gandhi demonstrates the merits of non-violence. The principle of Gandhi’s Satyagraha is difficult to accurately define and translate, but it broadly describes the inner purification of the soul through truth and non-violence, which is the foundation for the establishment of Swaraj (Chandel, 2014, p.135). Gandhi’s commitment is clear when in 1922 he suspended his movement after 23 policemen were burned to death during the Chauri Chaura incident, in protest of the violence (Loomba, 2014, p.22). Instead the protestors were characterised as being criminal, rioting peasants. Gandhi instead suggests that natives should ‘psychically submit’ to attacks, and that it is not an example of capitulation (Loomba, 2014, p.25). Clearly, this is submitting to the existing structure and shows the

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paradox of Gandhi's vision. In this scenario, the native will change the status-quo by demonstrating the brutality of the system, as though the coloniser was not already aware. Fanon entirely rejects the idea that change can be delivered in this hierarchical, racialised system. Non-violence of the natives does not change the violence of the colonial structure.

The events and aftermath of Partition are undeniable evidence that the Indian decolonisation process was violent. A 1942 documentary showed British soldiers attacking protestors, with the commentary: "The Indian people have never ceased to defy British authority, whether enforced by Soldier's bayonets or Policemen's batons".[1] To characterise Indian independence as a product of non-violence ignores the struggles, suffering and deaths of those who violently revolted and protested. Therefore, whilst Gandhi's movement was certainly based on the rhetoric of non-violence, the decolonisation of India was anything but. The relevance of non-violence is brought into question with Gandhi himself insisting that non-violence was not just a strategy, but instead an absolute moral position (Loomba, 2014, p.20). Using India as a case study, it is clear that the use of violence was key to fighting colonial powers and that non-violence played a very minor role in the overall process of decolonisation, vindicating Fanon and showing Gandhi's approach to be more significant rhetorically than in practise.

Fanon is clear that true national liberation will not come from the elites, including the intellectuals and political parties. This is because they are not wedded to the idea of revolution in the same way as the desperate proletariat (Fanon, 1961, p.46). The colonised intellectual has been indoctrinated by white supremacy, a structure upheld through violent means and is therefore willing to appeal to the rationality of the coloniser – which as previously discussed is not an option for true liberation (Fanon, 1961, p.34). On the other hand, the truly colonised person needs the land and bread for their survival and have nothing to lose in seeking this, and are therefore willing to risk their life. Unlike the intellectual, the majority of natives do not want to assimilate, or change the settler's position, they want to change the settler's place, by taking the land (Fanon, 1961, p.47). In fact, the bourgeoisie begin talking about non-violence as a signal to the colonial elites that they have shared economic incentives and they are open to negotiations. Singh contextualises this in India and explains that the proponents of non-violence were often the middle and rich classes, but that the poor, landless and tribal embodied the idea of land and bread that Fanon wrote about (2007, p.350). Referring to Fanon's question about 'bread and land', it is clear that non-violence led by elites neglects the proletariat who are the true proponents of radical, systematic change. The violence of non-violence is that it ignores class-based dynamics and the disproportionate violence inflicted on the most vulnerable in society. (Singh, 2007, p.350).

Furthermore, Fanon sees violence as a necessary phenomenon because it acts as a cleansing force (1961, p.74). Colonialism is also dependent on violence of the mind, by making natives believe in the racial hierarchies (Fanon, 1961, p.33). Not only does violence physically remove the coloniser, but it unifies the people, it is an inclusive act that restores the native's self-respect. Violence in the colonial context includes relationships other than the native/coloniser dynamic, such as violence between tribes or different ethnic group. In the process of decolonisation, a common enemy is found, and this also lays the foundation of a unified postcolonial state. Even the intellectuals, who previously sought patronage in the colonial system, begin to look at their fellow natives as brothers and sisters, and take pride in traditional institutions such as village assemblies (Fanon, 1961, p.36).

However, this argument faces criticism as violence in this context is about a spiritual reawakening, rather than structural change and can therefore be seen to be an example of arbitrary violence. For example, Gandhi agrees about the impact of colonialism on the Indian psyche, and his version of decolonisation also meant an overhaul of the native's identity. However, with the idea of Satyagraha and Ahimsa, Gandhi's solution is more introspective and dependent on inner strength and purification (Fazer and Hutching, 2015, p.8). Arendt criticises Fanon's approach as being a 'libidinal' argument, that focuses on a natural urge and strength, and therefore makes violence an emotional occurrence rather than a rational one (Frazer and Hutching, 2008, p.103). Ultimately however, Fanon does not advocate for unconstrained violence, and his experience in dealing with the psychological impact of violence on both victims and perpetrators demonstrates that he is aware of the negative impact of violence. The violence that Fanon describes has a purpose – it allows the natives to free themselves of their 'inferiority complex' and it means that they will 'set themselves up as the liberators (Fanon, 1961, p.74). In reality, it is difficult to find examples of violence being used as a successful cleansing force. In his chapter 'Colonial War and Mental Disorders, Fanon describes the long-term psychological damage that witnessing and participating in violence has on individuals and society in Algeria

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(1961). Paranoia and distrust are common themes in the examples that he gives, and it is therefore difficult to see how to reconcile violence as a cleansing force with the damaging impact that it would inevitably have on a post-colonial society.

It is also necessary to examine whether Fanon's thesis is applicable in the modern age. Gopal demonstrates how Maoists in India's central regions see their struggle for autonomy from India as a colonial struggle against a democracy that acts as a colonial power (2013). Here, peaceful methods which utilised the structures of the state failed to materialise any gains for the tribal groups, for example the buildings of dams on the Narmada River that occurred despite opposition from tribal groups (Gopal, 2013, p.117). This therefore led to the feeling that change could only be achieved through violent overthrow of what is seen to be the 'colonial regime', which involved kidnappings, murders and other terror attempts. However, as Balagopal argues, here neither violence nor peaceful methods resulted to change (in Gopal, 2013, p.125). This demonstrates the limitation of the view that 'decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon' as it assumes that decolonisation is always a possibility. 20th century decolonisation was in a time period of mass revolt and a changing global order, but in the modern age when colonialism is more subtle than direct empire, it is difficult to see the benefits from violence or non-violence, when the targets of the violence are less accessible. As Balagopal summaries, you can hold a gun against a landlord, but not the Indo-US Nuclear Deal (Gopal, 2013, p.125). Therefore, it is unrealistic to use Fanon's thesis as a normative tool in the modern age, as the structure and meaning of colonial states has developed.

To conclude, it is clear that in the cases of 20th century decolonisation, violence was an unavoidable means to overthrowing a violent system. The structure of the colonial state was inherently violent, whether or not native elites were co-opted into the leadership. Whilst the principles of Gandhi and Fanon have some similarities such as a desire to revert to the true pre-colonial 'self', it is clear that non-violence was and is ineffective in creating large-scale structural change. Non-violence movements failed to deal with the fact that 'violence is the only language understood by the coloniser' (Fanon, 1961, p.66). Anti-colonial violence as described by Fanon is not intended to be senseless, but it has a purpose of freeing the body and the mind. Whilst there is a valid critique over the effectiveness of violence as a cleansing force, it is clear that Fanon's interpretation includes violence as a necessary evil that requires self-discipline. Whether this can be achieved without descending into barbarism is another question. It is also clear that 21st century examples of repression cannot be answered with 20th century solutions to colonisation.

Note

[1] Civil Disobedience 1942 – March of Time!. prod. Time Inc. Film. 1942

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