

## FANON AND POLITICAL WILL<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** The most important component of Fanon's political psychology is the notion of emancipatory political will. In the context of Algeria's national liberation struggle, Fanon develops an account of the militant 'will of the people' that warrants analysis in terms drawn from the legacies of Rousseau, Lenin and Mao.

**KEYWORDS:** Fanon; Will; Political Philosophy

The categories that defined the immediate context of Fanon's last years and publications—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 no doubt much 'younger' than its still-limited set of political consequences. Although its opponents had already sought to consign this notion to the dustbin of conceptual history well before Fanon himself came to rework it, its real significance is still oriented towards the future.

What is this familiar notion that has become almost unrecognisable in our ultra-capitalist age, an age marked by absolute commodification and 'humanitarian' imperialism? It is the notion of autonomous political will. More precisely, it is the theory and practice of an emancipatory 'will of the people' conceived in terms that enable it to be both decisive and inclusive.

This 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 central element of modern revolutionary experience.<sup>2</sup> It is the practice that Fanon's own revolutionary contemporaries (Mao, Castro, Che Guevara, Giap, Mandela...) preserved as their guiding frame of reference. It is also the notion that has been most thoroughly

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1. A slightly earlier and substantially shorter version of this essay first appeared in Nigel Gibson (ed.), *Living Fanon: Global Perspectives*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

2. Reference to these thinkers here is justified on the basis of analogy and pertinence, rather than direct influence.

forgotten if not repressed, in both theory and practice, by the discipline that in recent decades has largely appropriated Fanon's legacy: the discipline of postcolonial studies. A preliminary requirement of any new 'return to Fanon' worthy of the name must involve the forgetting of this forgetting, in order to remember a much older 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* [will]' is the term that links his psychological and his political work. Mobilisation of the will of the people is the guiding priority of what we might call his 'political psychology'. It integrates his strategic defence of 'terror' with his affirmation of a fully and concretely 'universal humanism'. It connects his French republican inheritance and his anti-colonial internationalism. Mobilised and united, the indomitable will of the people explains the triumph of the Algerian revolution and anticipates its pan-African expansion; demobilised and dispersed, it yields in the face of neo-colonial reaction. The same alternatives continue to define the terms of anti-imperialist struggle to this day, from Haiti to Palestine. Fanon should be read, in short, as one of the most insightful and uncompromising political voluntarists of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

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 lends this characterisation some initial plausibility. Collected in the posthumous volume *Toward 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>4</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, Fanon insists, must recognise 'the will of twelve million men; that is the only reality' (AR, 74). And as this will to independence advances towards realisation of its purpose, so then affirmation of 'a national will opposed to foreign domination' has become and will remain the 'common ideology' of the African liberation movement as a whole (AR, 153).

Fanon's voluntarism is hardly less emphatic in the approach to psychology he begins

3. The most pointed critique of Fanon's voluntarism, written from the perspective of the people's war in Vietnam, remains Nguyen Nghe, 'Frantz Fanon et les problèmes de l'indépendance', *La Pensée*, no. 107, February 1963, pp. 23-36; cf. Neil Lazarus, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990, pp. 8-17. More sympathetic recent readings of this aspect of Fanon's work include Nigel Gibson's *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination*, London, Wiley-Blackwell, 2003, pp. 181, 202 and passim, and Ato Sekyiotu's *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 171.

4. 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).

to develop in his first book, *Black Skin White Masks* (1952). If as Fanon (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 is a matter of freely assumed commitment, rather than an automatic orientation inherited by a community. If then ‘the question of practical solidarity with a given past ever arose for me, it did so only to the extent to which I was committed to myself and to my neighbour to fight for all my life and with all my strength so that never again would a people on the earth be subjugated. It was not the black world that laid down my course of conduct’ (BS, 177), but rather my course of conduct that illuminates the scandalous devaluation of ‘blackened’ parts of the world. Fanon’s goal here, after Sartre, is to ‘teach people to become aware of the potentials they have forbidden themselves, of the passivity they have paraded in just those situations in which what is needed is to hold oneself, like a sliver, to the heart of the world, to interrupt if necessary the rhythm of the world, to upset, if necessary, the chain of command, but in any case, and most assuredly, to stand up to the world’ (BS, 57).

In the ancient philosophical struggle that pits will versus intellect as rivals for primary faculty of the mind, then, 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’ (WE, 247). The effort to understand what is the case is secondary in relation to a determination to prescribe (and then realise) 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. [...] Truth is that which hurries on the break-up of the colonialist regime; it is that which promotes the emergence of the nation’ in its freedom and autonomy (WE, 50).

## I

Needless to say, like any consistent voluntarist, Fanon is critical of distorted conceptions of will that turns it into one of its several opposites—instinctive reflex, unthinking ‘fervour’, ‘blind’ impulse. Fanon condemns a ‘blind will toward freedom’ (WE, 59; cf. BS, 2), for instance, precisely because he recognises the minimal requirements of a consequential voluntarism. These requirements are easily derived from the concept itself (and most were anticipated by the first philosopher to grapple in detail with the problem of a popular or ‘general’ will, Rousseau).

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 instinctual, historical, or 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 will of the *people* as such, and not of a group (defined by class, function, ethnicity...) 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, to impose itself, i.e. to overcome the resistance of those opposed to that prescription. Will is a matter of victory or defeat. Victory requires the assembly and unity of the people, and on that basis 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, ‘recognition’ or ‘respect’, not through more appropriate or sensitive forms of representation, acknowledgement, concern, management, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

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 what-

5. As Richard Pithouse argues, *Black Skin, White Masks* is a book about the futility of the politics of recognition, in which Fanon demonstrates that ‘reason walks out of the room when a black body walks in’. Rather than continue to pursue an elusive recognition, Fanon’s account dramatises ‘the necessity of action’ (Pithouse, letter to the author, 7 October 2010).

ever 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. ‘The colonised have this in common, that their right to constitute a people is challenged’ (AR, 145), through a combination of coercion and deference.

Conquest alone allows colonialism to begin.<sup>6</sup> 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. Since the colonial cultural machine leads one to believe that ‘one is a Negro to the degree to which one is wicked, sloppy, malicious, instinctual’, so then, encouraged on all sides to identify with what is white, I come to ‘distrust what is black in me, that is, the whole of my being’. ‘Voluntary’ internalisation of this distrust completes the colonial project, and re-establishes a form of slavery on a more robust footing. ‘The black Antillean is the slave of this cultural imposition. After having been the slave of the white man, he enslaves himself’.<sup>7</sup>

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). In this way, ‘French colonialism has settled in the very centre of the Algerian individual’ and systematically pursued a programme of ‘expulsion of self, of rationally pursued mutilation’ (DC, 50). 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

6. The colonial relation to the Algerian woman, likewise, is not primarily a matter of hegemonic manipulation; ‘straight off, with the maximum of violence, there is possession, rape, near-murder’ (DC, 31).

7. BS, 148-189. Decolonisation, then, involves at the most elementary level a project to ‘change people’s minds’. ‘The colonized peoples, the peoples who have been robbed, must lose the habits of mind which have characterized them up to now’ (WE, 143). They must gain the capacity literally to ‘make up their own mind’. Human behaviour, as Fanon concluded in *Black Skin White Masks*, is ‘not only reactionary [...]’. To educate man to be actional, preserving in all his relations his respect for the basic values that constitute a human world, is the prime task of him who, having taken thought, prepares to act’ (BS, 173). ‘Initially subjective, the breaches made in colonialism are the result of a victory of the colonised over their old fear and over the atmosphere of despair distilled day after day by a colonialism that has incrustated itself with the prospect of enduring forever’ (DC, 38). ‘Old superstitions began to crumble. Witchcraft, maraboutism [...], belief in the djinn, all things that seemed to be part of the very being of the Algerian, were swept away by the action and practice initiated by the Revolution’ (DC, 124).

impossible for the native' (WE, 93). Even to desire an end to colonialism, in this context, would involve the libidinal equivalent of 'suicide'.<sup>8</sup>

As doctor Fanon diagnoses it, in other words, colonialism is first and foremost an immense 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 is first and foremost a systematic effort to represent the indigenous people 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 Europe the Negro has one function: that of symbolizing the lower emotions, the baser inclinations, the dark side of the soul' (BS, 147). Within Algeria itself 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 aggression. The native Algerian kills 'savagely' and 'for no reason [...]. We find him incapable of self-discipline, or of canalizing his impulses. Yes, the Algerian is a congenital impulsive', and his 'impulsiveness is largely aggressive and generally homicidal' (WE, 296-298). As described by colonial psychiatrists, Algerian natives 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', etc. (WE, 300). Unsurprisingly, colonial doctors even managed to find a physiological basis for the north African's 'almost animal impulsivity' (WE, 303). The Algiers-based professor Porot, quoted by Fanon in the closing pages of *Wretched of the Earth*, pursues this logic to its conclusion when he describes, in 1935, the 'native of north Africa' as a 'primitive creature whose life [is] essentially vegetative and instinctive' and who, deprived of a distinctively human cerebral cortex, is dominated, like the inferior vertebrates, by the diencephalon' (WE, 301). As the World Health Organisation's Dr. A. Carothers would conclude twenty years later, the most economical way of describing these impulse-governed Africans is as 'lobotomised Europeans' (WE, 302).

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.<sup>9</sup> '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).

8. 'The effect consciously sought by colonialism was to drive into the natives' heads the idea that if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality. On the unconscious plane, colonialism therefore did not seek to be considered by the native as a gentle, loving mother who protects her child from a hostile environment, but rather as a mother who unceasingly restrains her fundamentally perverse offspring from managing to commit suicide and from giving free rein to its evil instincts' (WE, 211).

9. Cf. Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, trans. Gregory Elliott, London, Verso, 2011.

But for all its literally ‘inhuman’ brutality, colonial oppression in its classical (i.e. racist) form is undermined by a fundamental weakness which favours the eventual empowerment of the oppressed. Its brutality is, again literally, *obvious*, flagrant; it is rooted more in coercion than in deference, and it is thus easier to judge and condemn. As Foucault would point out in the decade following Fanon’s death, the successful exercise of power is ‘proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms’.<sup>10</sup> Whereas in non-colonised capitalist societies the hegemonic cultural and educational system, Fanon observes, ‘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, my emphasis). The full clarity that Marx assumed would accompany the development of capitalism—the assumption that as capitalism replaces feudal ‘exploitation veiled by religious and political illusions’ with ‘naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation’, so then ‘man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life’<sup>11</sup>—has so far only prevailed in the countries colonised by capital.

Colonial and racist forms of oppression thereby lend themselves to conscious and thus deliberate or ‘voluntary’ 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, in the absence of any conventional neurotic deviation or ‘amnesia’ (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. Colonial diagnoses of the ‘native personality’, the nature of ‘Muslim society’ or the plight of the ‘Algerian woman’, etc., merit one and only one ‘valid challenge’: ‘the experience of revolution’ (DC, 51). The fact that such struggle may or may not (yet) succeed, given the current balance of forces, is a secondary issue: faced with the fact of colonialism, ‘our historic mission is to sanction all revolts, all desperate actions, all those abortive attempts drowned in rivers of blood’ (WE, 207).

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>12</sup> In keeping with one of the funda-

10. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York, Pantheon, 1978, p. 86.

11. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 1970, p. 35.

12. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* [1847], Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 1966, p. 109. *Black Skin* anticipates the solution, but abstractly. Where a standard (Adlerian) Eurocentric approach seeks to assign blame

mental characteristics of political will itself, for Fanon, the will of the people would only become a collective and political (as opposed to a merely psychological) reality through its direct mobilisation in Algeria's national liberation struggle. Fanon's 'populism' has nothing to do with any form of ethnic or cultural communitarianism, let alone any form of jingoistic chauvinism. 'The most solid bastion of the Algerian Revolution', Fanon will learn, is not a material interest or a socio-ethnic identity, but rather the 'spiritual community' of a people 'realizing its unity' through combat and determination (DC, 101).

The will of the people only becomes the basis of an 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>13</sup> (By the same token, he knows that people whose liberation is thrust upon them—like the inhabitants of Martinique and Guadeloupe in 1848—remain fundamentally unfree<sup>14</sup>). Decolonisation is precisely this, the conversion of an involuntary passivity into a self-mastering activity. Decolonisation 'transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them [...]. Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the "thing" which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself' (WE, 36-37).

### III

Committed to their revolution, Fanon has confidence in the people. The people are adequate to the task of self-emancipation. This is both an 'article of faith', 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>15</sup> Understanding fosters

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for an ethnic 'inferiority complex' on its victims, Fanon's response to such a victim is perfectly clear: 'I will tell him, "The environment, society are responsible for your delusion." Once that has been said, the rest will follow of itself, and what that is we know. The end of the world' (BS, 168). Until the outbreak of Algeria's war, however, Fanon lacked the concrete instrument that might accomplish this end. In 1952, Fanon—a veteran of the French army—still considered himself to be 'a Frenchman' and not an 'outsider': 'I am personally interested in the future of France, in French values, in the French nation' (BS, 157).

13. 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, pp. XX, 441.

14. In Martinique (unlike Haiti), 'the Negro steeped in the inessentiality of servitude was set free by his master'. He did not act, he was 'acted upon'. The 'upheaval reached the Negroes from without' and made no fundamental difference: they 'went from one way of life to another, but not from one life to another [...]. The Negro knows nothing of the cost of freedom, for he has not fought for it' (WSBM, 171-172).

15. 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. For if you think that you can manage a country without letting the people interfere, if you think that the people

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, in the true understanding of their interests, and in knowing who their enemies are' (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 deliberate and settle on their own course of action, then sooner or later they will solve the problems they face (or in Rousseau's more emphatic terms, if the circumstances allow for a universal or general will, if a group is indeed able to sustain a single and undivided will, then such willing will never err<sup>16</sup>). Determination of the popular will may take time, but in the end it is the only reliable way of getting things right.

Algeria's experience proves, Fanon notes, 'that the important thing is not that three hundred individuals 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'. The legacy of colonial 'discouragement', compounded by under-developed means of communication and isolation from the rest of the world, mean that 'awakening of the whole people will not come about all at once' (WE, 193-194tm).<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, this awakening is for Fanon both a fact and a norm: the Algerian people *are* awakening, and they *can* 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

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upset the game by their mere presence, whether they slow it down or whether by their natural ignorance they sabotage it, then you must have no hesitation: you must keep the people out' (WE, 189).

16. Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract* 1:7, 2:3.

17. Fanon's approach here is again best read as a variation on Lenin's. Popular 'consciousness slowly dawns upon truths that are only partial, limited, and unstable. As we may surmise, all this is very difficult. The task of bringing the people to maturity will be made easier by the thoroughness of the organization and by the high intellectual level of its leaders. The force of intellect increases and becomes more elaborate as the struggle goes on, as the enemy increases his maneuvers and as victories are gained and defeats suffered. The leaders show their power and authority by criticizing mistakes, using every appraisal of past conduct to bring the lesson home, and thus insure fresh conditions for progress' (WE, 146-147; cf. Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?', *Selected Works*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1968, one volume], 379.).

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. In fact, experience proves that the masses understand perfectly the most complicated problems (WE, 188).<sup>18</sup>

For Lenin it is the party that guides the industrial proletariat who in turn guide the working classes and labouring people as a whole. The Leninist party provides the theoretical framework through which the people will ‘spontaneously’ recognise and learn the lessons of their own experience.<sup>19</sup> Carried by his commitment to the Algerian revolution, Fanon effectively inverts 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 very close to Lenin (and then 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 ‘achieving unanimity of will among the van-

18. The political contribution of the legal and non-violent i.e. reformist parties, in Fanon’s Algeria as much as in Lenin’s Russia, is vitiated at the level of their fundamental *volonté*: ‘inside the nationalist parties, the will to break colonialism is linked with another quite different will: that of coming to a friendly agreement with it’ (WE, 124). ‘The national political parties never lay stress upon the necessity of a trial of armed strength, for the good reason that their objective is not the radical overthrowing of the system. Pacifists and legalists, they are in fact partisans of order’ (WE, 59)—a new or ‘reformed’ order, no doubt, but certainly not the ‘disorder’ of revolution as such. As far as these reformists are concerned, the question of an unqualified will to independence never crosses the threshold of consciousness. For them, ‘every attempt to break colonial oppression by force is a hopeless effort, an attempt at suicide, because in the innermost recesses of their brains the settler’s tanks and airplanes occupy a huge place. When they are told “Action must be taken,” they see bombs raining down on them, armoured cars coming at them on every path, machine-gunning and police action ... and they sit quiet. They are beaten from the start. There is no need to demonstrate their incapacity to triumph by violent methods; they take it for granted in their everyday life and in their political maneuvers’ (WE, 63).

19. Cf. Vladimir Lenin, *What is to be Done?* [1902], Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1978, pp. 154-155; Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done?* In Context, Leiden, Brill, 2006) Lih, ‘Lenin and the Great Awakening’, in Sebastian Budgen et al. (eds.), *Lenin Reloaded: Towards a Politics of Truth*, Durham NC, Duke University Press, 2007, pp. 284-287; Hal Draper, *The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’ from Marx to Lenin*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1987. 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., vol. III, p. 209).

guard 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>20</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>21</sup> For Mao, likewise, political initiative belongs to those whose 'unshaken conviction' and 'unceasing perseverance' enables them (to adapt one of Mao's metaphors) to 'move mountains.'<sup>22</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>23</sup>

In keeping with Rousseau's fundamental distinction between the general will of the people and the mere 'will of all'<sup>24</sup>, what matters is a collective capacity to identify and will the general interest as such, rather than the aggregate interest or opinion of all individuals as individuals. Lenin privileges the party because (as he sees it) it is the subject most capable of willing and acting with the sort of clarity, unity and 'iron 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. In Fanon's Algeria rather like Mao's Hunan, it is the peasantry who are best placed to 'smash all the trammels that bind them and rush forward along the road to liberation.'<sup>25</sup> In the colonies it is the urban working class that tends to vacillate under the pressure of anti-colonial struggle. Modern

20. Lenin, 'Preliminary Draft Resolution of the Tenth Congress of the RCP on Party Unity' [1921], *Selected Works*, p. 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. We must suppress them in order to free humanity from wage slavery, their resistance must be crushed by force [...]. 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*, pp.324-325.

21. Lenin, 'Left-Wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder [1920], *Selected Works*, 514.

22. Mao, 'The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains [1945], *Selected Works III*, 322.

23. Mao, 'On New Democracy' [1940], *Selected Works II*, 352; Mao, 'On Coalition Government', *Selected Works*, vol. III, p. 263.

24. Rousseau, *Social Contract* 2:3.

25. Mao, 'Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan' [1927], *Selected Works*, vol. I, pp. 23-24.

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’ (WE, 108).<sup>26</sup> The peasant farmers, by contrast, are the first to confront the full reality of colonial oppression, and the first to draw the unavoidable 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). Fanon knows, of course, that in industrialized colonial countries the peasantry may be ‘the least aware, the worst organized, and at the same time the most anarchical element’. In such places, the peasant’s ‘individualism, lack of discipline, liking for money’, and so on, may lead them to play an ‘objectively reactionary’ role (WE, 111). In colonial Algeria, by contrast, grounded in respect for their ‘living’ traditions, the peasants are the most ‘disciplined element’, they are 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’ (WE, 112), whose members stand ‘ready to sacrifice themselves completely’ (WE, 127).<sup>27</sup>

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. ‘The rebellion, which began in the country districts, will filter into the towns through that fraction of the peasant population which is blocked on the outer fringe of the urban centres, that fraction which has not yet succeeded in finding a bone to gnaw in the colonial system [...]. It is within this mass of humanity, this people of the shanty towns, at the core of the *lumpenproletariat*, that the rebellion will find its urban spearhead’. Like their rural cousins, the *déclassé* shack-dwellers know that struggle offers the only way out, and ‘by militant and decisive action

26. ‘In capitalist countries, the working class has nothing to lose; it is they who in the long run have everything to gain. In the colonial countries the working class has everything to lose; in reality it represents that fraction of the colonized nation which is necessary and irreplaceable if the colonial machine is to run smoothly: it includes tram conductors, taxi drivers, miners, dockers, interpreters, nurses, and so on’ (WE, 109).

27. By contrast, ‘the country people are suspicious of the townsman. The latter dresses like a European; he speaks the European’s language, works with him, sometimes even lives in the same district; so he is considered by the peasants as a turncoat who has betrayed everything that goes to make up the national heritage. The townspeople are “traitors and knaves” who seem to get on well with the occupying powers, and do their best to get on within the framework of the colonial system. This is why you often hear the country people say of town dwellers that they have no morals’ (WE, 112).

they will discover the path that leads to nationhood. They won't become reformed characters to please colonial society, fitting in with the morality of its rulers; quite on the contrary, they take for granted the impossibility of their entering the city save by hand grenades and revolvers' (WE, 129-130).

Fanon's confidence in the people, then, is not unconditional: he is confident in the people insofar as they actively will and determine the course of their own political destiny. In the case of an oppressed or colonised people, this means that affirmation of the category of the people is inseparable from direct participation in their will to self-emanicipation. 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 Algeria, of course, determination of the will of the people took on the particular form required by the obstacle it faced. 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 and foremost on a willingness to overcome the main basis of this power—ruthless and systematic political violence—on its own terms. Given what he's up against, 'the colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence' (WE, 86). 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 are 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'.<sup>28</sup> 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).<sup>29</sup>

28. DC, 40. 'Not enough attention', Fanon notes, 'has been given to the reasons that lead a revolutionary movement to choose the weapon that is called terrorism' (DC, 40). 'The naked truth of decolonization evokes for us the searing bullets and bloodstained knives which emanate from it. For if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists. That affirmed intention to place the last at the head of things, and to make them climb at a pace (too quickly, some say) the well-known steps which characterize an organized society, can only triumph if we use all means to turn the scale, including, of course, that of violence' (WE, 37).

29. In a colonial context, 'violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organized and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them. Without that struggle, without that knowledge of the practice of action, there's nothing but a fancy-dress parade and the blare of the trumpets. There's nothing save a minimum of readaptation, a few reforms at the top, a flag waving; and down there at the bottom an undivided mass, still living in the middle ages, endlessly marking time' (WE, 147).

## 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 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 is practiced 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, Fanon discovers, 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).<sup>30</sup> Commitment to the struggle allows Fanon to conform to a basic Leninist prescription—wherever possible, ‘to go on the offensive’ (AR, 179tm). Willingness to fight the ‘superior’ or ‘master race’ is already an immediate assertion of equality that evacuates 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. He finds out that the settler’s skin is not of any more value than a native’s skin; and it must be said that this discovery shakes the world in a very necessary manner. All the new, revolutionary assurance of the native stems from it. 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). For those engaged in armed struggle the only pertinent imperative, as Sartre puts it, is ‘to thrust out colonialism by *every* means in their power’ (Sartre, Preface, WE, 21). 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

30. Once this step has been taken, whatever happens on the battlefield, ‘the inferiority complex, the fear and the despair of the past’ can no longer be ‘reimplanted in the consciousness of the people’ (DC, 19).

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). Previously, the colonized people had been 'reduced to a body of individuals who only find cohesion when in the presence of the colonizing nation' (WE, 292). Now, however, 'all the degrading and infantilising structures that habitually infest relations between the colonised and the coloniser [have been] suddenly liquidated', and in place of the old 'frenzied attempt at identification with the coloniser, the Algerian has brought into existence a new, positive, efficient personality, whose richness is provided [mainly...] by his certainty that he embodies a decisive moment of the national consciousness' (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'—insofar as they help energise a general will to deliberate and act, 'the branch meeting and the committee meeting are liturgical acts' (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>31</sup> 'The mobilization of the masses, when it arises out of the war of liberation, introduces into each man's consciousness the ideas of a common cause, of a national destiny, and of a collective history' (WE, 93). Forged in struggle, the new nation comes to enjoy a properly 'monolithic' degree of national unity (AR, 62).

National liberation is to be achieved by the people as a whole. Fanon has no more sympathy than Lenin himself for merely 'terroristic' or 'ultra-leftist' 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'

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31. WE, 243. After a period of initial resistance to a foreign technology, over the course of the mid 1950s Algerians adopted the radio as a means of collective deliberation and struggle. Broadcasts of 'The Voice of Fighting Algeria' helped in the 'consolidating and unifying the people', and 'having a radio meant [...] buying the right of entry into the struggle of an assembled people' (DC, 68). This development illustrates the voluntarist logic of Fanon's cultural nationalism more generally. '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. 'The living expression of the nation is the moving consciousness of the whole of the people; it is the coherent, enlightened action of men and women' (WE, 204). 'A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature [...]. A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence' (WE, 233). By contrast, 'the desire to attach oneself to tradition or bring abandoned traditions to life again does not only mean going against the current of history but also opposing one's own people' (WE, 224).

(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; that if we stagnate it is their responsibility, and that if we go forward it is due to them too, that there is no such thing as a demiurge, that there is no famous man who will take the responsibility for everything, but that the demiurge is the people themselves and the magic hands are finally only the hands of the people’ (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>32</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). In short, 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. In a situation where ‘almost all the men who called on the people to join in the national struggle were condemned to death or searched for by the French police, confidence was proportional to the hopelessness of each case. You could be sure of a new recruit when he could no longer go back into the colonial system’ (WE, 85). 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 struggle for collective salvation in which the only possible outcome is victory or death. ‘The practice of violence binds [the people] together as a whole, since each individual forms a violent link in the great chain, a part of the great organism of violence which has surged upward in reaction to the settler’s violence in the beginning. The groups recognize each other and the future nation is already indivisible. 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 themselves, the solidarity born of an irreversible commitment sus-

32. 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 ‘serenity’ with which young Vietnamese ‘fanatics’ face firing squads (BS, 177) to his portrait of the ALN’s major Chawki, a man with an almost ‘murderous hardness’ in his eyes, a man ‘difficult to deceive, to get around’, who cannot be intimidated or distracted (AR, 181).

tains 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).

What is imperative, instead, is to rely on *ourselves*. Since ‘a will cannot be represented’, as Rousseau explained, so then ‘sovereignty, being nothing more than the exercise of the general will, can never be alienated [and...] can only be represented by itself; power can indeed be transferred but not will.’<sup>33</sup> As far as the active *willing* of the popular will is concerned, 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).<sup>34</sup>

Such self-reliance points to another basic feature of a voluntarist approach: its commitment to the here and now, to decisive action in the present moment, and its consequent rejection of terms that proceed 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, not to improve a situation of partial dependence but to escape it. The FLN does not seek to incorporate colonial ‘modernisation’ as a difficult but necessary chapter in the development of the nation, but to eliminate it: ‘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>35</sup> In keeping with Fanon’s neo-Jacobin logic, the will of the people, where one exists, not only demands but incarnates an immediate and 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 the so-called 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

33. Rousseau, *Social Contract* 2.1; cf. 3:15.

34. ‘In reality, the UN is the legal card used by the imperialist interests when the card of brute force has failed’ or run its course (AR, 195).

35. 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).

objective dialectic which more or less rapidly assumes the appearance of an absolutely inevitable mechanism'. Revolutionary optimism here is not a response to an objective assessment of the situation: rather, 'optimism in Africa is the direct product of the revolutionary action of the African masses' (AR, 170-171), pure and simple. Ultimately, there is nothing 'beneath' the will of the people that might guide its course. There are no historical or economic laws 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 and the consequences of action. Considered in isolation and 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*, to Sartre's interpretation of negritude as a merely transitional moment in a dialectic that subsumes it. Fanon is no less convinced than Sartre himself, of course, 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 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', at least if the latter are to be understood as providing a rationale for that experience which is supposedly 'deeper' than its own conscious self-determination.<sup>36</sup> On either the individual or the collective level, such 'wilful ignorance' is indeed an irreducible aspect of the practical primacy of the will. On either level, '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 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 Marx 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

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36. 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. It is not out of my bad nigger's misery, my bad nigger's teeth, my bad nigger's hunger that I will shape a torch with which to burn down the world, but it is the torch that was already there, waiting for that turn of history [...] Jean-Paul Sartre, in this work, has destroyed black zeal' (BS, 102-103; Fanon is referring to Sartre's 1948 essay 'Black Orpheus').

‘coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing’<sup>37</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). On the one hand, Fanon writes in 1961, ‘during the last few years I have had occasion to verify a very classic fundamental idea: that honour, dignity, and respect for the given word can only manifest themselves in the framework of national and international homogeneity. From the moment that you and your like are liquidated like so many dogs, you have no other resource but to use all and every means to regain your importance as a man’ (WE, 295). On the other hand, there can be no waiting for the ‘political process’ to transform the individuals needed to sustain it. Each individual needs to remember that ‘it is necessary at all times and in all places to make explicit, to de-mystify, and to harry the insult to mankind that exists in oneself. There must be no waiting until the nation has produced new men; there must be no waiting until men are imperceptibly transformed by revolutionary processes in perpetual renewal’ (WE, 304-305).

As Rousseau might say, civic *vertu* is not first a public concern and only *later* 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.’<sup>38</sup> 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.’<sup>39</sup> If ‘independence produces the spiritual and material conditions for the reconversion of man’, at the same time the people’s ‘inner mutation’ enables ‘the emergence of the Nation and the growth of its sovereignty’ (DC, 159).

## V

In keeping with this voluntarist logic, the central sections of *Wretched of the Earth* are best read, I think, as an outline of the basic steps involved in the constitution of a general or

37. Marx, ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, §3.

38. DC, 83. Already in *Black Skin*, the psychoanalyst’s goal is ‘to help my patient to become conscious of his unconscious’, to help ‘put him in a position to choose action (or passivity) with respect to the real source of the conflict—that is, toward the social structures’ (BS, 74-75).

39. AR, 103. Again, ‘when the nation stirs as a whole, the new man is not an *a posteriori* product of that nation; rather, he co-exists with it and triumphs with it. This dialectical requirement explains the reticence with which adaptations of colonization and reforms of the facade are met. Independence is not a word which can be used as an exorcism, but an indispensable condition for the existence of men and women who are truly liberated, in other words who are truly masters of all the material means which make possible the radical transformation of society’ (WE, 310). The resulting ‘voluntarisation’ embraces even aspects of domestic e.g. conjugal life: ‘the Algerian couple rids itself of its traditional weaknesses at the same time that the solidarity of the people becomes a part of history. This couple is no longer an accident but something rediscovered, willed, built’ (DC, 96).

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).

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. There is no program; there are no speeches or resolutions, and no political trends. The problem is clear: the foreigners must go; so let us form a common front against the oppressor and let us strengthen our hands by armed combat’ (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. At this stage, ‘each man or woman brings the nation to life by his or her action, and is pledged to ensure its triumph in their locality’ (132). This is the occasion for a ‘cleansing’ purity and ‘collective ecstasy’. ‘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. There is a permanent outpouring in all the villages of spectacular generosity, of disarming kindness, and willingness, which cannot ever be doubted, to die for the “cause.” All this is evocative of a confraternity, a church, and a mystical body of belief at one and the same time. No native can remain unmoved by this new rhythm which leads the nation on’ (WE, 132-133). Spontaneous solidarity and commitment, however, has its limits both in time and space. At this stage ‘initiative is localized’, restricted in time and space: ‘the program of each locally constituted group is local liberation. If the-nation is everywhere, then she is here. One step further, and only here is she to be found. Tactics are mistaken for strategy’ (WE, 132).<sup>40</sup>

A second stage is required 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’. Initially caught off guard, the enemy regroupes. 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. For the most everyday, practical realism takes the place of yesterday’s effusion, and substitutes itself for the illusion of eternity’ (WE, 134). If it’s to prevail, the struggle must convert a ‘peasant revolt’ into a ‘revolutionary war’. A ‘central authority must be created’ and the national forces assembled and coordinated. ‘The leaders of the rebellion come to see that even very large-scale peasant risings need to be controlled and directed into certain channels’ (WE, 135).

40. Naïve enthusiasm creates new pitfalls. The inexperienced intellectual who joins the popular struggle can be dazzled by people’s ‘good faith and honesty’, and thereby become ‘opportunist’. ‘The danger that will haunt him continually is that of becoming the uncritical mouthpiece of the masses; he becomes a kind of yes-man who nods assent at every word coming from the people, which he interprets as considered judgments, as the literal incarnation of the truth (WE, 49).

It is especially important to preserve the 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 united and more organised 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).<sup>41</sup>

Those waging the struggle 'must not waver. They must not imagine that the end is already won [...]. Once again, things must be explained to them; the people must see where they are going, and how they are to get there', and 'this taking stock of the situation, this enlightening of consciousness, and this advance in the knowledge of the history of societies are only possible within the framework of an organization, and inside the structure of a people' (WE, 141, 143).

If they are sufficiently organised and disciplined, the people will subsequently manage to cope with the inevitable betrayals that accompany victory over the immediate enemy. If 'nationalism, that magnificent song that made the people rise against their oppressors, stops short, falters, and dies away on the day that independence is proclaimed' (WE, 203), then (for reasons that Machiavelli and then Rousseau anticipated) an independent people will need to find ways of renewing its spirit. 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." They show themselves to be jealous of the results of their action and take good care not to place their future, their destiny, or the fate of their country in the hands of a living god. 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, 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: the private interests of the rich and privileged. As Fanon conceives things, the postcolonial bourgeois is faced with a choice between two forms of betrayal:

The historical vocation of an authentic national middle class in an underdeveloped country is to repudiate its own nature in so far as it is bourgeois, that is to say in so far as it is the tool of capitalism, and to make itself the willing slave of that revolutionary capital which is the people. In an underdeveloped country an authentic national middle class ought to consider as its bounden duty to betray the calling fate has marked out for it, and to put itself to school with the people: in other words to put at the people's disposal the intellectual and technical capital that it has snatched when going through the colonial universities. But unhappily

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41. As partisans of national independence in countries all over the world would soon discover, in the face of a political movement that 'was beginning to "embody the national will" and to constitute a danger for the colonial regime, parties which have their origin in ethnic or regional differences spring up. It is the entire tribe which is turning itself into a political party, closely advised by the colonialists. The conference table can now be pulled out. The party which advocates unity will be drowned in the computations of the various splinter groups, while the tribal parties will oppose centralization and unity, and will denounce the party of unity as a dictatorship' (WE, 118-119).

we shall see that very often the national middle class does not follow this heroic, positive, fruitful, and just path; rather, it disappears with its soul set at peace into the shocking ways—shocking because anti-national—of a traditional bourgeoisie, of a bourgeoisie which is stupidly, contemptibly, cynically bourgeois (WE, 150).<sup>42</sup>

Unhappily, more often than not the postcolonial bourgeoisie betrays its nation rather than its class, and ‘just steps into the shoes of the former European settlement’ (WE, 152). There it actively undermines the national project, and while covering its tracks with pseudo-patriotic ritual, confirms the tribal, occupational and regional privileges approved by their colonial counterparts (158-159).<sup>43</sup> As the ‘people stagnate deplorably in unbearable poverty, slowly they awaken to the unutterable treason of their leaders’ (WE, 167). Meanwhile ‘colonialism, which had been shaken to its very foundations by the birth of African unity, recovers its balance and tries now to break that will to unity by using all the movement’s weaknesses’, by exploiting all ‘ethnic’ and ‘spiritual’ rivalries, real or imagined (WE, 160).

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. In 1961, the peoples of Africa face a similar choice as to that faced by the peoples of Russia in 1917: their ‘national bourgeoisies, who are quite clear as to what their objectives are, have decided to bar the way to that unity, to that coordinated effort on the part of two hundred and fifty million men to triumph over stupidity, hunger, and inhumanity at one and the same time. This is why we must understand that African unity can only be achieved through the upward thrust of the people, and under the leadership of the people, that is to say, in defiance of the interests of the bourgeoisie’ (WE, 164). 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). Again, ‘we must repeat, it is absolutely necessary to oppose vigorously and definitively the birth of a national bourgeoisie and a privileged caste’ (WE, 200). 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’ (WE, 246).

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42. ‘Bereft of ideas, because it lives to itself and cuts itself off from the people, undermined by its hereditary incapacity to think in terms of all the problems of the nation as seen from the point of view of the whole of that nation, the national middle class will have nothing better to do than to take on the role of manager for Western enterprise, and it will in practice set up its country as the brothel of Europe’ (WE, 154). Meanwhile, however, through their mobilisation, ‘the people come to understand that wealth is not the fruit of labour but the result of organized, protected robbery [...]. The land belongs to those that till it. This is a principle which has through explanation become a fundamental law of the Algerian revolution’ (WE, 191).

43. Such is the ‘Thermidorian’ moment in the anticolonial revolution: ‘all the decentralizing tendencies spring up again and triumph, and the nation falls to pieces, broken in bits’ (WE, 183).

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>44</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 Fanon to qualify (rather than exaggerate) the voluntarist orientation of his approach. Under the pressure of a 'manichean' struggle, Fanon occasionally yielded 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 oppressor can be conceived as an overt 'stranger in our midst', so then it might seem that his 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, precisely, the guarantee of an 'inevitable' or 'definite' victory.<sup>45</sup> So long as Fanon conceives of oppression in simplified or 'undifferentiated' terms, grounded on the model of foreign military conquest (AR, 81), so then the solution he proposes will suffer from symmetrical limitations. Fanon's strategic emphasis on armed struggle, in particular, risks the reduction of action to reaction, the determination of a solution by the nature of the problem it aims to solve. If during the liberation war this solution helps foster 'the holy and colossal energy that keeps a whole people at the boiling point' (DC, 17), it is poorly equipped to limit the eventual evaporation of such energy.

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). We have since entered a different phase. 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 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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44. 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).

45. 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.