Violence and Political Action:

A Theoretical Discussion of the Ideas of

Frantz Fanon and Martin Luther King

On political Action

(Written by Guy Pade)

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to confront two major twentieth century theorists of social struggle and change - the Algerian revolutionary Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) and the African American civil rights activist and leader Martin Luther King (1927-1968).

These two men, whose years of activity and writing parallel, share yet differ in a number of categories. They share an African ascendance; both men sought freedom, justice and equality for their people; and they seem to have shared a common enemy – the white man. Nevertheless, while they seem to have had a similar starting point and similar goals, they differ gravely in there philosophical approach to the problem and to its solution. King was one of the greatest advocates of nonviolence in modern history. Fanon, on the other hand, believed in the psychologically emancipating power of violent action.

As the question of decolonization and ethnic national sovereignty continue to rattle our world, in the former Yugoslav republics, the Palestinian autonomy, the minority populated suburbs of Paris, etc. it is interesting to examine the writings of theses two very influential thinkers. What implications do they have for us today? What can we learn from the differences between them as we grapple with the complexities of a world torn between a history of segregation and a vision of multiculturalism?

I shall begin this examination with a brief history of the life and times of Frantz Fanon and Martin Luther King. Then I will begin a critical comparison of how Fanon and King viewed there respective situations – the black and white psyche, the desired change, and the means of achieving that change. Having made clear the basis for the debate, I will turn to the debate on physical violence as a means of political action. In doing this I will try to see if the difference of opinions on the issue of violence, is a product of different outlooks on the struggle at hand, or rather an essential disagreement rooted in the philosophical roots of these two distinct thinkers.

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Years of Upheaval: The Life and Times of Frantz Fanon & Martin Luther King

The 1950's and 60's were a period of cultural and political unrest. The U.S.A., having just won the war in Korea, entered a period of growing civic unrest, mostly through black-white tensions and the communist scare of Senator McCarthy and others. (Washington 1986: xi-xxiv; King Encyclopedia) Africa was also beginning to rise-up at this time against its European colonizers. (Adas 2003; Kent 2000) Two major figures of this era were Frantz Fanon, who became the leading

theoretician of the Algerian struggle for independence, and Martin Luther King, who was perhaps the most important leader of the African-American's struggle for desegregation and equality. (Gordon, Sharpley-Whiting and White 1996: 1-8; Washington 1986: xi-xxiv)

(I) Fanon: the Early Years

Frantz Fanon was born on the island of Martinique, on June 20, 1925. He was privileged (in comparison to the majority of the black population in Martinique) to attend the *lycee* (a British grammar school). When he was 17, the Nazis occupied Martinique. Fanon fled to the island of Dominica, where he joined the Allied forces against Germany, and earned honors a war hero in Europe.

On his return to Martinique, Fanon worked in the elections campaign of the communist candidate Aime Cesaire. After the elections, he went to study psychiatry at Lyon, on a war veteran's scholarship. During his study at Lyon, he edited a student paper *Tam Tam*, and wrote three unpublished plays. During this Period Fanon also fathered a child out of wedlock, and later married a French woman, Marie-Josephe Duble. (Gordon, Sharpley-Whiting and White 1996: 1-8)

(II) King: the Early Years

Martin Luther King Jr. was born in Atlanta, Georgia, son to the Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr. and Alberta Williams King. He entered Morehouse College before turning 16 and graduated with a degree in sociology before turning 20. The same year, 1948, King was ordained to the Christian ministry. The same year U.S. President Harry Truman issued Executive order 9981, desegregating the American armed forced.

King later went on to graduate at the top of his class from Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania with a Bachelor of Divinity degree. In June 1955, he received a Ph.D. in Systematic theology from Boston University.

In June 1953, King married Coretta Scott, and in the fall of 1954, he became the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church of Montgomery, Alabama. (Washington 1986: xi-xxiv; King Encyclopedia)

(III) The Franco-Algerian War and Early Death

After completing his studies, Fanon accepted a post in 1953 as head of Blida-Joinville Hospital in Algiers. During that year, Fanon also wrote and presented psychiatric articles. While in Blida-Joinville Hospital, Fanon actively supported the Algerian revolutionaries (the FLN) by training them in emergency medicine and psychological techniques for resisting torture. (Gordon, Sharpley-Whiting and White 1996: 1-8; Fanon Page)

In 1956, Fanon resigned his post in a famous *Letter to the Resident Minister* (Fanon 1969: 52-54) claiming France was enacting a "systemized dehumanization" of Algerians. He went on to become one

of the leading theoreticians of the Algerian struggle for independence, thus becoming a persona non grata of the French government.

He served as Algeria's ambassador to Ghana attempted constructing a Pan-African revolutionary agenda. He had planned a move to Cuba when he discovered that he was suffering from Leukemia. After writing *the Wretched of the Earth* and meeting with Jean-Paul Sartre, whom he asked to write the preface to the book, Fanons' health deteriorated and he received medical treatment in the Soviet Union. The Russian physicians sent him to Bethesda, Maryland in the U.S.A., where he died on December 6, 1961. (Gordon, Sharpley-Whiting and White 1996: 1-8; Fanon Page)

(IV) Rosa Parks and the Beginning of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

On 1 December 1953, while Fanon was at the Blida-Joinville Hospital in Algiers, in the state of Alabama in the southern U.S., Mrs. Rosa Parks, a 42-year-old African-American, refused to give-up her sit on a Montgomery public bus to a white man, in defiance of Alabama law. Her defiant action came after a period of lynching and murders of African-Americans in Mississippi and across the U.S., including those of the reverend George W. Lee and 14-year-old Emmett Till.

Following the arrest of Rosa Parks, King led a 382-day nonviolent African-American boycott against the Montgomery, Alabama, public bus system. The Montgomery bus boycott led to the United States Supreme Court decision outlawing racial segregation on intrastate buses. King was widely praised for his charismatic leadership and his nonviolent stance. Following this success, King was among the founders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957, an organization of African American churches leading nonviolent

protests in the name of civil rights. King remained dominant in the organization until his death.

King organized and led marches for the right to vote, desegregation, labor rights and other basic civil rights. Most notable among these was the 250 thousand people 1963 march on Washington in which King delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. On October 14, 1964, King received the Noble Peace Prize for his nonviolent protest against racial discrimination. By this time Fanon, who would of course be an unlikely candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize, was already dead.

King continued to lead nonviolent protest throughout the U.S., spreading the movement from the south to the north and attempting to link it with economic injustices as well as racial ones. He also spoke out against the Vietnam War in 1965.

On April 4, 1968, an assassin, in Memphis, Tennessee, shot King to death while he was preparing to lead a local march in support of the striking Memphis sanitation workers' union. Thus, a life of nonviolent activity ended quite violently. (Washington 1986: xi-xxiv; King Encyclopedia)

(V) Between African Liberation and American Civil Rights

Two major differences between these two men should be noted, aside from their opposing views on the use of physical violence. First, despite a certain inclination to view African decolonization and African-American desegregation as two branches of the same struggle, it is important from a theoretical perspective to remember that the U.S. was a democracy and African-Americans did have equal citizenship according to law. It was perhaps a flawed democracy, but that is exactly what King aimed to correct. Algeria on the other hand, was a French colony, and although France itself was a democracy, Algeria was not and Algerians did not enjoy equal or any other citizenship.

Thus, the struggles are distinct at their core. One is a civic struggle for democratic change – a type of struggle that is not uncommon in democracies. The other is an oppressed people's fight for independence, from its oppressors. Even without knowing the full story behind each of these struggles, one can assume they will be different in character and intensity. The moral inhibitions will thus also be different, as King wanted to maintain the existing regime but improve it. Fanon wanted to change the regime altogether. Even if the French offered to make Algerian's lives better, Fanon would dismiss this offer. African-Americans wanted equal rights. Algerians wanted independence. In the following chapters, we will attempt to deal with this basic distinction between these two men.

A second important difference, though one that is biographical and not necessarily relevant to this study, is that King was the active leader of the struggle he discussed in his writings, and to some extent, he initiated the struggle. Fanon, on the other hand, did not lead the FLN nor did he set the theoretical stage for the battle in advance. He supported the struggle and gave it a theoretical foundation as it was in progress. We shall return to this point at a later stage, as it has some relevance regarding the similarity of King and Fanon's ideas.

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Philosophical Roots and Views on Political Action

(V) The Social Contract: When Can it be Broken?

(I) The Road to Recognition and Sovereignty

The debate between Martin Luther King Jr. and Frantz Fanon is not a debate over the philosophic concept of the 'African' or 'Black' man, nor is it a question of the need for Africans to view themselves as a political group. Both theorists believe the problems of the African man are group problems with group solutions. They also share a belief that the problem facing the African man was caused directly by another group of human beings known as the European or 'white' man. More specifically, it is a problem of the European's racism toward Africans. (Fanon 1952, [1961] 1963; King 1963)

According to this view, both the African-American citizen of the U.S.A. and the non-citizen Algerian colonized by the French, share this problem of European racism. Differences between these two countries and their respective political systems not withstanding, the African-American does not enjoy equal political rights *because* he is African. To that extent, the problem facing the African is inherent to his being African in countries and/or states dominated by Europeans.

Thus said, the mission at hand is the African man's quest for recognition as a full and autonomic human being. The road to King and Fanon's shared dream of recognition of the Africans' equal humanity and sovereignty is a political road and an active one at that. Only through direct and unified political action can the African peoples gain sovereignty and equality in their respective states and countries of residence. This truism is not restricted to colonized people; it is also true for the African citizens of the democratic U.S.A. (Hayes 1996: 22; Gaines: 33-34; [both in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*])

"...a revolutionary change has taken place in the Negro's conception of his own nature and destiny. Once he thought of himself

as an inferior and patiently accepted injustice and exploitation. Those days are gone." (King [1957] 1986: 5)

It is noteworthy that King uses this active terminology six years before his famous *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* in which he expressed his disappointment with moderate European-Americans and clergy, and the inability of the African to continue *waiting* for equality. (King [1963] 1986: 292-293)

However, while King and Fanon share some of their outlook on the both the problem facing their peoples and the road to the solution, King is an obstinate supporter of nonviolence, whereas Fanon sees violence as an intrinsic element in the road to sovereignty. Here lies the major difference between these two theorists of African self-emancipating political action.

(II) Non-Violent Resistance: Fight the Good Fight

Non-violent civil disobedience was the agenda proposed by King, beginning in 1957, as the course of action that the African American struggle for equality should take. King asserted African-Americans needed to act defiantly, strike, march, and assemble, handout leaflets, and so on. Thus, he believed, the government and the European-descendent citizens of the U.S.A. would "wake-up" and realize the "evil of segregation". (King [1957] 1986: 7-9)

King raised five points in favor of non-violent action:

1. **The resistance is, primarily, in the mind and spirit**. The means of resistance are just that, means. The choice between paths of action does not constitute a difference in the intensity or the conviction of the protest.

   "This method is passive physically but strongly active spiritually." (Ibid)

2. The struggle itself is a means and not the end. The purpose of the disorder is not the disorder itself, but the creation of a new and improved order.

   "The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness." (Ibid)

3. The enemy is the white man's racism, not the white man himself. If you attack people, you will be attacking the wrong enemy, as people find themselves in situations where they are not to blame personally for they are "victims of circumstances".

   "The tension is at bottom between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. And if there is victory it will be a victory not merely for fifty thousand Negros, but a victory for justice and the forces of light." (Ibid)

4. Violence does not stay external. When one acts violently, motivated by hate and bitterness, the violence breads in the person and remains a means to an end in the life that is beyond the immediate struggle.

   "If the American Negro and other victims of oppression succumb to the temptation of using violence in the struggle for justice, unborn generations will live in desolate night of bitterness, and their chief legacy will be an endless reign of chaos." (Ibid)

5. When you are fighting for justice, God is on your side. The belief in God's existence and active role in history, allows the oppressed never to feel that the battle is lost or that only extreme measures can still work. The justness and urgency of the struggle do not excuse all means. God will judge eventually.

"It is this deep faith in the future that causes the nonviolent resister to accept suffering without retaliation. He knows that in his struggle for justice he has cosmic companionship" (Ibid)

He reiterated these points in a number of articles and speeches during his years of action. (King 1986)

(III) Violence will set you Free: the Colonized' Psyche and European Morals

In an article he published in 1952, Fanon describes the uneasy meeting of Arab-Algerians living in France, with a French medical staff. The patient is unable to describe accurately his ailment. The medical staff begins to doubt any such ailment exists, and the alienation between the parties grows stronger.

The French staff does not understand the nuance and cultural differences that leads the Arab to complain that he is about to die and yet be unable to explain exactly what pain he feels and where. The Arab does not understand why instead of treating him the medical staff persists with annoying questions. The French staff's prejudices regarding the Arab's laziness gain reinforcement by what they perceive as a grown able man pretending to be ill so he can get a few days off from work. The Arabs feeling of alienation and racism are expound by the staff's attitude toward him. (Fanon [1952] 1969: 3-16)

This scenario, which Fanon discusses, elucidates the key difference between his reading of the Algerian struggle for independence and Kings' reading of the African-American struggle for equality. There are, Fanon claims, cultural differences that separate the African and the European on a more basic and fundamental level. There are basic differences in the European and African psyche, logic, speech, and morals. (Bullard 2005: 231-246)

Thus, when the African ponders the road to self-determination, he should not allow so-called European ethics to guide him. (Fanon 1952: 9-16; [1961] 1963: 35-95; Presbey 1986: 283-296) This Fanon developed further in the years to come, as he grew more radical in his view of both the problem of colonialism and the answer to it. (Shenhav 2005: 2-3)

"...decolonization is always a violent phenomenon. At whatever level we study it...decolonization is quite simply the replacing of a certain 'species' of men by another 'species' of men. Without any period of transition, there is a total, complete, and absolute substitution...the Proof of success lies in the whole social structure being changed from the bottom up." (Fanon [1961] 1963: 35)

Colonialism is violent. It uses both physically and mentally violent means to oppress the colonized. Thus, the way to deal with it is with equal violence, but violence has another more important aspect. Not only does violence avenge and deter the oppressors, it also serves as a mental emancipator, freeing the colonized from his feelings of subjugation, and reinforcing his autonomy and self respect. When the oppressed African hit, fires at, kills his European oppressor, he becomes a free man in his own psyche. He has not received his rights and independence from the European. Rather he has taken his rights and independence from the European. In other words, Fanon claims the political solution is not enough, as there remains the psychological colonization, and that can only be cured using violence. (Fanon [1961] 1963: 35-95; Shenhav 2005: 2-3)

(IV) Race Relations: From Social Change to Racial Conflict

In Kings' 1957 *Nonviolence and Racial Justice* he wrote of an *"uneasy peace [between the races] in which the Negro was forced*

patiently to submit to insult, injustice and exploitation." (King [1957] 1986: 6) By 1963, when Frantz Fanon was already dead, having published *the Wretched of the Earth*, King described in long detail these insults, injustices and exploitations which African-Americans had to "patiently submit to", and which they were no longer willing to be patient about. Acts of lynching, police harassment and unjust killing of African-Americans, poverty, and the depiction of an African-American child's tears when She is told that the amusement park is "closed to colored children" (King [1963] 1986: 292-293)

"Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The urge for freedom will eventually come. This is what happened to the American Negro. Something within him has reminded him of his birthright of freedom; something without has reminded him the he can gain it..." (Ibid: 297)

These strong and angry words were the outcome of the six hard years that followed the Montgomery bus boycott, and they were the result of growing frustration with the moderate white community and King beloved church.

"Over and over again I have found myself asking [when looking at churches in the south]: 'What kind of people here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave the clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when tired, bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?" (Ibid: 299)

In December 1957, Fanon wrote an article entitled *French Intellectuals and Democrats and the Algerian Revolution*, in which he quite cynically dealt with the reasons for the French Left's weak and ambivalent voice. (Fanon [1957] 1967: 79-90) Fanon, who's *Black Skin, White Masks* was an attempt to reconcile his "Black" heritage and

complexion with his French education, discovered early in his work a fundamental distinction between the “white” European and the “black” Third World African, Asian or Latin-American. This distinction surfaces when the French left (in Fanon’s case) or the moderate European-Americans and ministers of the church (in King’s case) are torn between full support for the African’s cause and their core loyalties to their own racial group.

This is a difficult and alienating philosophy, but regardless of the extent of its validity, when reading King’s later writings compared with those of Fanon, we discover a seemingly inescapable feeling of disappointment with “other” race and the leftist or moderate elements within it, which can lead to a view of the struggle as unambiguously racial. (Shenhav 2005) Fanon saw things this way; King came close in his final years.

(V) The Social Contract: When Can it be Broken?

The Greek Philosopher Socrates, accused of blasphemy and being a bad influence on the children of Athens, refused an offer to escape from jail and save his life. The corrupt law, which that he was accused of braking, was sacred to him despite its flaws. The rule of law is importance in itself. One cannot break it at will, if one wants to live under the rule of law. If you feel that you must break the law, be prepared to pay the price. (Writings of Plato: ‘Crito’) Sophocles’ *Antigone* professes similar inclinations.

The advocates of civil disobedience in Liberal Democracies follow this line of thought. A majority elected leader can lead a nation astray; the judicial system imprisons innocent people and sets free guilty persons; a nation can remain unaware of the racial segregation that exists in it for decades. However, change is always possible, and this is

the beauty and the strength of democracy. The wrongly convicted can be set free and compensated; segregation in public schools and other unjust laws, can be overturned. Thus, the struggle against these injustices must remain within the framework of the law. The “Social Contract” must not be broken, for even the staunchest opposition to democratically elected government does not usually object to the idea of government itself. The objection is to the current government and existing laws, and the sought change is not lawlessness but changes in the government and the law. (Wasserstorm 1970: 274-304)

This is why theorists such as Thoreau, Gandhi and King, while supporting the right to civil disobedience, maintain unequivocally the nonviolent character of the struggle. For they fear that violence crosses a dangerous border that will be difficult to overcome, once the battle has been won. (Thoreau [1849] 1993; Gandhi 1998: 111-122; King 1986)

Fanon breaks from this line of thought early in his work, but takes time to explain in detail the difference in his view. This view has a philosophical base and a political outcome. First, the oppressed and the oppressors are not on the same moral grounds. European ethics are good for the Europeans, as the fundamental protection of the social contract does exactly that – it protects the social contact, leaving disenfranchised groups armless against the biased settings of the social contract. If one is to except that Algerians must at all times refrain from violently demanding their basic human rights, then France can continue to colonize and oppress Algerians, while paying lip service to theoretical discussions about human rights. This is a Marxist argument – the philosophy of the bourgeois serves the bourgeois while claiming to be universalistic.

Second, Fanon asserts, since the social contract is French it does not and should not apply to Algerians. What this means is that the goal of the struggle is not to correct unjust laws or improve the political

representation of Africans in the French regime, but rather it is the abolishment of the French regime in Algeria. Fanon wants to break the social contract – a revolution of the political status of the colonized, not an improvement of their conditions.

Thus, Fanon does not grapple with the philosophical question of fighting the law and yet maintaining the rule of law. Fanon believes the French rule in Algeria must cease to exist. When this is the goal, there are no barriers to the use of brut-force. (Fanon 1952, [1961] 1963)

The only remaining inhibition is King's social and psychological discussion of the day after. Violence contaminates the spirit and thus stays with the person who committed to it. King warns the oppressed people of the world not to "*indulge in hate*", and not to forget that aim of the struggle is not a division between the races but a newfound relationship based on common respect and equality. (King [1957] 1986: 7-9)

Fanon offers an opposing psychological argument. The African, who has been subjugated, humiliated, beaten and tortured, and altogether dehumanized, needs violence to reassert his selfhood. The African cannot look the European in the eye as long as he continues to feel inferior to him. Only by actively, violently fighting and beating the European can the African regain his self-esteem, and only then will he be able to convene with the European on equal grounds and develop a relationship of mutual respect and equality. (Fanon [1961] 1963; Shenhav 2005: 2-3)

Conclusion

At the midst of the twenty first century's first decade, after the notorious 9/11, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, the continuation of the Palestinian' second Intifada and the eruption of

violent clashes between African-descendent minorities and the French police in the cities of France, the world seems far from closing the age of decolonization. Although European empires have collapsed and African colonies have gained independence, peace and quiet have yet to be achieved. At this point in time it is interesting to reread and compare the works of the spiritual mentor of decolonization, Frantz Fanon, and one of the greatest advocates of active nonviolent civil-disobedience, Martin Luther King.

In this web site, I have attempted to outline the ideas of both of these men, the similarities and differences in their life stories, the political and social situations and institutions they fought against and those they supported, and the changes and dialectics in their thought throughout the years of their respective activity.

Both men believed oppression and denial of rights are things that must be fought against. Both believed the disenfranchised should unite in their struggle for change. Both grew disillusioned with the probability that change will occur within the oppressing side, without the action of the oppressed. Both were disappointed with the moderate and left leaning among the oppressing side.

King was a religious man, who believed *“God is on the side of truth and justice”*. (King [1957] 1986: 9) Fanon proclaimed no such faith in divine intervention. King envisioned a world where persons of all colors, religions and ethnicities would live together without racism and biased. Fanon most likely aspired for such a world as well, but he was not as optimistic as King, and he was certainly not willing to “turn the other cheek” or except restrictions to the struggle, especially if the stronger side, in an uneven battle, set up these restrictions.

King, in his final years proclaimed similar sentiments, but he was unwilling to risk the future, by descending into violence. ‘The day after we have won, what shall we do with the violence within us?’ He asked. ‘How will we look the white man in the face, when for hundreds of

years we have grown accustom to looking down when we face them?’ replayed Fanon.

When looking at the ongoing Palestinian – Israeli conflict, we can see as a current example of this dilemma. Does independence have to be taken by force, for the Palestinians to regain their self-respect after 40 years of Israeli occupation and after never truly being independent? Will the ongoing psychological and sociological effects of suicide bombings and armed conflict from childhood, leave traumatic scars in the hearts and minds of young Palestinians long after they achieve sovereignty?

These are difficult question, which the Fanon-King comparison only intensifies, but does not begin to answer.

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