Considerable attention is paid in the “Third World” to the theories of Frantz Fanon on how to achieve liberation. These theories are discussed by a research student in Economic History at Strathclyde University in an article which first appeared in Marxism Today.

FANON was born on the island of Martinique in 1925 and experienced at first hand the condition of being a “native,” i.e., a colored person, in a colonial society. The exploration and analysis of the personal effects of this condition, formed the subject, somewhat slanted towards Freudian jargon and concepts, of his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, published when he was 27. In France he studied medicine, specialising in psychiatry at the psychiatric hospital at Blida in Algeria.

His experiences there during the revolution, when he was obliged to treat both members of the repressive forces and their victims, and witnessed the diabolical effects of torture on both sides, caused Fanon to become an active participant. He commenced by training Algerian patriots how to control their nervous and physical reactions when engaged in dangerous missions, eventually he served the Provisional Government in a leading diplomatic capacity, particularly in Ghana, where he was able to observe the progress of a colonial revolution very different from the Algerian. In 1961 he was sent to the United States of America mortally sick with leukemia and died in most distressing circumstances, being left helpless and untended in his hotel room by the Americans until practically in his death agonies.

Fanon’s two major works are *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, 1965 (originally *L’An Cinq de la Revolution Algerienne*, 1959) and *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1965 (originally *Les Damnes de la Terre*, 1961) written shortly afterwards. A collection of pieces on the theme of *Towards the African Revolution* was published posthumously in 1964.

**Revolutionary Nationality and Consciousness**

The *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* might be described as a description and celebration of the creation of a revolutionary nationality and consciousness, and *The Wretched of the Earth*
as an investigation of the social forces which were to mould the futures of the emerging African states. Both, like all his writings, are highly polemical in tone. Fanon is not a sober controversialist and he prefers to make his points in broad outline illustrated by a striking example or two, rather than build up his case by massive and elaborate accumulations of statistical detail. The dual insight which he gained as a colored person and a trained psychologist is always present, and it can be safely said that nothing else ever written gives an outsider such a vital perception of what it actually feels like to be colonised, despised and regarded as an item of livestock or a feature of the natural environment.

Is the "native lazy, unco-operative and sly, a thief and a liar?" Yes, says Fanon, of course he is, in the absence of political resistance, these are the only weapons he can use to sabotage the colonial machine. Then again, the "native" is described as backward, and not only in the economic sense. He is insanely suspicious of modern technique, especially medicine, he clings obstinately to medieval superstitions and modes of behaviour, he inflicts the most senseless and masochistic rigors on his own person, heedless of the well-intentioned advice purveyed by the occupying powers' welfare services. Perfectly true, agrees Fanon, and proceeds to demonstrate that there is every justification for acting thus.

Such considerations form the subject of Studies in a Dying Colonialism. The Western ethic (despite the latter-day philosophies of pessimism and decadence) values man, science, progress, culture and spiritual development. That is only for home consumption though. There is of course a total divorce between Western values and the colonial facts of the matter. All state power rests in the last resort on violence, but in the colonies this relation assumes a particularly uninhibited and barefaced character. Colonial rule is violence perpetually and systematically practised against the colonised population.

Having robbed the colonised people of their independence, their land and their bread, having removed them from all possibility of science, progress, culture, etc., imperialism is still not satisfied. It seeks to pulverise their indigenous culture, to make them accept their past as a dark barbarism from which conquest has fortunately rescued them, not only to adopt the oppressor's standards but to confess they fall far short of them and that for the foreseeable future their essential nature is and must remain savage and worthless.

It is not to be wondered at that the "natives" refuse to submit to this spiritual rape and prostitution. But what alternative is there? What other source of values can they turn to? The pre-colonial type of existence is broken, meaningless and obsolete,
but it is all they have. The colonised people maintain their dignity as best they can by clinging to the dirty rags of their murdered culture. They emphasise traditions and taboos that have no significance in modern conditions, obscurantist superstitions take on a new lease of life. There is a violent refusal of the oppressors’ science and knowledge even when these would be objectively beneficial. The colonialists, according to temperament, wax indignant at the colossal difficulty of teaching these savages anything or else smile indulgently at the quaint folklore.

And so we discover the typical stereotype of the colonial society, primitive, stagnant, unchanging, a race whose only possible use to science or human advancement is to serve as the raw material for anthropological studies.

*Man Changes Himself*

The theme of the *Studies* is the process by which in changing the world — in this case by revolutionary war — man changes himself. Fanon shows how the Algerian nationality was forged by the demands of the struggle and how the people discovered a capability for the most advanced forms of organisation and developed the ability to use the most up-to-date techniques — and without any assistance at that — when to do so ceased to be a sign of surrender to the alien ethic and became instead a necessary requirement for prosecuting the war. Knowledge and applied science are never accepted simply on their merits, but judged by the company they keep.

Fanon shows this process occurring in four major areas of Algerian society; the treatment of women, family life, communications and medicine. He traces the process by which the Algerians discarded the old protective prejudices and adopted for their own use the devices they had formerly rejected because of their association with the foreign oppressor. The ancient obscurantist values, artificially preserved in the hermetically sealed environment of colonial society, crumble away. A new ethic and a morality is born, one in which national liberation and the revolution become the supreme goals. The natives recover their dignity and intellect. A new man emerges.

From the colonisers’ point of view one of the most scandalous of the traditional Algerian practices was the custom of veiling and excluding their women folk. The absence of the veil was a badge proclaiming the acceptance of alien standards, and hence the “liberation of Algerian woman” took its place among the foremost battle cries of the Foreign Legion parachutists and the “Algerie Francaise” *pieds noirs*. Eventually the unveiling was accomplished
— by the Algerians themselves in the interests of revolutionary effectiveness. The use of women for revolutionary work of one sort or another in the European quarters of the cities, the presence of female soldiers in the Marquis, made its existence totally redundant. Eventually it was worn or left off according to the exigencies of the situation or the needs of disguise. It had lost its sacred character altogether, and, correspondingly, the position of women in colonial society had been profoundly transformed in a progressive and liberating direction.

Likewise, with family relationships in general. The authoritarian, ritualised patterns and behaviour dissolved when patriotism and the necessities of the revolution rather than patriarchal respect and obedience became the primary consideration of young Algerian men and women, when husbands and wives were separated for long periods and the women left to shift for themselves or, as frequently happened, suffered outrage and torture for the sake of the national cause, when millions were uprooted from their ancestral habitations and herded into concentration camps. Entirely new conceptions of marriage and sexual roles came into existence, based on equality and respect for shared revolutionary endeavour.

Before the outbreak of the revolution in November 1954, few Algerians cared to possess a radio. The official station, “Radio Alger”, was the voice of the occupying power, and its programs, which were in the habit of regularly glorifying the episodes of the European conquest and domination, provided an important cultural cement for the scattered settler population. Algerians remained indifferent.

With the commencement of the armed struggle a burning need was manifest to link the entire people to the movement and provide a country wide news service on the revolutionary progress. This was all the more urgent as the colons largely succeeded in suppressing the democratic press in Algeria. The FLN thereupon established its own broadcasting station, “The Voice of Algeria,” and Algerian attitudes to the radio were transformed. Listening to the “Voice” and combating the French jamming became an intense, communal, patriotic activity and incredible risks were run to possess a set.

In the forefront of the colonialist’s philanthropic self-image and serving as one of the cardinal justifications for his regime, stood his medical services. As indicated, the Algerian attitude was somewhat different. By and large the subject population refused to be treated, and on the rare occasions its members consented to it they did so in the most lackadaisical and reluctant fashion. Not too surprising, when it is remembered that the doctor appeared
invariably in the guise of an over-lord, usually arrogant and contemptuous, behaving generally like a vet rather than a physician, often being a landlord or other form of direct exploiter into the bargain. Suspicion prevailed that deaths in hospitals were not invariably due to natural causes, and the less agreeable aspects of treatment were often looked upon as simply another variety of European sadism.

Then the time arrived when medical supplies, next to munitions, were the key to victory. Once more the popular outlook changed dramatically. Desperate courage was employed to procure them against impossible odds. The people enthusiastically directed their attention towards acquiring skill at hygiene and first-aid, and went on to master the most elaborate procedures required to establish a nation-wide medical service.

A concluding section of the book deals with a different theme, the passing over of considerable numbers of the European population to service in the revolutionary struggle. It details the invaluable assistance received by the FLN from the most unlikely quarters among the Europeans — the students, the Jewish community, even police officers, and an astonishingly large number of the rural settlers themselves. The political maturity of the FLN at this period is demonstrated by the fact that it could win and use such people, and proves a salutary reminder that, in contrast to what Stokely Carmichael and certain others may assert, any individual, no matter what his class origins may be, can join up with the oppressed class and participate in their struggle. These people, too, became Algerians.

So out of the blood and the fire a new people is forged and the nation is born. *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* does not go beyond this point. It does not inspect the fate of the nation after it emerges from the colonial situation.

*Parties and Politicians*

*The Wretched of the Earth* takes up from there, and is broader both in political and geographical scope. After a brief initial consideration of the debasement which colonial rule works on native culture and psychology, exemplified in such phenomena as intertribal vendettas, animism, etc., Fanon directs his attention to the political trends in the emerging African nations which he sees as most significant for their future. Basically the work might be called a critique of the nationalist parties which evolved during the course of the independence struggle and which usually ended by taking over as the successors to the colonial power, almost universally on a negotiated basis and without open warfare.
Fanon is particularly concerned with what he claims to be the fact that these parties and the politicians who lead them are nearly always based on and draw their strength from the towns and do not relate in a meaningful fashion to the rural masses. This factor is one major weakness, and alongside it the parties have certain other highly undesirable characteristics. In the minds of the leaders, it is alleged, politics appears primarily as a dialogue with the colonial authorities at the seat of power, with the object of winning a series of concessions within the framework tolerated by the colonialists which lead to a negotiated independence at the end of the road, with black faces substituted for white in the government apparatus, but no other significant changes. In other words these leaders are mainly interested in power and privilege for themselves and their main quarrel with the colonial regime is that it fails to give them a satisfactory share of the booty wrung from the people at large.

These leaders are in fact frauds. They organise the militancy of the masses, at least the urban masses, but they look upon it as their private property, to be turned on or off like a tap, at suitable points in the process of negotiation with the imperial state. They have no intention of conceding any real say in affairs to their followers. They are full of distrust for the countryside, regard it as tribal, chief-ridden, backward and reactionary, believe (on the whole correctly) that in the countryside the colonialists find such popular support as they can count on. When they do give the peasants their attention they try to batter down the obscurantist traditions instead of using them to develop the struggle and in the process weaning the people away from them.

The last thing they try to do is prepare or organise the people for armed struggle, yet frequently they are taken by surprise when it breaks out nevertheless. In that case the town-based nationalist politicians attempt to use the revolt without identifying with it. Perhaps the colonialists throw them into jail all the same, but often enough they hasten to bargain, even to decolonise, before the situation gets entirely out of hand. In which event the nationalist party may even find itself as the government taking over and prosecuting the same repressive anti-popular war as the imperial power was engaged in before the change-over.

More often, however, what has happened is that the nationalist party achieved its objects without such a distressing eventuality. A new state came into being amid popular rejoicing with its flag, parliament, seat in UNO and all the trappings of national sovereignty.

The bright new image is soon tarnished, however, mutual suspicion remains between the town and the countryside, a great divide
separates the governors from the governed, the former in fact are closer in attitude and temperament to the previous masters than to their own subjects.

"Model" of Betrayal

Soon the state is divided, not merely between the new exploiters and those patriots who have the people's true interests at heart and have generally been excluded from office and power, but also between different factions of the ruling group itself, the “ins” who monopolise the sweets of office and the “outs” who desire to lay hold of them. Both these factions try to provide themselves with a political base, and since their aims are careerist and corrupt and so win no popular support, they turn to bargain with the most regressive elements in the rural districts. If the “outs” are making the running in this game we get parties based on chiefs, money lenders and rich peasants, demanding regional autonomy and tribal independence, endeavouring to circumvent and nullify the central government’s power over them. If the “ins” are working the trick, tribal obscurantism is mobilised against revolutionary opponents.

In any event the unity of the nation is disrupted, corruption and cynicism reign in the government, tribalism, superstition and rural idiocy renew their vigor while imperialism comes back triumphant in the shape of neo-colonialism. The entire process of liberation goes into reverse.

This is Fanon’s model of how revolutionary hopes are betrayed. While he proceeds to provide an explanation he is quite emphatic that the problem has its roots in the class basis of the nationalist parties, from the fact that they are primarily the creations of the colonial bourgeoisie and its intellectual collaborators.

Colonial Bourgeoisie

In the first place they win popular support by a range of anti-imperialist and even socialist-sounding slogans, but the leaders seldom take these slogans seriously, and hasten to exclude from their parties any persons or groups who actually do so. Nevertheless for a period the interests of the bourgeoisie — expulsion of the occupier — do coincide with the general interest and on this basis independence is won.

But these bourgeoisie have no future, because unlike their European counterparts 150 years ago they are not inventive, industrial and dynamic. They are, on the contrary, weak and corrupt, with an entirely parasitic role. In a world economy tightly sewn up by imperialist monopolies, and ruling pauperised and fragmented states, they cannot develop as a class by emulating the Japanese
and developing a powerful national capitalism. All they can do is exploit the economic channels previously established by imperialism and function as middle-men and Western business agents in the neo-colonial exploitation of the nation. Even when they go in for Africanisation it is not on a progressive basis but merely to secure a monopolistic grip on the national resources and the middleman role. The upshot of their practice is in the long run usually to exploit the people as intensely as the former masters, without even the excuse of developing the national economy by doing so:

Using two or three slogans these new colonists will demand an enormous amount of work from the agricultural labourers, in the name of the national effort of course. (p.124).

It is readily understandable that under pressure of these developments the national consciousness and the national party both go to pieces. Taking their cue from the elite, the labor classes in the towns betray chauvinistic attitudes towards "immigrants" — economic competitors from foreign African states:

If Europeans get in the way of the intellectuals and business bourgeoisie . . . for the mass of the people in the towns competition is represented principally by Africans of another nation . . . (p.126).

Regional and tribal exclusiveness flourish and often religious diversion exacerbates the process further. Nigeria is a tragic example of this process. Completely incapable of preserving even national unity, the African bourgeoisie is far less able to create the continental unity to which they pay pious tribute.

Disintegration of Party

Naturally the party disintegrates as well, degenerating into what is at best an arthritic administrative machine and at worst a gangster protection racket. No longer does it express the people's will to any extent at all, it is reduced to serving the state as an instrument of administrative discipline and pronouncement:

The party helps the government to hold the people down. It becomes more and more clearly anti-democratic, an implement of coercion. (p.138).

Even in this shabby task it is not given first place, for lacking the self-confident sophistication and skill of the Western bourgeoisie, the African one rules increasingly by demagogy and the leadership principle, combined with spectacular demonstrations of force, and the governing caste sinks deeper into insolence, corruption and arbitrariness. As the popular masses become more and more alienated from the regime, the leader, an heroic figure from the past is brought forward as a national mascot to confuse and distract the people:

The leader, who has behind him a lifetime of political action and devoted patriotism, constitutes a screen between the people and the rapacious bourgeoisie
since he stands surety for the ventures of that caste and closes his eyes to their insolence, their mediocrity and their fundamental immorality. He comes to the aid of the bourgeois caste and hides its manoeuvres from the people... Every time he speaks... he calls to mind his often heroic life, the struggles he has led... and the victories... he has achieved, thereby intimating clearly to the masses that they ought to go on putting their trust in him... These men who... have taken upon themselves the whole burden of the past... find themselves today, alas, at the head of a team of administrators who... proclaim that the vocation of their people is obey, to go on obeying and to be obedient to the end of time. (p.135).

As the history of the past few years demonstrates however, such gambits fail to save the elite. Incapable of governing on its own merits it depends to an ever-growing degree on the military and police forces and is eventually shoved aside by them.

Fanon has no hesitation in asserting that the only alternative to one version or another of this depressing scenario is for genuinely committed leaders to involve the people deeply in national planning at all levels, to cut free from colonial economic ties and to develop the party as a real expression of the people's will, being careful to keep the best party militants separate from administrative functions. The masses must be politically educated and consciously involved and the only way to prevent the army developing Bonapartist longings is to politicise it, to create correct political understanding among the soldiers. Nationalism is a blind alley unless an effective social and economic program is developed beyond the patriotic slogans. Fanon maintains categorically that the only real lines along which a newly liberated country can advance are socialist ones, and though he does not use the phrase he makes it quite clear that he means scientific socialism.

Points of Criticism

Such is the case presented by Frantz Fanon and it would be idle to deny that events since his death have borne out his analysis to a remarkable degree. Even so, there are points upon which marxists, while conceding the great strength of his arguments, might wish to voice dissent.

In the first place it is difficult to avoid the impression that in discussing the preconditions for colonial revolution he gives insufficient weight to circumstances which remain beyond the control of the revolutionaries. It might be assumed on the basis of Fanon's analysis that the only condition necessary to begin the struggle is the cultivation of an appropriate attitude of mind among the people. This rather one-sided emphasis and tendency towards political voluntarism, the suggestion almost that the strength of a revolutionary cause is essentially "in the mind" could be seriously misleading if it caused revolutionaries to ignore objective conditions and convince themselves that the imperialist
power was bound to succumb at any time to a sufficiently determined attack. However it is most unlikely that the Algerian revolution could have succeeded twenty years earlier, or that successful revolt will be possible in South Africa until the regime's strength is undermined by its own short-sightedness and more adequate international mobilisation against it.

In regard to international factors although Fanon pays tribute to the assistance rendered by the socialist camp to the colonial revolution, his work appears to lack an appreciation of the fact that it has only been made possible in the first place by the disruption and chaos created in the world imperialist system by the appearance, existence and advance of the socialist states, which have been the indispensable pivot for the anti-imperialist revolutions of the twentieth century. Even more, Fanon ignores or dismisses the contributions made by the organised working class in the metropolitan countries, maintaining that all strata of imperialist society have a share in colonial exploitation and that bribery from colonial plunder has hopelessly corrupted them. He values what help they may give to the colonial revolution but does not think it can ever amount to much.

It would be a distortion to imply that Fanon is entirely blind to the necessarily inter-linked nature of the struggle carried out by the socialist states, the working class in imperialist countries and the national liberation movement, but the notice he gives it is pretty perfunctory. There are elements of a narrow "Third Worldism" in his outlook.

Role of Violence

The aspect of Fanon's writings which has undoubtedly excited the most guilty and disapproving fascination on the part of academic commentators is the alleged emphasis on violence and the value of violence against the aggressor as a therapeutic activity in restoring the native's morale and self-respect. The attitude of such people to the colonial situation is, "we support your claims for a better deal of course, but don't get violent or we'll have to disapprove of you." Violence is looked upon by these people as a metaphysical abstraction of evil.

Since bourgeois society legitimises itself on the basis of free agreements and social contract those who are intellectually imprisoned in its ideology cannot bear to know that all class rule is a form of violence and that a movement which renounces its use under all circumstances, far from abolishing it, is merely sanctifying the infliction of one-sided violence by the ruling class. Fanon never lets them forget that the violence is there already and the only question at issue is its direction.
All the same he would seem to go beyond this to argue that the only genuine method of liberation is revolutionary war, and that negotiated political settlements with the colonial power are inevitable betrayals which entrench the middle class in power and lead on to counter-revolution. Although in many cases this claim has been justified by the event it has not, nevertheless, been invariably so. Guinea at least is managing to proceed along this road towards a socialist order of society and in Ghana, for all its weakness the Nkrumah government was by no means entirely discredited or politically bankrupt. Conversely, Algeria, the prime example in Africa of liberation by revolutionary war did not escape a military coup. Nor does it appear to be impossible, though admittedly very difficult and rare, for a party originally led by middle-class elements to transform itself into a genuinely popular movement carrying through the transformation of the economy and social life that all socialists regard as necessary. Julius Nyerere's TANU is arguably an example of this.

There is evidence for two things. Firstly that something more than revolutionary war is necessary to give a socialist orientation to emerging nations, and secondly that such war may not be essential.

Role of the Working Class

What has to be considered here is surely the role of the working class in the liberation movement and the new nation. Fanon has a very low opinion of its revolutionary capacities, believing that its relatively privileged position vis-a-vis the peasantry and the lumpen-proletariat will keep it quiescent, or at any rate, if independence is to eventuate in socialism, it must be the peasantry and rural proletariat, the most dispossessed class, which assumes the leadership, with the town proletariat playing a subordinate political role. He is very adamant on this point.

It would be arrogant and dogmatic simply to say "Fanon is entirely mistaken on this, his argument is entirely un-marxist," but it may certainly be noted that his description of the colonial working class as the social stratum which is "most pampered" by the imperialists is wildly inaccurate. Relatively well off they may be in some cases (though not always) compared to the absolute destitution in the countryside, but the "most pampered" sections are certainly the immediate tools of the colonial power, soldiers, police, state functionaries and the like together with the trading and mercantile sections most closely involved with the imperialist economy.

In any event, has it not always been the case that in nations where socialist revolution has occurred the situation was essentially
similar, and that the working class assumed the leadership because it was the most politically advanced and the best organised section of the exploited people, circumstances which often go along with being the most privileged.

Russia in 1917 is far from being an exact parallel with, say, Senegal, in 1968, but the similarities are probably more significant than the differences. Again in Cuba, the revolution's military victory was won in the countryside but its socialist direction was only definitely established once it had also gained the towns and could employ the political experience of the urban working class.

Fanon's conception in this matter must be compared with that of Lenin. With his profound understanding of the absolutely critical importance of the peasantry to the socialist revolution in underdeveloped countries, Lenin made the keynote of his strategy the link and alliance between proletariat and peasants, with the proletariat always providing the revolutionary initiative and political leadership. It is not any special metaphysical virtue of the proletariat which makes this arrangement necessary, merely the fact that it is this class which handles the sector of the economy and the mode of production which is of over-mastering importance in the life and development of modern communities and ones which are striving to modernise. It is the working class which has its hands on the levers of the future.

Passionate Involvement

However, if these are weaknesses in Fanon, they are the weaknesses of his strength, which rests in his passionate involvement with "the wretched of the earth," the "criminals of want" and a blazing concern for their dignity and human demands. He remains one of the major political theorists of the twentieth century. For Western man his words are salutary. For anyone who reads Fanon with sympathy none of the imperialist myths — the civilising mission, the native's backwardness — can ever again command the slightest flicker of acceptance.

The utter corruption of every human action and relation in the colonial atmosphere is exposed brilliantly. For the peoples of the dispossessed nations not only in Africa, but in Asia and Latin America too, he was at once an unqualified partisan and at the same time a harsh critic of their shortcomings and of pseudo-revolutionary waffle. At a time like the present, when the colonial revolution is meeting phenomenal difficulties yet still surging irresistibly forward, the mature understanding and commentary which he would have drawn from his mature understanding of it would have been invaluable. It is an immense tragedy he did not survive to continue his work.