

Decolonising the Self: Gandhi and Fanon on Violence and Agency

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There is a tendency to describe the phenomenon of decolonisation in technical terms: as the ‘withdrawal’ of a colonial power and their colonies’ subsequent acquisition of political independence.¹ Indeed, in the two decades following WWII, the number of people living under British rule went from 100 million to five million, and dozens of new states were created.² But something is missing from such a description—the effects of oppression on the oppressed. Colonisation and its undoing were not merely about the control of inanimate resources—they affected real people, constituted and re-constituted their lived experiences, and influenced their self-understanding. I prefer a more encompassing definition of decolonisation as an aspirational discourse: a set of expectations of radical social and cultural change; ‘a movement for moral justice’; an emancipatory ideology seeking to liberate not only the nation but aspects of humanity itself.³ Defining decolonisation in this way both more accurately reflects the ambitions of anti-colonial activists, and exposes the frequent contradictions in their activities. Aiming to right the wrongs of the past, the anti-colonial movement often fell into the very patterns of violence and oppression it sought to eradicate. War in a variety of forms was ‘a defining experience’ of the post-1945 collapse of empires⁴—and it is this combination of utopian dreams and horrific violence that makes decolonisation so complicated.

¹ See, for example, the Oxford English Dictionary definition.

² Todd Shepard, ‘What is Decolonization?’ in *Voices of Decolonization: A Brief History with Documents* (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2015), p. 10.

³ Prasenjit Duara, ‘Introduction: the decolonization of Asia and Africa in the twentieth century,’ in Duara, ed. *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then* (Routledge, 2004), p. 2.

⁴ Martin Shipway, ‘The Late Colonial State at War: Insurgency, Emergency and Terror,’ in *Decolonization and its Impact: A Comparative Approach to the End of the Colonial Empires* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), p. 140.

Two anti-colonial figures, Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948) and Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), are noteworthy in that they interrogated these complex and often fraught relationships between decolonisation, violence, and agency. They share a conceptualisation of the colonial structure that understands its deep influence on the self-perception of the colonised; and an aim to undo those pervasive effects and construct what Fanon calls ‘a new humanity’⁵ through radical political action. This essay focuses on their point of divergence—the most effective way to achieve this common goal. While Gandhi was an absolute pacifist—committed to *ahimsa*, nonviolent resistance as the mechanism for achieving Indian independence—Fanon called for violence in the decolonisation of Algeria. A comparative study of their disparate philosophies, and the two instances of decolonisation they both inspired and experienced, allows us to evaluate the extent to which the anti-colonial movement lived up to its own stated expectations. Fanon’s theory of violence effectively mobilised anti-colonial support, but the new Algerian society it constructed ironically replicated colonial power dynamics. Gandhi’s influence on Indian nation-building, by contrast, inspired an attempt to transcend these dynamics. Although the violence of partition and Gandhi’s assassination force us to question the realism of the idea that humanity can reinvent itself peacefully, the articulation of such a hope retains its fascination.

So, in this essay I do something complicated and perhaps problematic for an historian. I combine two strands of analysis that don’t necessarily align: historical assessment of the two approaches, and a normative claim about which theory constructs a more preferable form of humanity. But I do this because of a deeply held belief that the past is the key to understanding the world in which we currently live. At a time of profound contest over the meaning and constitutive elements of ‘self-determination’ and ‘sovereignty’ as applicable to Indigenous Australians and other

⁵ Frantz Fanon, ‘Concerning Violence’ in *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington tr., (Grove Press, 1963), p. 30.

oppressed groups globally,⁶ this sort of evaluation will allow us—without falling into the trap of unmitigated ‘presentism’—to draw some (limited) conclusions about the process of self-transformation that follows oppression.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is a towering figure in the history of decolonisation. First involved in the struggle of the Indian community for human rights in South Africa, on his return to India in 1915 he became involved in anti-British activity, and was Leader of the Indian National Congress from 1921. Although qualified as a barrister in England, he was scathing about the contradictions and excesses of Western ‘civilisation’.⁷ His critique is compelling in its acknowledgement of the impact of colonisation on the Indian psyche. Modern imperialism involved hegemonic force: a subtle, insidious domination of the mind, a more invasive form of force than physical or legal coercion. The undoing of such processes would logically require their absolute overthrow—the overthrow not just of institutions, but of ideas. Most importantly for Gandhi, this meant a radical reimagining of the individual and, by extension, collective self. Decolonising India was about reclaiming Indian identity.

Gandhi’s mission was to ‘spread truth and non-violence among mankind in place of violence and non-truth’⁸. A deep loathing of the exploitative violence he witnessed in South Africa and in

⁶ See, for example, the debates surrounding the concepts of *terra nullius* and ‘Native Title’ and their relationship to the proposition of Indigenous sovereignty (especially following the famous 1992 High Court of Australia decision *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)* (1992) 175 CLR 1); and the debate over Constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians. Glenn Coulthard’s *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014) is also significant in its use of Fanon to problematise the ‘politics of recognition’ in contemporary Canada. Note, as well, the influence of Fanon’s theory of violence on the Palestinian liberation movement which explicitly draws on his philosophy to justify and explain its use of violence. These are just a few of the current debates over decolonisation and identity—and it is clear that Gandhi and Fanon’s theories of violence and agency are important aspects of the conversation. My hope is that a nuanced understanding of the history of decolonisation will continue to inform and enrich our current debates over the same issues.

⁷ See Mohandas Gandhi, ‘Chapter VII: Civilisation’ and ‘Chapter VIII: Why Was India Lost?’ in *Hind Swaraj; or, Indian Home Rule* (1909), pp. 18-27.

⁸ Gandhi, quoted in Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* (Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 97.

India resonates throughout his work. Gandhi presents in its place an echo of Thoreau's 'civil disobedience': a paradigm of non-violent resistance which he called *satyagraha*, 'truth force'—'opposing error in the shape of unjust laws'⁹. This form of resistance to colonial rule is 'the weapon of the strongest' and yet 'excludes the use of violence in any shape or mean'.¹⁰ Connecting the apparently contradictory modes of nonviolence and power is crucial to Gandhi's argument: he tells the Indian people that 'true' power comes from each individual exercising restraint, or *swaraj*, self-rule. In his 1909 book on Indian Home-Rule, *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi proclaimed: 'home rule [independence] must be grounded on the control that leaders and citizens exercise over themselves.'¹¹ In understanding the individual as a microcosm for the national, Gandhi aimed to transform subjects of power into those exercising power. What is most interesting is the way his argument complicates notions of activity and passivity: he suggests very little by way of 'actual' change—and yet he imbues passivity with political purpose. This linguistic and psychological shift underscores Gandhi's central thesis: empowerment is about self-perception.

Non-violent resistance to British rule did, in fact, come to dominate anti-colonial discourse and activity in the decades leading to Independence, with three phases of organised noncooperation: the strikes of 1919-1922, the salt campaign of 1927-1932, and the 1942 'Quit India' movement.¹² A useful tool in destabilising the British Raj because cooperation with local leaders was precisely the mechanism on which they relied to maintain minority rule, the movement was also opportunely timed to match growing international anti-violence sentiment and support for self determination in the wake of WWI and Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Point Plan. But accurately measuring the effectiveness of *ahimsa* is, as Judith Brown points out, complicated. By Gandhi's own criteria it

⁹ Mohandas Gandhi, 'Evidence Before Disorders Inquiry Committee' in Dennis Dalton, ed., *Gandhi: Selected Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1996), pp. 61-62.

¹⁰ Gandhi, 'Evidence', p. 62.

¹¹ Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, p. 52 (Chapter XIV), see also p. 89 (Chapter XX).

¹² Judith M. Brown, 'Gandhi as Nationalist Leader, 1915-1948' in Brown, Judith M. and Parel, Anthony, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 64-68.

would be impossible to measure, as *swaraj* requires constant effort towards self-reformation. In terms of historical causation, critics are divided as to the extent to which the non-cooperation movement can claim responsibility for Independence. There is a strong argument that it was broader economic factors and the diminishing significance of India to the British Empire, not *satyagraha*, which led to Independence.¹³ Especially problematic in measuring the success of nonviolence was the violence that accompanied the partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan.

The eruption of violence following partition—the Great Calcutta Killing of August 1946 and the struggle for the Punjab in 1947 are the most famous examples—seemingly dealt a death blow to Gandhi’s ideal. According to Gyanendra Pandey, the ‘truth’ of partition lay, at least for its victims (whether Sikh, Hindu or Muslim), in the violence done to them¹⁴—the connection between violence and decolonisation is not incidental but inherent; they are inextricably intertwined. Historians estimate that as many as one million people were killed and 12.5 million uprooted.¹⁵ Among survivors, ‘everyday’ violence created the perception that ‘one could be safe only among the members of one’s own community’, consolidating loyalties and simultaneously fostering hostility and suspicion.¹⁶ The long-lasting effects of such violence is especially evident in the form of the narratives the survivors constructed: ‘violence and community are constitutive of each other’ in a story where only the ‘other’ is capable of barbarity.¹⁷ Pandey’s impressive collection of testimonies reveals dual tendencies in survivors’ processing of the events of 1947: in order to maintain the ‘fiction’ of a safe community, violence was either othered, marked as occurring ‘elsewhere’; or

¹³ Brown, ‘Gandhi as Nationalist Leader’, p. 65.

¹⁴ Gyanendra Pandey, ‘Community and Violence: Recalling Partition’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 32, No. 32 (1997), p. 2037.

¹⁵ Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, ‘The 1940s: Triumph and Tragedy’ in *A Concise History of Modern India* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 221.

¹⁶ Metcalf, ‘The 1940s: Triumph and Tragedy’, pp. 221-222.

¹⁷ Pandey, ‘Community and Violence’, p. 2037.

redefined as ‘martyrdom’ and thus not violence at all.¹⁸ Self-immolation is a heroic sacrifice sanctifying the inner domain of the community; revenge is displaced onto the evilness of the other inhabiting the outside. Both are acts of violence done as a duty, as a response to the times, securing the life of the nation.¹⁹ This process of ‘narrativising’ violence, incorporating it as part of collective identity, undermines Gandhi’s most central premise: that the empowering of the powerless is possible and preferable in the absence of violence.

In the face of such a reality, Gandhi’s assertion that ‘the force of love and pity is infinitely greater than the force of arms’²⁰ rings hollow. He was assassinated on 30 January 1948 by Nathuram Godse, a member of both the All-India Hindu Grand-assembly (*Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha*), and National Patriotic Organisation (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*), groups which advanced a vision of India as a land of, and for, Hindus; a ‘mystical nationalism with racial overtones’ diametrically opposed to Gandhi’s inclusive vision.²¹ The tragedy of Gandhi’s ending lies in its meaning for *ahimsa*. The assassination brought back into public view this exclusionary and violent Hindu nationalism. In fact, Gandhi had always recognised the difficulty in realising his ideal: ‘Man cannot for a moment live without consciously or unconsciously committing outward *himsa* (violence)... He will be constantly growing in self-restraint and compassion, but he can never become entirely free from outward *himsa*’.²² The naïveté of proposing as a course of political action an ideal that he himself acknowledged as unattainable leaves us with a sense of Gandhi’s argument as unfinished.

¹⁸ Pandey, ‘Community and Violence’, pp. 2041-2042, 2045.

¹⁹ Pandey, ‘Community and Violence’, p. 2037.

²⁰ Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, Chapter XV, p. 57.

²¹ Metcalf, ‘The 1940s: Triumph and Tragedy’, pp. 228-229.

²² Mohandas Gandhi, *Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Beacon Press, 1993), p. 439.

Frantz Fanon, Afro-Caribbean philosopher, psychiatrist and revolutionary, picks up where Gandhi left off. Influenced by personal experiences of racism, especially abuses of the Martiniquan people by the French Navy during the Vichy regime of WWII,²³ Fanon's radical theory of the psychopathy of racism and colonialism, and his accommodation of violent expressions of anti-colonial anger is, in many ways, more realistic and satisfying than *ahimsa*. Fanon describes the experience of being constrained by a white gaze: 'I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all historicity... I was responsible at the same time for my body, my race, for my ancestors'.²⁴ The subtle ways that white privilege decomposes the visible body; the way that racism impinges upon human transcendence and alienates a person from themselves; the idea of 'cultural lethargy'²⁵—these, for Fanon, are the issues at the heart of decolonisation; and this piece of his analysis rings particularly true in its thoughtfulness.

Such a description of the ways that European supremacist narratives make their way into native consciousness is, of course, similar to Gandhi's exploration of the way that discourses of Western 'civilisation' obscured and distorted Indian self-understanding. For both, decolonising the nation was ultimately about decolonising the self. But although Gandhi recognises the accompanying need for radical self-transformation, he provides no outlet for the anger which oppression creates; nor does he propose a model for collective transformation. For Fanon, the experience of oppression—the systematic limiting of opportunity because of membership in a particular group—is not something that the individual can undo, as Gandhi claims, internally, or alone. In acknowledging the psycho-affective internalisation of inferiority, Fanon creates the space for emancipation, or 'disalienation'. 'Why not the simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?'²⁶ Under disalienation, both oppressor and oppressed travel to

²³ David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Life* (Granta, 2000), p. 56.

²⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Markmann (Grove Press, 1968), p. 112.

²⁵ Fanon, 'Concerning Violence', p. 92.

²⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 231.

the world of the other; disalienation comprises mutual, dialogic recognition and ‘authentic communication’ between compartments of society. This movement is transformative; it constitutes an ontological shift, a change in one’s very being: ‘I want the world to recognise, with me, the open door of every consciousness’.²⁷

The complicated and innovative step in Fanon’s theory is the primacy he gives to violence in achieving disalienation: ‘decolonisation is always violent’, a ‘programme of complete disorder’.²⁸ This is an accurate observation of the social upheaval that decolonisation often entailed; in Algeria, violence was an important factor in the build-up of pressure on the French to grant independence. Political efforts had failed: although the 1947 Algerian Statute ambitiously proposed, among other reforms, a system of local administration and recognition of Arabic as an official language, by 1954 virtually none of the Statute had been enacted.²⁹ While the failure of reforms did not make insurrection inevitable, ‘it deprived Algerian nationalist aspirations of any conceivable legal outlet’ and was thus crucial in creating the conditions for the onset of disorder.³⁰ Fanon’s theory of violence is descriptively useful here—it helps to account for the breakdown of political efforts to achieve Algerian nationalisms. According to Fanon, as a transformation of the self, decolonisation will always be a bottom up rather than top down process.³¹ Thus political efforts to reform Algeria would never have been enough; the violence that broke out in November 1954 was inevitable.

But beyond the descriptive claim, Fanon’s theory also makes a normative one: violence is an important, morally justifiable tool in achieving national liberation. This shifts the focus of his argument from determinism to the agency of the *Front de Libération Nationale*, National Liberation

²⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 232.

²⁸ Fanon, ‘Concerning Violence’, p. 29.

²⁹ Shipway, ‘The Late Colonial State at War’, p. 151.

³⁰ Shipway, ‘The Late Colonial State at War’, p. 152.

³¹ Fanon, ‘Concerning Violence’, p. 33.

Front (FLN).³² The FLN issued a proclamation on 1 November 1954 promising to restore ‘the sovereign, democratic and social Algerian state within the framework of Islamic principles’.³³ In a culmination of a decade of political struggle, the revolution was launched with thirty simultaneous attacks across Algeria. By 1956 nearly all the nationalist organisations in Algeria had joined (or been coercing into joining) the FLN. In March 1962, after conflict had claimed the lives of an estimated 1.5 million people,³⁴ the French government and the FLN signed the Evian Accords cease-fire. In July it was approved by referendum in Algeria and full independence followed. There is a straightforward (and according to Fanon, justifiable) causal link here between revolutionary violence and independence. Re-inventing the relationship between the settler and the native requires that we look at its root: ‘their first encounter was marked by violence’, the ‘agents of the government speak the language of pure force’, and thus to achieve independence the native needs to ‘claim’ that same violence as his/her own.³⁵ Native identity, previously constructed by their oppressors, could now be formed as a result of self-determination. Indeed, revolutionary violence was distinctively ideological—contemporary prevailing discourse talked about the battle for the ‘hearts and minds of the population’.³⁶ Violence, as a proactive mode of behaviour, thus fulfils for Fanon the same purpose that nonviolence did for Gandhi: it transforms passive subjects of power into those who wield it.

Yet there are problems with Fanon’s justification of violence. The first is an internal philosophical contradiction: his idea of decolonisation as ‘the meeting of two forces, opposite to each other by their very nature’³⁷ is confusing given the emphasis on mutuality and communication

³² Shipway, ‘The Late Colonial State at War’, pp. 143-144.

³³ Shipway, ‘The Late Colonial State at War’, p. 150.

³⁴ Marnia Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: from Algiers to Baghdad* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

³⁵ Fanon, ‘Concerning Violence’, pp. 30-33.

³⁶ Shipway, ‘The Late Colonial State at War’, p. 166.

³⁷ Fanon, ‘Concerning Violence’, p. 30.

with the ‘other’ elsewhere in his works. But perhaps more important is the way he organises the relationship between violence and sense of self. According to Fanon, decolonisation is ‘the replacing of a certain species of men by another species of men’. This language of ‘species’ is central to his analysis of colonisation’s effects—spoken of in zoological terms such as foulness, swarms, colonised peoples absorb those negative and inhuman self-understandings.³⁸

Decolonisation, then, is about reclaiming the humanity of the colonised. But what kind of humanity does violence construct? There was a huge human and parallel moral cost to the FLN’s tactics. The Battle of Philippeville in 1955, in which 123 civilians were killed and the FLN allegedly committed atrocities such as chopping babies into pieces and raping and disembowelling women, and the Oran massacre of 1962 which occurred after the ceasefire and resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths, are only two examples.³⁹ That there was political reasoning to these acts is morally irrelevant. In a way that is ironically similar to Gandhi’s naiveté in thinking that oppression can be countered internally, Fanon’s assumption that violence used in wars of decolonisation will remain untainted is obtuse. From the perspective of the agency-construction that Fanon is concerned with—the transformation of ‘spectators’ into ‘privileged actors with the grandiose glare of history’s floodlights upon them’⁴⁰—he is advocating for the construction not only of an agentic identity for the Algerian people, but also a deeply violent one.

The final complication in Fanon’s argument is the way that he falls into the very colonial structures that he criticises. Torture practices of the French Army were a defining element of the Algerian War,⁴¹ reflecting colonial structures of power and punishment. If decolonisation is about the dismantling of colonial power dynamics, these parallel atrocities should logically turn anti-

³⁸ Fanon, ‘Concerning Violence’, p. 34.

³⁹ Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire*.

⁴⁰ Fanon, ‘Concerning Violence’, p. 30.

⁴¹ See Shipway, ‘The Late Colonial State at War’ pp. 164-165 and Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire* for detailed descriptions of various torture methods used during the War.

colonial thinkers away from violence. Gandhi made such a point—*satyagraha* would not only transform the individual who practiced it, but would also reveal the immorality of the oppressors to the oppressors themselves by transcending their rules of engagement. And yet, in the French-Algerian War, no party was untouched by the ‘stain’ of abusive and transgressive violence.⁴² It is Fanon’s concession to colonial violence that constitutes the greatest moral flaw of his argument— notwithstanding its useful function in achieving Algerian independence. By contrast, Gandhi’s commitment to a recognisable form of moral humanity is consistent with anti-colonial hopes of a better world—although it was an ideal that proved hard, even impossible, to achieve. While Fanon’s admittance of violence may be realistic, if decolonisation is an aspirational discourse, then an ideal which is practically unattainable may turn out to be a perfect guiding light.

Decolonisation is about the construction of political agency for peoples treated as non-agents under colonialism. Theories both of nonviolence and violence may achieve this broad aim by empowering and mobilising colonised peoples to fight oppression. And yet, if decolonisation has aspirations to liberate aspects not only of the nation but of humanity, then it is Gandhi’s *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* which provide the more persuasive theory of self-determination.

⁴² Shipway, ‘The Late Colonial State at War’, p. 163.

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