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Bombed Thrice: An Existential Analysis of Attacks on Civilians in' The Battle of Algiers'

Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 film, *The Battle of Algiers* is a work of art that reflects the complexity and tragedy of Algeria's efforts to relinquish itself from France's colonial grip. The Algerian War was a topic of discussion for many twentieth century philosophers, namely Simone de Beauvoir, Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, all of whom had a personal stake in the issue (each being French and/or Algerian). During the Algerian War, atrocities such as torture and civilian bombing were prominent on both sides, and urban-guerilla style warfare complicated military encounters.

Pontecorvo's film highlighted socio-political tensions between France and Algeria and had an uncanny ability to evoke visceral reactions that could be likened to the works of writers such as Quentin Tarantino. One particularly intense and thought provoking scene was when three Algerian women prepare for and execute a bombing in the French district. The women working for the Algerian Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN) disguise themselves as French women, removing their traditional veils and cutting their hair, each with a basket to receive a bomb once in French territory. The women then cross from the Casbah (Algerian district) into the French district, largely unnoticed or in one case, even catcalled. They then receive their respective bombs and plant them: one in a cafe, one in a soda shop, and the third in what appears to be a department store. After the women leave their drop off points, each bomb detonates one after another, killing scores of French civilians. Prior to the first detonation, the faces of some civilians are flashed on to the screen one after another.

This scene is arguably one of the most potent expressions of the French-Algerian conflict. It is not only rich in content, but highly relevant when put in an existential context. This paper will provide a philosophical analysis of the bombing scene in *The Battle of Algiers*, specifically through the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon that focus on colonialism and violence.

For the scene to be complete, it must first be understood that France had colonized Algeria nearly a century ago and that France's presence was felt politically, culturally, and spatially. Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* provides a thorough analysis of colonial dynamics which are especially applicable to the French occupation. According to Fanon, "The colonial world is a compartmentalized world" and "a world divided in two" [WE, 3]. Not only does he highlight the divisions of power, but in the film there is a concrete spatial division between the Algerian Casbah and the French quarters. The Casbah is separated from the French quarters by barbed wires, dogs, sandbags, and military outposts. This French imposed partition demonstrates their feelings toward the Algerians, they perceive them as a threat, as things that are to be fenced away and kept in check with violence and guns. Simone de Beauvoir spoke to this, saying, "the more miserable the [Arabs] were, the more contemptible they seemed [to the French], so much so that there was not any room for remorse" [EA, 109].

In order to enter French quarters unsuspected, the Algerian women had to disguise themselves. The act of disguising oneself has many philosophical implications. The women had to remove their veils which holds religious and cultural significance. They also had to cut their hair and adorn themselves with skirts and blouses that fit the bill of a frenchwoman and speak to fashion forward, consumer oriented norms. They are sacrificing both their outward appearance

and their culture and authenticity by adopting these garments. In a way reminiscent of Camus' fastidious assassin, these agents of destruction must destroy their personhood and be reduced to things to carry out their mission.

While continuing on the thread of deception, there are many pragmatic reasons for a bomb being the weapon of choice in guerilla warfare, but an existential analysis of this method of attack provides other valuable insights. A few attributes come to mind when thinking about a bomb; it is desperate, unstable, indifferent, covert. The baskets and purses used as vessels to carry the bombs cloak the ugly spectres and allow them to enter into the world of the real. Like the razor in the apple, the bomb enters the scene unexpectedly and has dire consequences. Irrespective of placement, a bomb does not care who or what it impacts, its sole purpose is to annihilate. Guerilla warfare is inherently vulgar; its nature requires deception.

One of the most significant and moving moments of this scene is when camera flashes between the faces of all the civilians before the bombing at the cafe. The overflow of humanity and vitality displayed through the faces is aptly juxtaposed with what will soon follow. The man who talks to the woman planting the bomb at the cafe further demonstrates the complexity of humanity. At a glance, he certainly does not seem to fit the bill of the colonizer, the savage brute. The dualistic schema of oppressed or. oppressor becomes complicated. In the montage of faces one sees men and women casually taking drags from their cigarettes, a young child eating ice cream, and the toothless smile of an old man. This sentiment is also noticeable when observing the second target, the soda shop filled with dancing teenagers.

After the first explosion, the youth at the soda shop witness ambulances rushing toward the rubble of the cafe, but give it little thought. Immediately after they resume their careless

jukebox dancing, and the second bomb detonates, tearing through the building. Staring at signs of tragedy elsewhere, the youth take a brief note of it but ignore it. The same could be said of France's reaction to the plight of the Algerians as well as the potential cost of looking the other way. Furthermore, these bombs go off in places of leisure. How ironic is it that despite the partition between the French and the Algerian, between the haves and the have nots, that violence is brought directly to the affluent and far removed? One could even argue that these bombings were physical manifestations of or attempts to demonstrate the oppression experienced by the Algerians, a distant cry to the indifferent masses who simply would have turned the other cheek otherwise.

One might ask, "why must the Algerians resort to violence in the first place?" We see Fanon himself make a related observation, saying,"...the colonized masses intuitively believe that their liberation must be achieved and can only be achieved by force" [WE, 33]. Put simply, this question is answered by the maxim, "violence begets violence." According to Fanon, "colonialism only loosens its hold when the knife is at its throat" [WE, 23]. As an act of desperation, the colonized resorted to what they thought was their only choice, and their experiences of intense oppression were finally expressed through a horrendous display. Fanon not only taps into the violent tendencies of the Algerian people, but also the parallels between their existential and literal desires when he says, "To blow the colonial world to smithereens is henceforth a clear image within the grasp and imagination of every colonized subject" [WE, 6].

Fanon also draws from an interesting text written by Engels that can be loosely applied to the bombings. Not only does violence beget violence, but it seems inevitable that matters would eventually intensify. Engels makes this clear when he says, "...instruments, the more perfect of

which vanquish the less perfect...which also implies that the producer of more perfect instruments of force, *vulgo* arms, vanquishes the producer of the less perfect instrument…" [Engels, 184]. Put colloquially, the FLN brought bombs to a gunfight in an attempt to beat the colonizers at their own game.

While Fanon diagnoses the problem of violence in regards to colonization, Simone de Beauvoir goes further and claims that violence in some cases is necessary. Though not directly involved in torturing Algerians or imposing harsh militarism, French civilians are just as guilty to Beauvoir as other agents of colonization. This is made clear when she states, "for any abstention is complicity, and complicity in this case is tyranny" [EA, 93]. Beauvoir posited that individuals are in a way commissioned to help others live toward an open future, so a bystander who does not make a contribution to dismantle a system of oppression (such as colonialism) is part of the problem. She makes the observation that, "One does not submit to a war or an occupation as he does to an earthquake" [EA, 99], noting that war and occupation should not be treated as natural phenomena that cannot be circumvented or avoided.

Another issue is that even in light of oppression, lethal force against an individual cannot be justified on an existential level. The taking of another life would seem to be in direct contradictory with Beauvoir's idea of an open future, and Camus discusses how violence toward the other can completely betray a cause or rebellion. To address this issue, one can turn to Beauvoir's controversial "antinomies of action." From a practical standpoint, it can often seem next to impossible to adhere to existential ideas, especially in the face of injustice, oppression, and constant violence. To eliminate oppression, Beauvoir advocates for doing what she deems unpleasant yet necessary. She legitimizes the reduction of peoples to factical beings when she

says, "...by virtue of the fact that the oppressors refuse to co-operate in the affirmation of freedom…[they] will here have to be treated like things, with violence; the sad fact of the separation of men will thereby be confirmed" [EA, 104]. Much in line with Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of "dirty hands," Beauvoir posits that anyone not marching toward the path of liberation is an obstacle to be overcome, no matter what the cost. This militaristic rhetoric intensifies when she claims that, "We are obliged to destroy not only the oppressor but also those who serve him, whether they do so out of ignorance or out of constraint" [EA, 106]. In light of these texts, one could argue that Beauvoir would see the bombings in the French quarter not only as justified, but necessary, which seems problematic.

The existential analyses of violence seem bleak. Fanon would likely argue that a situation in which colonialism has been deeply rooted is "too far gone," and that violence is inevitable, and Beauvoir's antinomies of action claim that violence is the only viable option in light of colonial oppression. However, it might be worthwhile to develop an existential analysis of nonviolent action in light of colonial oppression. It could be possible that Engel's perfect instrument is not one of destruction, but one that's purpose is to bring about change without limiting the future of others. Beauvoir herself finds a silver lining, or at least an observation worth further exploring, stating, "...with all this sordid resignation, there were children who played and laughed; and their smile exposed the lie of their oppressors" [EA, 109]. Years after the battle of Algiers, a nonviolent movement is kindled, and two years after its birth Algeria gained its independence. Whether or not this movement was only possible due to prior conflicts is up for debate, but it is possible that in some ways, colonialism can be dissolved without the use of violence.

As a whole, *The Battle of Algiers* is a poignant work of art that captures the dynamics of colonialism and guerilla warfare while also entertaining various philosophical questions. The scene depicting the planting and subsequent detonation of bombs in French Algiers is rich with cinematic and existential meaning. The works of Frantz Fanon and Simone de Beauvoir speak to the issue of violence as a response to power asymmetries, and their works are incredibly relevant given that much of their inspiration was drawn from the Algerian war. In light of this analysis, it is important to look forward and keep in mind the existential implications of political and militaristic actions in order to prevent conflicts and their subsequent retellings from occurring again.

Sources:

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Engels, Friedrich, and C. P. Dutt. *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science (Anti-Dühring)*. New York: International Publishers, 1966. (Note that this work was cited in *The Wretched of the Earth*).

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