Online Submission of Assessed Work

Student ID number	201596918
Degree programme	BA Philosophy, Politics, Economics
Module code	PIED3611
Module title	Radical Political Ideas
Essay title	Question 1: Explain and assess Fanon and Butler's views on revolutionary violence. Your answer should include an engagement with a practical case of resistance which illustrates your view of these thinkers.
Word count	2889
Seminar tutor	Masa Mrovlje

Explain and assess Fanon and Butler's views on revolutionary violence. Your answer should include an engagement with a practical case of resistance which illustrates your view of these thinkers.

In this essay, I will explore Fanon and Butler's views on revolutionary violence, noting where they agree and diverge. Butler's perspective on revolutionary violence has evolved throughout her body of work and is most clearly developed in *The Force of Non-Violence* (Butler, 2020) but its roots can be traced back throughout various footnotes and past texts (Butler, 1990; 1993b; 2008). Essentially, Butler recognises situations where violence may be necessary (Butler, 2020, p. 43), but argues in general terms that true self-invention requires "constitutive sociality" (Butler, 2008, p. 228), i.e., that existence requires social mutual recognition, and that by wielding violence we destroy this social constitution (Butler, 2020, p. 25) and at the same time allow violence to grow beyond the role of a "pure instrument" into a self-perpetuating affliction (Butler, 2008, p. 225; 2020, p. 22). Fanon's view of colonial violence decomposes in two distinct parts: first, the colonist's violence, both physical and structural, on the colonised and their psyche; second, the path-dependence inherent in violence, meaning a return to a pre-colonised state is impossible following violent struggle (Fanon, A Dying Colonialism, 1965, p. 21). Both thinkers, therefore, focus on how violence ingrains itself past its initial outburst. However, both diverge on the implications of this view: Fanon views violence as necessary, albeit scarring, whereas Butler contends that a strong commitment to equality cannot allow the dehumanisation which is necessarily imposed on the recipients of violence. Ultimately, I conclude that Fanon's view likely overstates the primacy of violence in decolonial struggle – on the other hand, I find theoretical problems with Butler's arguments that I will tackle and discuss. As a practical example to illustrate my assessment of these two opposing views, I will analyse the case of violent and non-violent resistance in South Africa during the struggle against apartheid.

Beginning with Fanon's conception of revolutionary violence, it is important to tackle the whole timeline of his framework of colonial violence, wherein we start with the violence imparted by the colonist on the colonised. In the colonial era, the colonised are subordinate to the colonist, not only in the sense that they are economically inferior – with a society "divided in two", wherein the higher sector is "built to last, all stone and steel" and the lower sector "hungry for bread, meat, shoes, coal, and light." (Fanon, 2004, p. 57) – and legally inferior – where the representatives of the "regime of oppression" are the police and soldier (Fanon, 2004, p. 56) – but also in the sense that they are morally inferior: the colonised are dehumanised, reduced to the state of an animal, and their own religion, beliefs and values are seen as diametrically opposed to the colonists' (Fanon, 2004, p. 59).

Fanon (2004, p. 56) argues that decolonisation "can only succeed by resorting to every means, including, of course, violence". Ultimately, decolonisation is about the colonised taking the place of the colonists, and such an agenda requires violent intent as a pre-requisite (*ibid*). Indeed, this violent intent is, according to Fanon (2004, p. 90), a reflection of the colonial violence imparted on the oppressed peoples. However, the belief that Fanon glorifies violence (Jha, 1988), is misplaced. Instead, as Ewara (2020) convincingly argues, for Fanon, violence scars the new society which emerges out of it: even though the colonist fabricates the colonised, the removal of the colonial regime does not return the colonised people back to their original society nor psyche. Violence, committed both against colonial forces, but also against innocents, lives in the hearts and minds of the revolutionaries: "the old Algeria is dead. All the innocent blood that has flowed onto the national soil has produced a new humanity and no one must fail to recognise this fact" (Fanon, 1965, p. 27). Ewara (2020) aptly quotes Baldwin (1979, p. 375): "Hell is a staining place". Nowhere is this seen more clearly than the depiction by Fanon (2004, p. 196) of the major depressive disorder and suicidality of a young soldier of the Algerian National Liberation Army (ALN) in *Case No. 3*. The soldier, now a patient of Fanon,

killed a woman – the wife of an infamous white settler – and is haunted by her in his dreams every night. The journey of the colonised is, for Fanon, a tragedy: violence is necessary for their freedom, but it will invariably scar their future.

This final point is my main disagreement with Fanon. While I agree that violence does have a scarring effect, I disagree with how Fanon continuously takes the primacy of violence is a given. This is exemplified throughout his writing:

> "the last can be first **only after** a murderous and decisive confrontation …",

> "the colonized […] have been prepared for violence from time immemorial. As soon as [the colonized] are born it is **obvious** to them that their cramped world […] can only be challenged by out and out violence."

> (Fanon, 2004, pp. 55-56) [Emphasis added]

Clearly, not only is violence taken as a given, so is the colonised's desire for it. In analysing non-violence, Fanon frames it as a colonialist-bourgeois ploy:

> "[The colonialist bourgeoisie] introduce a new notion, in fact a creation of the colonial situation: nonviolence." (Fanon, 2004, p. 72)

Once the source of nonviolence as *colonialist* is identified, any representatives of the colonised who repeat similar notions of compromise and admonish the "Mau-Mau"[1] (Fanon, 2004, p. 73) are seen by Fanon as traitors at worst, and at best proliferators of the colonial status quo through *neo-colonialism*, where while colonies have national self-determination *de jure*, they are *de facto* dictated to by European powers (Halperin, 2025). The veracity of Fanon's assertions will be compared in the next section when a practical case of resistance is examined.

---

[1] Violent decolonial revolutionaries, from the 1952 Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya.

Butler disagrees principally with Fanon's view that violence is necessary, although she shares a similar attitude to violence's dangerous outcomes. A core part of Butler's broader philosophy is the idea that "that there can be no invention of oneself without the 'you' and that the 'self' is constituted precisely in a mode of address that avows its constitutive sociality." (Butler, 2008, p. 228)[2]. This forms the basis of one of Butler's arguments for non-violence: to be violent is to be violent against oneself. On the other hand, if the humanity of the Other is rejected, those on the margins are pushed into the "zone of non-being" (Butler, 2020, p. 25 [*Quoting Fanon*]). Doing so, however, is to abandon another core part of Butler's philosophy – the belief in radical egalitarianism, and the belief that each person should be equally grieved; this radical egalitarianism is itself a precondition for living interdependency (*ibid*). This constitutes another argument for non-violence: violence rejects egalitarian philosophy. Finally, Butler also argues that violence can become a self-perpetuating affliction when it is used instrumentally (Butler, 2020, p. 18).

Transferring these non-violent arguments in general, to investigate revolutionary violence in particular, is not straightforward. Butler (2020, p. 18) concedes that non-violence is not an "absolute" principle, and that there are cases where 'intervention' – from context, we can safely read *violent* intervention – is necessary. Already in earlier work, we see Butler (2008, p. 221) grappling with propositions from Sartre and Fanon as to whether violence is really the only route to "psychoaffective survival" (Butler, 2008, [*Quoting Babha, 2004*]) for the colonised. In more recent work, Butler (2020, p. 133) concedes that a future where everyone is committed to an egalitarian ideal and understands the "interdependency of lives" is "unrealistic and useless"; however, it would also lead to a state which does not rely on an idea of instrumental violence nor racial phantasmagoria – she finalises by stating that the unrealistic nature of such

---

[2] She takes this view as shared by Fanon, asserting this in contrast to the view that "there can be no self-creation without violence."

an ideal is in actuality its strength. In my opinion, this proposition remains critically underdeveloped; the question of why, precisely, the unrealistic nature of an ideal is a strength, rather than a weakness, is never clearly answered. There could be a misunderstanding; Butler's argument could instead be that the ideal *itself* is unrealistic; or, the argument could be as it was initially considered – the possibility of broad acceptance of the ideal is what is unrealistic. The former case seems unteneble: Butler (2008, p. 228) labels the interdependency of lives a "philosophical truth"; clearly, a philosophical truth cannot be unrealistic, given that it accurately describes reality.[3] Moving on then to the latter case: what is Butler's (2020) argument that the unrealistic prospect of acceptance is a strength? In my opinion, this strength is not elaborated, neither in character nor in content. In terms of character: what exactly is it *strengthening*? Does it facilitate the countering of the spread of violent tendencies, i.e., the "lethal phantasmagoria that so often justifies police violence against black and brown communities" (Butler, 2020, p. 133), or does it raise the quality of life in those who already accept a non-violent approach? In terms of content: why is it a strength? Rather than explain, Butler (*ibid*) instead describes a world in which there *is* broad acceptance.

This line of argument is where my disagreement with Butler lies. Given that she herself concedes a broad acceptance of her proposed philosophy is "unrealistic" and "useless" (Butler, 2020, p. 133) it seems that it would be counterproductive for any movement to adopt her approach, particularly given she does not expand on why either of these qualities is a strength. This lack of practical consideration is reflected in much of Butler's earlier writing on gender and resistance. As Nussbaum (1999) points out, Butler's (1990; 1993a) prescriptions focus mainly on "poking fun at", or "parodying", gender, but never at destabilising a larger system of injustice. In this way, Butler continuously appears to narrow the possible scope of resistance:

---

[3] Even accepting reasonable counterarguments for what constitutes 'truth', any accepted sense of the word would surely have 'unrealistic' as its antonym.

I contend that just as modifying the structure of gender-based oppression *is* possible, so is a *realistic*, *useful* non-violence. This claim will be examined next via comparison with the case of violent and non-violent resistance during apartheid in South Africa.

As Zunes (1999, p. 139) notes, the strict adherence to either violence or non-violence is very rare in national liberation campaigns. What exactly constitutes the difference, though, is controversial. Zunes (1999, p. 138) includes damage to property as violence, although Butler (2020) argues that such inclusions are an attempt to discredit non-violence by the state. Regardless, both agree that non-violence includes boycotts, sit-ins, demonstrations, and other forms of unconventional civil disobedience. With this in mind, Zunes (1999) attributes the majority of the success of apartheid resistance to non-violent actions. He argues that, due to the relatively unique situation in South Africa, where the ruling white elite represented only ~20% of the population, they relied heavily on black South Africans workers and international trade, particularly with Western countries with whom they were closely linked, to sustain their high standard of living. As such, boycotts, strikes, and other manners of non-violence by black South Africans were extremely effective, both in disrupting domestic processes and instigating foreign interference.

Following the Sharpeville Massacre in March, 1960, the African National Congress (ANC), which was the lightning rod of anti-apartheid struggle and protest, was banned and moved underground (Lodge, 2011). Dissatisfied with the lack of political concessions that the initially non-violent approach of the ANC had achieved, Umkhonto We Sizwe[4] (MK) was formed by members of the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) (McKinley, 2018; Zunes, 1999, p. 139). The MK's perogative was to "hit back by all means within [their] power" against the curent South African administration (ANC, 1961), and it was officially recognised

---

[4] Meaning "Spear of the Nation"

as the military wing of the ANC in 1962 (McKinley, 2018, p. 4). Already, this chronology seems to contradict Fanon's prior assertions. Clearly, it was not "obvious" to the colonised that they could only challenge the white ruling class through "out and out violence"; instead, the shift toward more violent action came second.

Furthermore, Fanon (2004, p. 74) claims that asymmetrical warfare, exemplified by the Spanish guerilla campaign in the Pensinsular War and attempted by the MK, is a necessary instrument of violence of the colonised. Instead, the truth of this point seems to vary from region-to-region. While asymmetrical warfare was successful in forcing the French out of Algeria (Etheredge, 2008), or the Portuguese from Angola and Mozambique (Zunes, 1999, p. 142), the unique fact that "White South Africa possessed the most powerful military machine on the continent" (Zunes, 1999, p. 140) means it is seriously questionable whether an extended campaign was possible. Instead, the MK focused on localised sabotage which likely hampered parallel non-violent campaigns by justifying ANC repression in the eyes of the white populace, and by justifying the administration's capture of suspected dissidents (Zunes, 1999, pp. 139-140). This turns Fanon's thesis on its head – far from non-violence and compromise 'pacifying' the colonised (Fanon, 2004, p. 76), it is violence which harmed decolonial potential. According to Frederikse (1987, p. 178), it is likelier that by the early 80s, violent resistance was actually just being used as propaganda to bolster morale, rather than to directly effect any political change.

Meanwhile, it was non-violent means such as strikes, boycotts, and demonstrations, and the ostracisation and condemnation of those who sanctioned violence (Smuts, Westcott, & Nash, 1991, pp. 68, 96), that were ultimately the main reason leading to the cessation of hostilities, the unbanning of the ANC in 1990, and the eventual election of the ANC in 1993 to control the national government (Zunes, 1999). This goes against Fanon's (2004, p. 75) characterisation of non-violent means as a hypnotherapy by the "moderate nationalist parties", instead revealing

them to be potent and equally radical. It's true that Fanon would probably disagree with the idea that the non-violent means achieved a true freedom in South Africa. Similar to his criticism of Gabon following a non-violent separation from French colonialism, Fanon (2004, p. 76) would probably object that, in South Africa, "the status quo continues". While, on one hand, the scarring of colonialism is still readily apparent, supporting Fanon's path-dependency argument, it is erroneous to say that, simply because liberation was achieved using non-violent means, the status quo continues: as Zunes (1999) clearly explains and as I have elaborated on, violent means in South Africa represented a much stronger chance of failure.

It is precisely the relative success of non-violent means in practical examples which is not reflected in Butler's works. For Butler (2020), the desire for non-violence is first and foremost motivated from her philosophy of social interdependence, and secondly, her belief in radical egalitarianism and and equality of grievability. This view of social interdependence and a reflexivity of the self in the Other was shared, to some extent, by ANC politicians: Desmond Tutu, condeming violent tactics, stated that "[y]ou cannot use methods to gain the goal of liberation that our enemy will use against us." (Smuts, Westcott, & Nash, 1991, p. 68) Zunes (1999) points out that the non-violent strategy forced the white populace to reevaluate their views of the Africans; they were no longer seen as 'violent savages', 'black terrorists' nor subsurvient – they began to be seen as equals. This transformation strikes at the notion that the spread of such attitudes is unrealistic.

To conclude, the main difference between Fanon and Butler's views on revolutionary violence is that Fanon asserts that violence is both necessary and advanced by the decolonial movement, while Butler argues that violence is not necessary and harms not only those who suffer it but those who perpetrate it. Fanon chronologises colonisation into two parts, beginning with the outset of violence and subordination forced onto the colonised populace, and ending with the reflection of this violence onto the colonisers. He clearly elucidates the costs of such violence

and notes that the journey of subjected peoples is path-dependent; as such, the suffering felt by the colonised and the violence imparted onto the colonisers – both guilty and innocent – will irrevocably modify the national character and psyche of the resulting nations. While it's clear that Fanon does not glorify violence, he still defends its use as necessary, which is where my main point of disagreement lies. Pointing toward the South African anti-apartheid movement, I have shown that violence was both counter-productive to the freedom of black South Africans, but also that Fanon's proposed methods of resistance, e.g., protracted guerilla warfare, should be seen under a pragmatic lense rather than a pure necessity; while these methods worked in Algeria, Angola, and Mozambique, there are concrete reasons why the same did not apply to South Africa. Moving on to Butler, her non-violent attitude stems from three main premises: first, lives are interdependent and we rely on others to constitute ourselves; as such, violence against others is violence against ourselves. Second, violence against others undermines their humanity and grievability, and fails to uphold an egalitarian philosophy. Finally, violence used instrumentally will often become self-perpetuating. While I find that many of her propositions are echoed in the South African liberation movement, I vehemently disagree with her notion that non-violence lacks pragmatic character, i.e., that it is unrealistic and useless. I find that the success of non-violence contradicts that.

Bibliography

ANC. (1961, December 16). *Manifesto of Umkhonto we Sizwe.* Retrieved from African National Congress: https://www.anc1912.org.za/manifesto-1961-manifesto-of-umkhonto-we-sizwe/

Babha, H. (2004). Foreward. In F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (pp. 8-34). New York: Grove Press.

Baldwin, J. (1979). *Just Above My Head.* New York: Dell Publishing.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1993a). *Bodies That Matter: The Discursive Limits of Sex.* New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1993b). Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia. In R. Gooding-Williams, *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising* (pp. 15-22). New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. (2008). Violence, Nonviolence: Sartre on Fanon. In J. Judaken, *Race after Sartre* (pp. 211-232). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Butler, J. (2020). *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind.* Brooklyn: Verso Books.

Etheredge, L. (2008, May 1). *National Liberation Front.* Retrieved from Encyclopedia Britannica: https://www.britannica.com/topic/National-Liberation-Front-political-party-Algeria

Ewara, E. (2020). Fanon's Body: Judith Butler's Reading of the "Historico-Racial Schema". *Critical Philosophy of Race*, 265-291.

Fanon, F. (1965). *A Dying Colonialism.* New York: Grove Press.

Fanon, F. (2004). *The Wretched of the Earth.* New York: Grove Press.

Frederikse, J. (1987). *South Africa, a different kind of war: from Soweto to Pretoria.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Gordon, L. R. (2015). *What Fanon Said.* New York: Fordham University Press.

Halperin, S. (2025, April 4). *Neocolonialism*. Retrieved from Encyclopedia Britannica: https://www.britannica.com/topic/neocolonialism

Jha, B. (1988). Fanon's Theory of Violence: A Critique. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 359-369.

Lodge, T. (2011). *Sharpeville: an apartheid massacre and its consequences.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McKinley, D. T. (2018). Umkhonto We Sizwe: A Critical Analysis of the Armed Struggle of the African National Congress. *South African Historical Journal*.

Nussbaum, M. C. (1999, February 22). *The Professor of Parody*. Retrieved from The New Republic: https://newrepublic.com/article/150687/professor-parody

Smuts, D., Westcott, S., & Nash, M. (1991). *The Purple shall govern: a South African A to Z of nonviolent action.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zunes, S. (1999). The Role of Non-Violent Action in the Downfall of Apartheid. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 137-169.