

Why Violence Is Necessary Under Extreme Oppression

Violent resistance to oppression is necessary when political diplomacy and other civil avenues are no longer an option. These situations are typically examples of *extreme* oppression, which occur when groups of people are ideologically and physically denied their humanity by another distinct group of people (e.g., in cases of genocide, colonial expansion into inhabited lands, racially motivated attacks, etc.). In such cases, no attempt at political negotiation or pleas for mercy are listened to, because the oppressors hold an internalised belief that oppressed are ‘beneath’ them and are determined to forcibly convey this message to them. As a result, Fanon argues that the oppressed group is psychologically impelled towards actions that may return the chance of freedom and equality to their future – achievable only through violent means. This paper will argue that violence is necessitated when oppression threatens one’s humanity and paralyses a person’s ability to deescalate the attacks made onto them. This position will be supported through defending Fanon’s position on violence as a reactionary concept and refuting the relevant criticisms Arendt makes.

Fanon, in their social analysis of colonialism, tries to describe how colonialism shapes the psyche and realities of the people living under it. They define the colonizers or ‘settlers’ as those who differentiate themselves from the original inhabitants by virtue of being the conquering (more correctly: invasive) race, who have come from elsewhere, ambushed, and taken the natives by surprise and *force* (F, 40). This ‘force’ – imposed by means of artillery, torture, theft, murder,

is how the settlers define their rule (F, 40). It is distinct from the type of exploitation that occurs in societies where citizens are consenting to the social order at hand. In those societies, exploitation is maintained and justified through a strategic narrative (e.g., in capitalist societies, exploitation is masked by the pretense of a ‘fair and free’ market) that keeps its people participating. However, the kind of oppressive systems that Fanon writes about do not rely on any narrative at all. In these colonial societies, the authoritative agents maintain order solely by speaking the “*language of pure force*” (F, 38).

Arendt argues that structures behind both capitalist and colonial societies are powered by the support that they have, and not the ‘force’ or capacity for violence that they possess (A, 8). Since force or other tools for terror are “*no longer a reliable indication of that country’s strength or a reliable guarantee against destruction*”, there must be another source to the power that oppressive agents exercise (A, 2). Arendt thinks that it’s *support* that lends power to oppressive agents (A, 9). It is undoubtedly true that war criminals have both supporters and artillery, but the source of their power can’t be constituted in just one factor, since none of the atrocities they commit is possible without *both* violence and supporting actors. Although Arendt contends that the superiority of a government is based on the ideological support behind its power structure (A, 11), in circumstances of extreme oppression, this definition feels insufficient. Having supporting actors (i.e., those who outwardly exhibit support) doesn’t imply that these actors genuinely *agree* with the detrimental ideologies propagated. That is, being a soldier in Putin’s Russia doesn’t necessarily mean that the genocide of Ukrainians is *unconditionally* supported by the actor, but rather suggests that their support also relies on various external conditions (e.g., the condition of punishment being imposed on them if they resist their duties in war, or on the condition of

private favours being returned in exchange for acting support, on the condition that their racist ideologies may be carried out etc.). Assuming that it's a possibility that actors are providing merely *conditional* support, I propose the following argument. If the support is conditional, it is usually conditional under situations where one's personal values are more personally important than the severity of their actions. If, dehumanising oppressions are insignificant compared to the actor's personal values, it can be deduced that their reasons are either so horrifying or so unsound that their support is unalterable by philosophical or ideological appeal. Their minds or course of action cannot be easily changed. Therefore, the actor's supporting conditions are likely propelled by extremist values, which make diplomatic solutions extremely unlikely, if not impossible. And if diplomatic solutions aren't possible in de-escalating violence, the last two options are to either withstand the oppression or to pursue undiplomatic resistance by way of violence. When an oppressive government has support, it's deeply enmeshed with extremist values that are resistant to dialogue. Without speaking in their terms – in that language of pure force that they solely use to communicate with – it becomes very difficult for oppressed people to invoke change of any sort. Violence is therefore a very pragmatic style of dialogue in situations where support is intertwined with dangerous ideologies and conditions that override the regard for humanity.

The settler's extremist values are shown in the ways they dehumanise the native. Fanon writes, *“the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms...he speaks of the yellow man's reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of gesticulations”* to illustrate this animalistic perspective by which the settlers regard the native's humanity (F, 42). Fanon notes that when the native realises that the settler doesn't

regard the native as equal, but rather sees them as “*insensible to ethics*”, as representing “*not only the absence of values*”, but the “*corrosive element*” in their own lands, a revolutionary urge arises in the native (F, 41, 45). The native thinks, “*in fact, my life is worth as much as the settler’s, his glance no longer shrivels me up nor freezes me, and his voice no longer turns me into stone... in fact, I don’t give a damn for him*” as a response to the effects of the psychological denigration done by colonialism (F, 45). And therefore, in response to the dichotomy that colonization has imposed between the settler and native, the native feels the urge to reclaim their right to independence (F, 46). The native does this by realising their humanity and sharpening “*the weapons with which [they] will secure [their] victory*” (F, 43). This realisation must manifest as violence because the settlers’ reasons cannot be appealed to. Fanon writes that “*truth is the property of the national cause*” to indicate that behind the racist ideology of the settler’s, lies the values that they think is the correct opinion (F, 50). These extremist values don’t succumb to any discourse of philosophical appeals, because in the colonial context, “*there’s no truthful behaviour: the good is quite simply that which is evil for ‘them’*” (F, 50). That is, the settlers are deaf to any opposing thought – they will without external cause, continue colonizing and destroying the humanity of the natives. That is why the native must reply with violence, to escape the status of an oppressed person and become a persecutor of oppression (F, 53).

It must be violence that achieves this reversal of roles. The colonial society is a constant anxious reminder to the native of their degraded status and the inevitable response that must come from them (F, 53). This response must be “*greater violence*”, because colonialism in itself isn’t “*a body endowed with reasoning faculties...it is violence in its natural state*” (F, 23). Any attempt

to fix colonialism by non-violent measures will prove futile, since bloodshed isn't propelled by ideas that are stoppable by reason; if it were, all the cries of children, women and men would've been enough for any reasoning heart.

Arendt claims that violence is only good for short term goals, and that its justification deteriorates the longer it carries on (A, 11). Violence, Arendt claims, is encompassed by its mere modes of implementation (e.g., by guns, machinery, chemical warfare, famine etc.), and that terror results when a government has destroyed all opposing power, maintaining only violent control over everything (A, 12). In these societies, Arendt claims that the tyrannical governments lose all 'genuine' supporters, making their allies just as much of an enemy as the people they execute (A, 12). As a result, the entire country becomes paralysed because power (or the support in numbers) is gone. However, in the colonial contexts that Fanon wrote about, the friends of the settlers or don't turn into their enemies. The settlers (or those who support their ideology) think of themselves as an extension of their mother country (and its ideals), and as making history in its name (F, 51). This thinking is not without a grand idealization of their own country, of fondness and genuine satisfaction with the greatness they think they possess. Arendt writes of violent dictatorships as having a kind of 'condition' or malaise that prevents them from sustaining their reign into the future through support. However, through a historical lens, colonization has not stopped because the terror they projected onto natives somehow upset their allies and friends, because there was always a stark difference in treatment between those who were deemed as worthy of human treatment and the "others" who were below it. In the cases of dehumanisation and violent oppression, there is a very distinct class of people who are perceived as being unworthy of basic liberties. So long as the ideologies or conditions behind their

treatment (e.g., be it racism, the colonialist mindset, etc.,) persists, it can be assumed that the government operating behind this reign will. And so long as this government continues, attempts to stop them will not work unless the modes through which they communicate (terror, violence) is reciprocated.

REFERENCE LIST

Both readings are taken from the PHLC93 modules. Citations beginning with “A” refer to *Arendt*, and citations with letter “F” refer to *Fanon*.

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