

Anti-colonial Anarchism, Or Anarchistic Anti-Colonialism

**The Similarities in the Revolutionary Theories of Frantz Fanon and Mikhail
Bakunin**

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Contents

Introduction	3
Peasantry as a Revolutionary Group	4
Violence as a Mode of Revolution	7
Skepticism of Bourgeois Appropriation of the Revolution	8

Introduction

Speaking in very different social spheres, what exactly could a Russian anarchist writing in the mid-nineteenth century have in relation with an anti-colonial psychiatrist writing in the mid-twentieth century? The similarity could be understood simply by looking at their revolutionary intent. When we examine Mikhail Bakunin and Frantz Fanon's revolutionary theories, we see very stark overlapping thoughts regardless of the different time and place in which they were writing. This leads me to believe that anarchism and anti-colonial struggles speak to one another. By looking at them together, I think we can better understand revolutionary change outside of the urban working class and top-down revolutions which have often lead revolutionary debate.

I want to explore these similarities by looking at Frantz Fanon's theory of colonial overthrow, in tandem with Mikhail Bakunin's thoughts on social revolution. I will do this paying particular attention to the similarities between the two in their focus on peasantry as a revolutionary force, violence as a mode of revolution, and skepticism of post-revolution bourgeois dictatorship. Unlike classical Marxism, which relies on the industrial working class while ignoring other revolutionary forces, Mikhail Bakunin's anarchism speaks to issues of anti-colonial revolutions. This is because Bakunin understood domination and resistance outside of the simple bourgeois and proletariat antagonism that is inherent in capitalism. He didn't dismiss this, but understood that other factors, and other players, will help produce a truly anti-authoritarian revolution.

At the same time, Fanon pushed his thinking beyond a classical Marxist understanding, to further understand the multiple layers of domination and exploitation within colonialism. Rather than reducing his understanding to a basic class analysis, Fanon looked to the psychological realm. He attempted to understand the individual motivations, reactions, and overall feelings that functioned within the colonized peoples during a revolutionary movement against colonialism.

In order to examine Bakunin and Fanon's thoughts on revolutionary change and revolutionary movements, I think it is important to clarify the differing historical contexts that both theorists were writing in, which will in turn make the similarities between anti-colonial and anarchist struggles more recognizable. Bakunin's thinking emerged from the anti-capitalist debates during the nineteenth century in Europe. The writings I cover reflect Bakunin's firm commitment to anti-authoritarianism both within revolutionary movements and society as a whole. His thoughts on the peasantry can be seen in his work, *Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis*, which covers Bakunin's revolutionary thoughts in the French context of 1870. These letters were written during the downfall years of the Franco- Prussian war, at a time when France faced inevitable defeat. "The government of Napoleon III had collapsed and the succeeding provisional republican government was hopelessly demoralized. The French armies were in full retreat and the Prussian troops were at the gate of Paris."¹ Bakunin's revolution looked further than just simple repulsion of the foreign Prussian Army, but also aimed to defend the revolution against internal enemies that sought to advance their own power in the revolutionary wake.

Frantz Fanon, writing nearly a century later, was embedded in the anti- colonial struggles of Algeria against French colonial rule. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon explores the psychological effects of colonialism on the colonized and the modes needed to mentally and physically overthrow colonial domination. Fanon was interested in the process of decolonization though revolution, and the developments and characteristics such a process would take. He un-

¹ Sam Dolgoff, *Bakunin on Anarchism* (Montreal, Canada: Black Rose Books, 2002), p. 183.

derstood in many ways that the colonial situation was different than the industrial working class revolutions that Marx had put so much faith in. Through this understanding, Fanon's thoughts on revolution resemble Bakunin more so than Marx, although Fanon is often categorized in the Marxist group.

Peasantry as a Revolutionary Group

What motivates people to seek revolutionary change? What groups are most likely to be driven to revolutionary action? What groups or social classes are going to need to unite in order to push for a more expansive revolutionary movement? These are questions that continually nag activists and theorists, and these same questions were engaged and agreed on in many aspects by Bakunin and Fanon. Both Bakunin and Fanon saw a distinction between the urban working class and the rural dwelling peasants; both in their lifestyles, as well as in their revolutionary potential. Unlike many of the more Marxist influenced thinkers, both Bakunin and Fanon agreed that the peasantry was a revolutionary group. Furthermore, both theorists saw the need to combine the peasantry and the urban working class into a unified revolutionary force.

Similar to Marx, Mikhail Bakunin looked at the peasantry (particularly their culture) as though it was in a kind of "innocent" state, untouched by the relations of industrialization and capitalism. However, unlike classical Marxism, which saw this as a flaw in their revolutionary potential, Bakunin felt that this innocent state was revolutionary in the sense that the rural peasantry was untarnished by the teachings of the bourgeoisie. By maintaining their rural traditions, they didn't yet adopt the values of the bourgeoisie or the capitalist ideology. Bakunin writes,

Unspoiled by overindulgence and indolence, and only slightly affected by the pernicious influence of bourgeois society, the peasants still retain their native energy and simple unsophisticated folkways.²

For Bakunin, this native energy allowed and fostered a spirit of revolt, as the peasantry very much favored their traditional lifestyle to the impediment of capitalist or state intervention.

Bakunin believed that the material reality and marginalized existence of the peasants would feed fervor for revolutionary change. It wasn't only the industrial working class that would be roused into revolutionary consciousness, but the rural dwellers as well. He writes,

The peasants are made revolutionary by necessity, by the intolerable realities of their lives; their violent hatreds, their socialist passions have been exploited, illegitimately diverted to support the reactionaries.³

In the tradition of historical materialism, Bakunin recognized that it was the material conditions of the peasantry that would lead them to revolutionary change. They too faced the poverty and inhumane conditions that were initiated by private property and other essential characteristics of capitalism. In effect, they also were a revolutionary class.

Although Bakunin saw revolutionary potential within the peasantry, he recognized that the peasants alone wouldn't be effective in carrying out a full social revolution. However, in cooperation with the urban working class, he saw that a true revolutionary movement could be built;

² Ibid., p. 189.

³ Ibid., p.191.

it was the unification of all exploited people that held the potential for emancipation. Bakunin recognized the negative attitudes these two groups held toward one another and understood the need to unify them. On one hand, Bakunin argued that the urban workers needed to undo a variety of prejudices they held against the rural workers. Bakunin writes,

*If we really want to be practical; if, tired of daydreaming, we want to promote the Revolution; we must rid ourselves of a number of dogmatic bourgeois prejudices which all too many city workers unfortunately echo. Because the city worker is more informed than the peasant, he often regards peasants as inferiors and talks to them like a bourgeois snob.*⁴

Adopting much of the same superiority complex that the bourgeoisie held over the workers, Bakunin argued that the urban working classes looked down on the rural workers as uneducated, and thus incapable of understanding the dynamics of socialism. On the other hand, Bakunin argued that the rural peasants also held a sort of hatred or contempt for the urban working classes. Bakunin writes,

*The peasants feel that they are despised by the city workers,...that the cities want to exploit them and force them to accept a political system that they abhor, [and]...the peasants think that the city workers favor the collectivization of property and fear that the socialists will confiscate their lands, which they love above all else.*⁵

For Bakunin, this animosity toward one another, between the urban working class and the rural peasantry, created the most glaring obstacle to an effective social revolution.

With Frantz Fanon, we see the same understanding of the peasantry as a revolutionary force, as well as the need to unify the rural and urban workers. In much of the same manner as Bakunin, Frantz Fanon argued that the peasantry, living in rural areas with little contact to bourgeois values, retained a vibrant commitment to their traditional customs and ways of living. Fanon writes,

*In fact, a rational analysis of colonial society would have shown them that the colonized peasants live in a traditional environment whose structures have remained intact, whereas in the industrialized countries, it is these traditional circles that have been splintered by the progress of industrialization.*⁶

Fanon argued that by living in the periphery of colonial society, the peasants held strongly to their original way of life, rather than adopting the values of the colonizer. It was from this disconnect with the metropolis—the heart of colonial rule—that the rural peasantry could maintain their traditional social structures. Fanon writes,

*The peasant who stays put is a staunch defender of tradition, and in a colonial society represents the element of discipline whose social structure remains community-minded.*⁷

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 201.

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1961), p. 66.

⁷ Ibid., p. 67.

For Fanon, the maintenance of community and traditional ways of life made the peasantry more of a revolutionary force than the urban working classes, who were in constant contact with colonial society.

Much like Bakunin, Fanon recognized that the material realities of peasant life too were a source of discontent and, in effect, revolutionary consciousness. Looking beyond the conditions of the urban industrial worker, Fanon recognized that the peasant workers faced similar harsh conditions, as well as the encroachment of industrial life on their traditional way of life. He writes,

*But it is obvious that in colonial countries only the peasantry is revolutionary. It has nothing to lose and everything to gain. The underprivileged and starving peasant is the exploited who very soon discovers that only violence pays.*⁸

It is within this state of necessity and extreme exploitation that the peasantry is in a position to give all for the cause of revolution.

In looking at the relationship between the urban population and the rural peasants, Fanon outlined the need for unity between the two exploited classes, rather than mistrust or discontent. Much like Bakunin, Fanon recognized that the rural peasantry didn't trust the urban peoples, and the urban peoples looked at the rural peasants in a negative manner. Fanon writes,

*The peasants distrust the town-dweller. Dressed like a European, speaking his language, working alongside him, sometimes living in his neighborhood, he is considered to the peasant to be a renegade who has given up everything which constitutes the national heritage.*⁹

The peasants, as the most marginalized of the colonized population, look at the urban dwellers and members of the nationalist parties as adopting the values of the colonizer. As strong defenders of their indigenous customs and traditions, they feel abandoned by the city dwellers that have assimilated into the ways of life of their oppressors. In the same manner, this distrust is cast from the nationalist parties and the urban workers at the peasantry. Fanon writes,

*The large majority of nationalist parties regard the rural masses with great mistrust. The masses give them the impression of being mired in inertia and sterility. Fairly quickly the nationalist party members (the urban workers and intellectuals) end up passing the same pejorative judgment on the peasantry as the colonists.*¹⁰

This mistrust between the two groups of the colonized population reflects the disunity of an organized force, a facet that remains essential to a successful revolutionary overthrow. The city dwellers, living among their colonizer and the bourgeois parties, look at the peasants as backward, uneducated, and incapable of understanding the processes and goals of revolutionary change. All the while, the peasants (as stark defenders of their traditional way of life) remain distrustful of these urban dwellers for adopting the lifestyles of their original oppressor, the colonizer.

⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

⁹ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 65.

Violence as a Mode of Revolution

Moving on, I would like to examine the way both thinkers look at the issue of violence within revolutionary movements. Although both Bakunin and Fanon were skeptical about the long-lasting revolutionary potential of violence, they recognized that violence was an inevitable and necessary element in the revolutionary development. I think both thinkers recognized violence as an unfortunate, but crucial, step in the sweeping destruction of bourgeois and/or colonial society.

Bakunin argued that this violence wasn't without tactical consideration or carried out in cold blood, but was rather a conscious maneuver in carrying out the all-encompassing destruction of the bourgeois society. Bakunin writes,

At the outset (when the people, for just reasons, spontaneously turn against their tormentors) the revolution will very likely be bloody and vindictive. But this phase will not last long, and will never degenerate into cold, systemic, terrorism... It will be a war, not against particular men, but primarily against the anti-social institutions upon which their power and privilege depend.¹¹

For Bakunin, violence was an inevitable component of the revolution. It would be a spontaneous action carried out against the foundational institutions for which the bourgeois society was built. This violence wouldn't be the heart of the revolution, but it would play an important part at a particular moment during the process.

Bakunin understood that violence was a necessary component in what we can broadly call destruction, and that this destruction was also a creative process. This entailed violence to property, but also non-violent revolt that would be beneficial in carrying out the destruction of the bourgeois order. For Bakunin, this destruction would dismantle and eliminate all the forces of authority and domination that were burdening the masses. From there, the masses could freely and spontaneously create a new social order. Bakunin writes, "*Revolution requires extensive widespread destruction, since in this way, and only this way, are new worlds born....*"¹² For Bakunin, violence was part of the overall destruction involved in overthrowing the old systems of power, and allowing society to be created from the unrestricted passions of the newly freed masses.

Frantz Fanon also recognized the role of violence within his understanding of anti-colonial revolutionary movements. Fanon understood that violence was a reciprocal process in colonization and then decolonization. He recognized that the extreme violence perpetrated by the colonizer on the colonized population would inevitably be reflected in the violence carried out by the very people they had oppressed, during the process of decolonization.

The tract merely expressed what every Algerian felt deep down: colonialism is not a machine capable of thinking, a body endowed with reason. It is naked violence and only gives in when confronted with greater violence.¹³

¹¹ Dolgoff, p. 100.

¹² Ibid., p. 334.

¹³ Fanon, p. 23.

For Fanon, this violence would sweep away the inferiority of the colonized and help in regaining their identity and independence. Violence was the only means by which they could restore their humanity and self-confidence. Fanon sums this up well,

*At the individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them and restores their confidence.*¹⁴

He saw violence as an act that both uplifted the colonized mentally, and was most likely their only means of response, having been continually subjected to it by the actions of the colonizer.

Skepticism of Bourgeois Appropriation of the Revolution

Lastly, it is important to examine Bakunin and Fanon's shared skepticism of bourgeois elements emerging during and/or after the revolution. Although Bakunin and Fanon differ in their overall revolutionary intentions, I believe they share a common concern for the emergence of a group or class attempting to benefit from revolutionary developments. Both theorists share the idea that revolutionary passion can often be mistaken and usurped by those seeking to gain power during or following the revolution.

Writing directly from the anarchist tradition, Bakunin was highly skeptical about the return of any form of state power during or after the revolution. For Bakunin, a true peoples' revolution was a passionate, spontaneous action of the masses against their common enemy. To introduce any sort of authority or authoritarian leadership into the revolutionary movement would squash the popular rebellion for which Bakunin clearly supported. Bakunin writes,

*The immediate, if not the ultimate, goal of the revolution is the extirpation of the principle of authority in all its possible manifestations; this aim requires the abolition and, if necessary, the violent destruction of the state.*¹⁵

For Bakunin, the urge existed for many so-called revolutionaries to attempt to guide the revolution to their own ends, or to the ends of their governmental authority. Bakunin recognized that the usurpation of power, from the people back into the hands of government, meant the total negation of the revolutionary cause, and a complete negation of true liberty. It was essential to eliminate structures of authority both within the movement, as well as the building of a new society.

Bakunin understood that if these authoritarian elements were not eliminated, the same structures and ideologies of power would weave their way back into the social fabric. In doing this, the new usurpers of state power would quickly steer the institutions in a direction that would benefit them. Thus, the society would return to the oppressive, domineering, and exploitative state that consisted in the bourgeois society.

Frantz Fanon differed from Bakunin in that Fanon was more so involved in a nationalist movement, intent on creating a newly independent state. However, if we read Fanon more closely,

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁵ Dolgoff, p. 202.

we see the same warnings against exploitative elements emerging during and after the revolution that Bakunin considered. Fanon's theory, which was based in the colonial context, was specifically skeptical about bourgeois nationalist parties. He understood that having learned the teachings of the colonizer and adopting their values and ways of societal structure, the bourgeois nationalist parties were prone to taking on the role of the colonizer in the emerging national government. Fanon writes,

We will see, unfortunately, that the national bourgeoisie often turns away from this heroic and positive path, which is both productive and just, and unabashedly opts for the anti-national, and therefore, abhorrent, path of a conventional bourgeoisie, a bourgeois bourgeoisie that is dismally, inanely, and cynically bourgeois.¹⁶

Fanon argued that during the period of colonial overthrow, nationalist parties would form in attempting to create a nationalistic movement among the colonized. However, rather than working for and amongst the people, Fanon warned that the nationalist bourgeoisie was often rubbing shoulders with the colonizer. In effect, the nationalist bourgeoisie was prone to adopting the same social structures that colonization relied upon, simply replacing their previous oppressors' place at the top of the power structure. Fanon argued that the interest of the peoples must be the main revolutionary voice, and not just the interests of the national bourgeoisie. He writes,

The national bourgeoisies, however, who, in region after region, are in a hurry to stash away a tidy sum for themselves and establish a national system of exploitation... this is why we must understand that African Unity can only be achieved under pressure and through leadership by the people, i.e., with total disregard for the interests of the bourgeoisie.¹⁷

In much the same manner as Bakunin, Fanon understood that the revolution was meant to feed the needs of the people as a whole and not the needs of another emerging class or party intent on exploitation. He was very skeptical about the bourgeois nationalist parties usurping the spirit of the revolutionary masses to achieve their own ends.

Having examined these three elements that link Bakunin and Fanon together, it's hard to deny the similarities in their thinking, particularly in regard to revolution. I think this is all the more interesting because both thinkers likely would have rejected each others' overall projects. Bakunin was an anarchist, arguing for a stateless, anti-authoritarian society, while Fanon was more of a nationalist, arguing for an independent state, and often blatantly dismissing anarchism. However, the similarities in the way they approach revolution cannot be denied. This leads me to believe that anarchism and anti-colonial struggles have something important in common, which I hope is clear in the comparison I have made above. Furthermore, I think it would be important to share these commonalities, to unite common struggles that may often be treated as opposing or differing from one another.

¹⁶ Fanon, p. 202.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 110.

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This paper attempts to explore the similarities in the revolutionary theories of Mikhail Bakunin and Frantz Fanon. Particular attention will be paid to their shared focus on the peasantry as a revolutionary force, violence as a mode of revolution, and skepticism of bourgeois appropriation of revolutionary fervor and success. This is not to argue that Frantz Fanon was an anarchist (he was clearly embedded within the Marxist tradition), but to explore how anarchism and anti-colonial struggles speak to one another.

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