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The Wretched of the Earth

The Wretched of the Earth by Frantz Fanon is a work that espouses the frustrations so commonly found in the era of decolonization following the age of imperialism that dominated so much of the world. I will not pretend to have understood everything the author discussed in the opening chapter, although in this handout I hope to be able to give my take and interpretations of what Fanon has written about. It is clear that this work is a reaction to the old institution of colonialism that had gripped much of the developing world for so many years. Fanon discusses the relationships between the colonizers and the colonized, and the struggles with that relationship, the obliteration of the self at the hands of the foreign dominators, and the struggle of the third world as it is trapped between the clash of socialism and capitalism.

In the opening of the first chapter, Fanon takes time to establish the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. He observes that decolonization or the act of liberation is a violent one that shakes the fabric of society and upsets the balance between the two parties. He implies that for the colonized to find true liberation they must first exhaust every possible option including violence. He argues that you can not tear down such a rigid institution such as colonialism without having the resolve to “smash every obstacle encountered”.

Fanon dissects the colonized world to reveal its anatomy. He states that it is divided into two parts. The 'European sector' and the 'native sector' with a fine line drawn down the middle between them made up of policemen and soldiers. The direct intervention of the colonizers on the colonized through means of force, unlike how it is perpetuated in the western world often through agents or self-learned subjugation, has filled the colonized mind with violence. This violence is not just an attack on their person but on their human dignity.

Fanon speaks on the disparities between the European and native sectors. The European sector as a land of plenty. One of paved roads and smooth streets, buildings of concrete and steel, where all the goods and luxuries of the western world can be found, while conversely the native sector consists of flimsy shanties and shacks stacked upon one another stricken by hunger and poverty.

The author states that this violence inflicted upon the colonized, themselves, and their culture, will finally be reciprocated back at their oppressors when the native peoples' storm "the forbidden cities" of the European colonizers and "blow the colonial world to smithereens". Fanon claims that the only way to truly decolonize is to totally dismantle all the old establishments and the European sector and entirely erase it from their world. This violent act of liberation can be traumatic and destructive of the native self as parts of the culture can be neglected or forgotten through the struggle for freedom.

Much time is spent discussing the nature of capitalism, socialism, and how it interacts with the colonial system. Fanon states that in the early days colonization was merely about extracting resources and delivering these raw resources to the European market, but over time

this relationship changed. Eventually, the colonies themselves became markets for European goods.

In the modern age, natives are finally starting to gain the upper hand in their struggle for independence, able to now break the chains of their oppression. Fanon explains that this is because the colonialists are too preoccupied with the rise of socialism and the ever-present threat of the spreading communist revolution. Only after successfully attaining independence are the native peoples now finding that in this new world little will change for them. The third world as he perceives it is locked in between a brutal clash of capitalism and socialism and once again at the mercy of foreign powers. Their fate as he puts it hangs in the balance trapped within a “doomsday atmosphere”.

Fanon has commented on the violence of liberation earlier but continues his exposition toward the end of the chapter. He comments that the act of liberation is a violent and traumatic experience for the peoples being liberated but ultimately is a cleansing force. “It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passing and despairing attitude. It emboldens them and restores their self-confidence” and it is through this that the people truly take up the mantle of their own liberation. “Violence hoists up the people to the level of the leader” making them the safe keepers of their own liberation.

Fanon’s first chapter “On Violence” describes a desperate and frustrated world held under the boot of imperialism. This sentiment is echoed throughout many of the great authors of the post-colonial era such as Doris Lessing and Albert Camus who wrote extensively during this period. A cyclic feeling of learned-hopelessness permeates their writing as they too rage against the systems that have dehumanized them, stripped away their dignity, and taught them to hate

themselves. Fanon, however, wishes to end this cycle and break the chains that have held down the colonized peoples, the wretched of the earth, for so long. In this, the use of violence, the way in which something world-shaking and traumatic is violent, is the key to find their liberation.