

FRANTZ FANON "CONCERNING VIOLENCE" (1961)

Fanon, Frantz. The Wretched of the Earth. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove, 1963.

Frantz Fanon offers here a striking rethinking (or 'misreading') of Marx's Base/superstructure model. Fanon amends Marx's architectural metaphor and Cox's seminal 'misreading' thereof in order to stress the primacy of race, rather than economics, within the colonial context. He argues that it is necessary to adapt Marx's model to the specifics of the colonial situation: it is "neither the act of owning factories, nor estates, nor a bank balance which distinguishes the governing classes. The governing race is first and foremost those who come from elsewhere, those who are unlike the original inhabitants, the 'others'" (31). He argues that the

originality of the colonial context is that economic reality, inequality and the immense difference of ways of life never come to mask the human realities . . . what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race. . . . In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. This is why Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem. (30-1)

Fanon offers a compelling portrait of the social relations of production within European colonies. He is of the view that the "colonial world is a world divided into compartments . . . a world cut into two" (29). It is, as such, a "Manichaeian world" (31). In contrast to the material prosperity of the settler's zone, the native zone is a "world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other. . . . The native town is a hungry town, starved of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. . . . It is a town of niggers and dirty Arabs" (30). The native looks with "lust" (30) and "envy" (30) towards the settler's quarters, a look that "expresses his dream of possession – all manner of possession" (30).

On this racial, economic and social base is erected an institutional and ideological superstructure. In the class-divided, capitalist societies of Europe, the educational system, the structure of moral reflexes and "all these aesthetic expressions of respect for the established order serve to create around the exploited person an atmosphere of submission and inhibition which lightens the task of policing considerably" (29). However, in the colonies what some contemporary Marxists call the Repressive State Apparatuses (the army, police, etc.) play a more important role: as Fanon puts it, here the "agents of government speak the language of pure force" (29). Because of the social inequity, the European and the native quarters have to be separated by "barracks and police stations" (29). Moreover, the

settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil. Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values. It is not enough for the colonist to affirm that those values have disappeared from, or still, better never existed in, the colonial world. The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is . . . the enemy of values . . . the absolute evil. He is the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near him; he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality; he is the depository of maleficent powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces. (32)

When carried to its logical conclusion, such Manichaeism "dehumanizes the native . . . it

turns him into an animal" (32). It is, however, when the native realises that "he is not an animal" (33), it is "precisely at the moment he realizes his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he secures" (33) his victory. Hence:

Superstructure

- concomitant racist ideologies
- social institutions which favour whites / colonisers

Economic Base

- racially stratified social relations of production
- forces and means of production owned by whites/colonisers

Racial Infrastructure

- the physical accident of being born white as opposed to non-white, native as opposed to coloniser