

FANON'S *LES DAMNÉS DE LA TERRE*: TRANSLATION, DE-PHILOSOPHIZATION AND THE INTENSIFICATION OF VIOLENCE

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There is significant circumstantial evidence to support the view that Sartre's *Critique de la raison dialectique*, published in May 1960, played an important role in the shaping of Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre*, which was completed in July of the following year. The main accounts of Fanon's interest in Sartre's text are found in two sources: Simone de Beauvoir's *La Force des choses*, published in 1963, and Annie Cohen-Solal's *Sartre*, which was published in 1985 and which draws on an unpublished interview with Claude Lanzmann given in May 1983. Beauvoir's account relies in part on her first-hand involvement in the encounter between Fanon and Sartre in Rome in July 1961, in part on second-hand information related by Lanzmann describing his meeting with Fanon in Tunis that had taken place sometime prior to that, almost certainly the same meeting that forms the major part of Cohen-Solal's account.¹ In Tunis, according to Cohen-Solal, Lanzmann found Fanon 'malade, [...] mais tout en souffrant atrocement, il niait complètement sa souffrance. Il avait déjà lu la *Critique de la raison dialectique*, il nous en parla des heures et des heures'.² Beauvoir's summary of Lanzmann's account, presumably given to her much sooner after the event, offers a little more detail:

[Lanzmann] trouva Fanon alité [...] atteint d'une leucémie; d'après les médecins il ne survivrait pas plus d'un an. 'Parlons d'autre chose', dit-il tout de suite. Il posa des questions sur Sartre dont la philosophie l'avait marqué; il avait été passionné par la *Critique de la raison dialectique*, en particulier par les analyses sur la fraternité-terreur.³

A much later series of recollections by Lanzmann of his meetings with Fanon in Tunis, provided in an interview with Jean Khalifa in 2005, indicates that Fanon told him 'in his feverish voice, that the *Jounoud* [Algerian fighters] were reading the *Critique de la raison*

dialectique' and subsequently set up a trip for Lanzmann to the interior, saying to him on the eve of his departure: 'Tomorrow you will see the interior [...] and you will see the readers of *Critique de la raison dialectique*.'⁴ In the same interview, Lanzmann calls into question the accuracy of Fanon's words, stating, in relation to his trip to the interior during which he met Bouteflika and Boumediene, that 'none of the people I met had read Sartre'.⁵ While Lanzmann appears to have taken literally Fanon's characterization of the fighters of the interior as 'readers of the *Critique*' (and indeed, the first of Fanon's two statements, assuming it is an accurate recollection, would encourage such an interpretation), it is possible that Fanon meant that the fighters were readers in another sense, namely that the *Critique* was truly meant for such as them, that they were the ones for whom it was truly relevant. Whatever Fanon meant and whatever the precise timescale involved, the circumstantial evidence provided through Lanzmann's various accounts strongly indicates that the *Critique* was viewed by Fanon as a profoundly significant piece of work, with clear relevance to the situation in Algeria and further afield, during the time when Fanon was completing *Les Damnés de la terre*.

This strong circumstantial evidence is cited in a number of recent works of criticism as background to textual explorations of the relationship between the *Critique* and *Les Damnés de la terre*.⁶ David Macey, for example, draws on the accounts by Beauvoir and Cohen-Solal to support his assertion that the *Critique* 'was to be the main theoretical influence on [Fanon's] *Les Damnés de la terre*',⁷ and he goes on to explore the parallels between Fanon's and Sartre's ideas (notably regarding violence) and Fanon's adoption of some of the technical terms used in the *Critique*, such as 'project' and 'praxis'.⁸ Ben Etherington takes up Macey's arguments, recapitulating the circumstantial evidence and proposing a more detailed textual analysis of the two works to illustrate his view that Fanon's approach – and more specifically his conceptualization of decolonization – underwent a

significant shift between *L'An V de la révolution algérienne* and *Les Damnés de la terre*, attributing this shift not only to Fanon's growing pessimism about the prospects of decolonization but also, crucially, to his encounter with the *Critique*.⁹

Another sustained engagement with the textual parallels between the *Critique* and *Les Damnés de la terre* is put forward by Robert Bernasconi. Once again, the starting point for the analysis is the circumstantial evidence provided by Cohen-Solal, on which Bernasconi draws to argue that 'Fanon was not only one of the first readers of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, but also one of its most keen readers'.¹⁰ He also highlights the ways in which Fanon's and Sartre's ideas coalesced around their view of 'racism as a system', their 'appreciation for the dialectical reciprocity of antagonism' and their concerns with the 'genesis of groups and the problem of keeping them together'.¹¹ Bernasconi further suggests that the title of *Les Damnés de la terre* may be drawn, not from *L'Internationale* or even Jacques Roumain's poem 'Nouveau sermon nègre',¹² but from a sentence from Sartre's *Critique*,¹³ and he goes so far as to argue that *Les Damnés de la terre* 'confronted Sartre with his limits' and may have contributed to the fact that Sartre never finished writing the *Critique*.¹⁴

While Bernasconi's conclusion is tantalizingly provocative, I want here to focus not so much on Bernasconi's arguments, but on the way in which they are expressed, drawing attention to an aspect of Bernasconi's article that may seem peripheral, but which I shall demonstrate to be of crucial and generally overlooked importance. In a discussion of the parallels between Sartre's and Fanon's ideas on the unifying and reality-changing functions of violence, Bernasconi cites a sentence from *Les Damnés de la terre*, arguing that 'one cannot fail to hear Sartre in this last phrase'.¹⁵ What is significant about Bernasconi's argument here is not its content – with which I think it would be hard not to agree – but the

way in which he presents it, for in order to make his point he alters the English translation of the extract quite considerably:

My interest here is in how violence not only creates the group but transforms reality. ‘The colonized discovers the real (*le réel*) and transforms it in the movement of his praxis, in his exercise of violence, and in his project of liberation’ (DT 89; WE 21. Translation modified). Again one cannot fail to hear Sartre in this last phrase, even if the choice of the word *libération* in place of the more Sartrean *liberté* once again marks a certain divergence.¹⁶

When Bernasconi draws attention to the dissimilarity between the Sartrean *liberté* and the Fanonian *libération*, a strange muddying of linguistic waters takes place. For in the modified extract which Bernasconi quotes, neither *libération* nor *liberté* is present; rather, what is present is the English term ‘liberation’. What is more, in the published English version from which Bernasconi is quoting and which he has had to modify in order to ‘hear Sartre’ – namely that by Constance Farrington, first published in 1963 – the English ‘liberation’ is not present at all, and neither are the terms ‘real’, ‘*le réel*’, ‘praxis’ or ‘project’. Farrington’s version of the sentence cited by Bernasconi reads as follows: ‘The native discovers reality and transforms it into the pattern of his customs, into the practice of violence and into his plan for freedom.’¹⁷ While Bernasconi refers only to the self-evidence of hearing Sartre in the last phrase, presumably referring to the expression ‘project of liberation’, his restoration of Sartrean terminology to the rest of the sentence indicates his awareness that Sartre can be clearly heard in other turns of phrase too. What Bernasconi fails to acknowledge is that while a reader of the French original might be highly likely to ‘hear Sartre’ in Fanon’s words, a reader of Farrington’s version who has no access to the French original almost certainly would not, since there are no terminological clues to point her in Sartre’s direction; indeed, the entire force of the argument has taken on a different direction on account of the translation of ‘dans’ as ‘into’ rather than ‘in’. When Bernasconi concludes that ‘the similarities in their [Fanon’s and Sartre’s] language and ideas [...] have not been given the attention they deserve’,¹⁸ he once again glosses over the question of translation, for in their

English versions, the language of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and the language of Farrington's *The Wretched of the Earth* share very few similarities, and parallels between the ideas presented in the two texts are consequently either not present – the dissolution of Sartrean concepts in Fanon dissolving essential aspects of his ideas – or are far harder to identify.¹⁹

The question of the inadequacy of Farrington's translation with regard to Sartre's terminology is an issue that Macey mentions explicitly, and Etherington in passing, the former arguing that the unity of *Les Damnés de la terre* 'is supplied by a philosophical framework derived from Sartre, but it is not always visible in the text itself and disappears in the flawed English translation',²⁰ and the latter taking care to mark up alterations to citations from the Farrington translation in order to show where and how the debt to Sartre is obscured.²¹ However, neither Macey nor Etherington explores the detail and implications of Farrington's translation choices, which is precisely what I shall do now, focussing on those sections of *Les Damnés de la terre* where the links to the *Critique* are most strongly evident.

Sartrean terminology in *Les Damnés de la terre*

In order to give an accurate impression of the extent of Fanon's adoption of Sartrean terminology, it is appropriate to start by outlining what Fanon does *not* do: where Sartre's *Critique* is replete with conceptually dense terms, such that the work itself has been variously described as 'monstrous' and 'indigestible',²² *Les Damnés de la terre* is for the most part couched in straightforward, everyday language. Fanon does not use terms such as *le practico-inerte*, *le groupe en fusion*, *l'être-dans-le-groupe*, *la sérialité* or many of the other neologisms that Sartre develops in the *Critique*, even if the ideas that he explores share certain parallels with those explored by Sartre. Rather, Fanon's use of Sartrean terminology

coalesces around three main terms: *praxis*, *projet* and *totalisation/totalisant/totaliser*. Of these, his use of *praxis* is the most noticeable and frequent.

A survey of the occurrences of these terms in *Les Damnés de la terre* offers important textual evidence regarding the composition of the text. As Etherington observes, *praxis* is a term which is new to Fanon; it did not appear in *L'An V de la révolution algérienne* and its presence in *Les Damnés de la terre* acts as textual confirmation of the circumstantial evidence concerning the influence of the *Critique* on Fanon in 1960–1.²³ *Totalisation* and its variations are similarly new to Fanon, and *projet*, in the specific sense intended by Sartre, had also not been used in previous works. Fanon does not, however, draw on these terms throughout *Les Damnés de la terre*, but only in specific places, notably in the second half of ‘De la violence’ (particularly the final pages of the main section), the concluding paragraphs of ‘Grandeur et faiblesses de la spontanéité’, the opening and conclusion of ‘Mésaventures de la conscience nationale’ and the ‘Conclusion’. That *Les Damnés de la terre* is made up of material composed at different points in time is well-known,²⁴ and the absence of Sartrean terms derived from the *Critique* in this earlier material is unsurprising; what is significant about the distribution of the Sartrean terms in the remainder of the material, however, is that large sections of the later material do not show any obvious textual traces of an engagement with the *Critique*. The pattern of use of the Sartrean terms indicates that it was only a section of ‘De la violence’ that was significantly developed or re-developed in light of a sustained engagement with the *Critique* – a hypothesis that certainly tallies with other textual evidence, notably the inclusion of the only footnote with a direct reference to the *Critique*, as well as with analyses of content. The limitation of Sartrean terms to the very opening and/or closing paragraphs of the other chapters indicates either that Fanon saw Sartre’s ideas as of less relevance to other aspects of his own thinking or – more likely, perhaps – that he simply did not have time to re-work the chapters in light of his engagement with the *Critique*. Either

way, this rather limited use of the Sartrean terms may call into question Macey's characterization of the *Critique* as 'the main theoretical influence on *Les Damnés de la terre*';²⁵ it may also lend support to Bernasconi's contention that the parallels between Fanon's and Sartre's ideas that are revealed through an analysis of the content of the two texts are more a result of simultaneous developments in their thinking.²⁶

In the sections that follow, I shall offer a close textual analysis of the final pages of the main part of 'De la violence', drawing out the implications of Farrington's renderings in light of a reading of Fanon informed by the *Critique*. Two core themes take centre stage in these final pages: the first concerns the effects of violence on the group, stressing the unifying power of violence; the second concerns the effects of violence on the individual, with particular emphasis on the connection between violence and reason. Both of these themes find strong resonances with Sartre's discussion of violence in the *Critique*, and in both the link with the concept of *praxis* is crucial.

The unifying power of violence

In one of the most well-known passages from 'De la violence' – indeed from *Les Damnés de la terre* as a whole – Fanon sets out the Manichaeistic opposition between colonizer and colonized, the colonized having realized that 'il n'y avait rien à attendre de l'autre bord':

Le travail du colon est de rendre impossibles jusqu'aux rêves de liberté du colonisé. Le travail du colonisé est d'imaginer toutes les combinaisons éventuelles pour anéantir le colon. Sur le plan du raisonnement, le manichéisme du colon produit un manichéisme du colonisé. À la théorie de 'l'indigène mal absolu' répond la théorie du 'colon mal absolu'.

L'apparition du colon a signifié syncrétiquement mort de la société autochtone, léthargie culturelle, pétrification des individus. Pour le colonisé, la vie ne peut surgir que du cadavre en décomposition du colon. Telle est donc cette correspondance terme à terme des deux raisonnements.

Mais il se trouve que pour le peuple colonisé cette violence, parce qu'elle constitue son seul travail, revêt des caractères positifs, formateurs. Cette *praxis* violente est totalisante, puisque chacun se fait maillon violent de la grande chaîne, du grand organisme violent surgi comme réaction à la violence première du colonialiste. Les groupes se reconnaissent entre eux et la nation future est déjà indivise. La lutte armée mobilise le peuple, c'est-à-dire qu'elle le jette dans une seule direction, à sens unique. [...]

La violence du colonisé, avons-nous dit, unifie le peuple. De par sa structure en effet, le colonialisme est séparatiste et régionaliste. [...] La violence dans sa pratique est totalisante, nationale. De ce fait, elle comporte dans son intimité la liquidation du régionalisme et du tribalisme.²⁷

In this passage, Fanon shows that there are two kinds of violence to be distinguished from each other: that of the ‘colon’ and that of the ‘colonisé’. The colonized’s violence is called forth by ‘la violence première du colonialiste’, echoing in slightly weaker form Sartre’s argument in the *Critique* that ‘la violence de l’insurgé, c’est la violence du colon: il n’y en a jamais eu d’autre’.²⁸ Crucially, it is the violence of the colonized (‘cette violence’), not violence in general, that Fanon argues to have positive qualities (‘Cette violence, parce qu’elle constitue son seul travail, revêt des caractères positifs, formateurs’). Fanon’s characterization of the colonized’s violence as ‘work’ here picks up on his earlier assertion that ‘travailler, c’est travailler à la mort du colon’.²⁹ By characterizing violence as work, Fanon stresses not only the dialectical relationship between the colonizer and colonized (‘le travail du colon’, ‘le travail du colonisé’) and the outcome of that dialectical opposition (‘la nation’), but also the purposeful nature of ‘cette violence’. Just as Sartre defines work as something that finds its meaning in an end – ‘le sens du travail est fourni *par une fin*’³⁰ – so Fanon is arguing that the violence of the colonized finds meaning in its goal; just as Sartre argues that ‘need’ can be seen not simply as the push factor driving people to work, but as the goal of work itself – ‘le besoin, loin d’être un *vis a tergo* qui pousserait le travailleur, est au contraire le dévoilement vécu d’un but à atteindre’³¹ – so Fanon is stressing the fact that the violence of the colonized is to be seen as part of a fight against ‘la misère, l’analphabétisme, le sous-développement’.³²

Work is also, in Sartre’s analysis, the means by which inorganic matter is reworked and transformed, and as such it is closely linked to his definition of praxis: ‘On définit la praxis comme projet organisateur dépassant les conditions matérielles vers une fin et s’inscrivant par le travail dans la matière inorganique comme remaniement du champ

pratique et réunification des moyens en vue d'atteindre la fin.³³ In this analysis, work is the means by which praxis, which is itself always goal-oriented, achieves its purpose. In a famous section of the *Critique* in which Sartre presents his analysis of the storming of the Bastille, the praxis of the individual becomes the praxis of the group, and the individual not simply an individual, but an 'individu commun':

Mais nous voyons maintenant en cet orateur penché vers des visages renversés et qui crie: 'A la Bastille!', l'*individu commun* (c'est-à-dire dont la *praxis* est commune) donner à la foule entière l'unité biologique et pratique de son organisme comme la règle de l'unification commune: nous verrons plus tard, en effet, l'unité commune, comme totalisation en cours, tentant de se réaliser comme individualité.³⁴

Sartre's emphasis here is on how unity is achieved; his reference to the crowd as an organism that has biological and practical unity finds a clear echo in the passage by Fanon cited above ('chacun se fait maillon violent de la grande chaîne, du grand organisme violent').

Furthermore, Sartre's reference to the group's communal unity as 'totalisation en cours' – a term he uses earlier in the *Critique* to define 'la Raison dialectique' itself³⁵ – is echoed in Fanon's repeated description of the colonized's praxis as 'totalisante', stressing the dialectical process and the move towards what Sartre calls 'la synthèse la plus rigoureuse de la multiplicité la plus différenciée'.³⁶

Farrington's translation of this passage from 'De la violence' obscures many of these links to the *Critique*: while the characterization of violence as work is retained, the terms *praxis* and *totalising* are translated using the everyday terms 'the practice of violence' and 'binds together as a whole' or 'all-inclusive'. It is in the final paragraphs of the longer section quoted above that Farrington's distancing of the text from its Sartrean influences becomes most apparent:

But it so happens that for the colonized people this violence, because it constitutes their only work, invests their characters with positive and creative qualities. The practice of violence binds them together as a whole, since each individual forms a violent link in the great chain, a part of the great organism of violence which has surged upwards in reaction to the settler's violence in the beginning. The groups recognize each other and the future nation is already indivisible. The armed struggle mobilizes the people; that is to say, it throws them in one way

and in one direction. [...] We have said that the native's violence unifies the people. By its very structure, colonialism is separatist and regionalist. [...] Violence is in action all-inclusive and national.³⁷

The effect of Farrington's replacement of 'cette praxis violente' with 'the practice of violence' is twofold. First, by using 'the practice of' instead of 'praxis', she replaces Fanon's conceptualization of violence as human action towards a goal with violence as a way of operating: the crucial goal-related element of Fanon's analysis disappears. And secondly, by shifting from 'this violence' to 'violence', she obscures the key distinction that Fanon is making between the violence of the oppressor and the responding violence of the oppressed: it is this latter kind of violence that has these positive effects, working as it does against its antithesis (colonial violence) towards its synthesis (the unified, independent nation). The replacement of 'totalizing' with 'binds them together as a whole' arguably allows Fanon's words to retain more of their original meaning, retaining the emphasis on the unifying power of violence even while making the framework of dialectical reason within which Fanon's arguments are couched less obviously apparent. The second rendering of the same term as 'all-inclusive', however, does not sustain this emphasis on violence's unifying properties, presenting it instead as something in which all can participate. While these shifts in meaning and emphasis undoubtedly contribute significantly towards what might be termed an intensification and simplification of the advocacy of violence in *Les Damnés de la terre*, an even more significant shift occurs through a mistranslation in the first line of the translated extract cited above: the original posits that 'cette violence [...] revêt des caractères positifs, formateurs', thus echoing Sartre's distinction between 'fraternité (comme violence positive)' and 'terreur (comme violence négative)';³⁸ in Farrington's translation, the French construction appears to have been misread, and rather than it being the violence that can take on such qualities, as in the original, it is the colonized people that are invested with such qualities as a result of their use of violence. The overall effects of this mistranslation and the

removal of the complex Sartrean terms *praxis* and *totalisant* are threefold: first, Fanon's comments on the unifying qualities of a particular kind of violence are made to apply to violence in general; secondly, the crucial link between violence and its purpose (change of the current system, unification of the people) is greatly diminished;³⁹ and thirdly, rather than violence taking on positive qualities in specific circumstances, violence is seen as investing the characters of those using it with positive and creative qualities.

Violence and reason

While in Farrington's translation the misreading of 'cette violence [...] revêt des caractères positifs, formateurs' means that the arguments concerning the effects of violence on the group and on the individual become somewhat blurred, in Fanon's original, the shift to the focus on the individual is clearly marked. After an extended focus on 'le peuple', Fanon announces a new paragraph with the words 'Au niveau des individus':

Au niveau des individus, la violence désintoxique. Elle débarrasse le colonisé de son complexe d'infériorité, de ses attitudes contemplatives ou désespérées. Elle le rend intrépide, le réhabilite à ses propres yeux. Même si la lutte armée a été symbolique et même s'il est démobilisé par une décolonisation rapide, le peuple a le temps de se convaincre que la libération a été l'affaire de tous et de chacun, que le leader n'a pas de mérite spécial. La violence hisse le peuple à la hauteur du leader. [...] Quand elles ont participé, dans la violence, à la libération nationale, les masses ne permettent à personne de se présenter en 'libérateur'. [...] Totale­ment irresponsables hier, elles entendent aujourd'hui tout comprendre et décider de tout. Illuminée par la violence, la conscience du peuple se rebelle contre toute pacification. Les démagogues, les opportunités, les magiciens ont désormais la tâche difficile. La praxis qui les a jetés dans un corps à corps désespéré confère aux masses un goût vorace du concret. L'entreprise de mystification devient, à long terme, pratiquement impossible.⁴⁰

This passage, like the previous one, has many resonances with Sartre's *Critique*, particularly with his analysis of the concrete, practical nature of the new awareness gained by those involved in revolutionary struggle:

Chacun reconnaît en l'autre tiers la violence comme impossibilité consentie de retourner en arrière, de revenir au statut de sous-humanité et comme la perpétuation du mouvement violent qui l'a créé comme individu commun. Mais, bien entendu, cette reconnaissance est pratique et concrète. Elle est *concrète* parce que chaque tiers reconnaît les membres du groupe non en tant qu'hommes abstraits (ou spécimens abstraits du genre) mais comme

assermentés d'une espèce singulière (liée aux circonstances particulières, aux objectifs, au serment).⁴¹

Sartre outlines here the way in which violence creates 'l'individu commun', elsewhere defined as someone 'dont la praxis est commune',⁴² someone who no longer sees the struggle for freedom as someone else's struggle but as her/his own. Sartre's emphasis on the practical, concrete nature of this realization – others involved in the struggle are viewed not as abstract entities, but as real beings – finds a close echo in Fanon, who argues that violent struggle gives the masses 'un goût vorace du concret'. This appetite for the concrete means that those involved in the liberation struggle view their co-fighters not as abstractions but as real people, and are no longer willing to hand over their own fate to any mystical 'dieu vivant' trying to set himself up as leader or liberator.

Where Fanon's assertions concerning the effect of violence at the individual level thus relate primarily to the taking of responsibility by the individual and the individual's refusal to be duped in the period that follows on from the revolutionary struggle, Farrington's translation of the passage opens up the possibility of a very different reading. In part, this opening up is facilitated by the simple, probably accidental omission of a line of the text: the sentence 'La violence hisse le peuple à la hauteur du leader', which might be viewed as the culmination of the argument that is being pursued in the first part of the paragraph, is omitted, with a corresponding weakening in the force and logical progression of Fanon's argument. More significant, however, is Farrington's decision to translate the opening line using the now infamous words 'violence is a cleansing force':

At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect. Even if the armed struggle has been symbolic and the nation is demobilized through a rapid movement of decolonization, the people have the time to see that the liberation has been the business of each and all and that the leader has no special merit. [...] When the people have taken violent part in the national liberation they will allow no one to set themselves up as 'liberators'. They show themselves to be jealous of the results of their action and take good care not to place their future, their destiny or the fate of their country in the hands of a living god. Yesterday they were completely irresponsible; today they mean to

understand everything and make all decisions. Illuminated by violence, the consciousness of the people rebels against any pacification. From now on the demagogues, the opportunists and the magicians have a difficult task. The action which has thrown them into a hand-to-hand struggle confers upon the masses a voracious taste for the concrete. The attempt at mystification becomes, in the long run, practically impossible.⁴³

The conceptualization of violence as a ‘cleansing’ force has been taken up by numerous groups and individuals to argue that Fanon promoted the cathartic benefits of violence for the individual.⁴⁴ Yet Fanon’s choice of words here and the context of his reasoning are of crucial importance. Fanon does not talk of violence as cleansing or purifying but as detoxifying, a term which connotes the undoing of a harmful process that has already been done to the individual. The broader context of Fanon’s work leaves the reader in no doubt as to what this harmful process was: colonization, Fanon argues, condemned the colonized to immobility, to acts of violence against his own kind and to a preoccupation with the malevolent forces of spirits rather than with real enemies.⁴⁵

This controversial section is, in essence, a reprise of Fanon’s earlier argument that ‘[la décolonisation] porte sur l’être, elle modifie fondamentalement l’être [...]. La décolonisation est véritablement création d’hommes nouveaux’.⁴⁶ It also displays many parallels with the earlier section dealing with the move from a preoccupation with ‘irréalisme’ to ‘le réel’, which was cited by Bernasconi and discussed above: ‘Le colonisé découvre le réel et le transforme dans le mouvement de sa praxis, dans l’exercice de la violence, dans son projet de libération.’⁴⁷ Farrington’s translation of this sentence – ‘The native discovers reality and transforms it into the pattern of his customs, into the practice of violence and into his plan for freedom’⁴⁸ – not only masks the links to Sartre’s *Critique*, as argued above, but also alters the content of Fanon’s argument quite considerably: in the original, the colonized does not transform the real into a pattern or practice or plan; rather, the real is transformed in, or through, the colonized’s praxis, use of violence and project of liberation. The point that Fanon is making here is precisely the point that is reiterated in the later section on which we

are focussing: during colonization, the colonized live in the colonial reality, which is in fact a false reality; in the process of revolutionary struggle, they both see and work towards a new reality, changing their understanding of themselves and their role as they do so.

When Fanon speaks of violence as detoxifying, then, he is referring to its power to open the colonized's eyes to the poisoning that has been done to him. This is not cleansing in some mysterious, cathartic way; it is the revelation of the reality of the colonized's situation and is detoxifying in the sense that it brings reason and understanding where once there was pacification and mystification. A further expression of this argument can be found in the concluding paragraphs of the following chapter, 'Grandeur et faiblesses de la spontanéité':

Le militant nationaliste [...] découvre dans la praxis concrète une nouvelle politique qui ne ressemble plus du tout à l'ancienne. Cette politique est une politique de responsables, de dirigeants insérés dans l'histoire qui assument avec leurs muscles et avec leurs cerveaux la direction de la lutte de libération. [...] C'est la lutte qui, en faisant exploser l'ancienne réalité coloniale, révèle des facettes inconnues, fait surgir des significations nouvelles et met le doigt sur les contradictions camouflées par cette réalité. Le peuple qui lutte, le peuple qui, grâce à la lutte, dispose cette nouvelle réalité et la connaît, avance, libéré du colonialisme, prévenu par avance contre toutes tentatives de mystification, contre tous les hymnes à la nation. Seule la violence exercée par le peuple, violence organisée et éclairée par la direction, permet aux masses de déchiffrer la réalité sociale, lui en donne la clef. Sans cette lutte, sans cette connaissance dans la praxis, il n'y a plus que carnaval et flonflons.⁴⁹

In this section, the emphasis is once more on the insights brought through revolutionary struggle and the new ability of the masses to anticipate and see through any attempts at mystification; this is goal-oriented action that is marked by knowledge, violence that is 'éclairée', 'connaissance' in praxis. To return once again to Sartre, it is not the struggle on its own that is pivotal, it is the comprehension – of the Other and of the self – that takes place in and through the struggle:

Comprendre dans la lutte, c'est saisir la *praxis* de l'Autre en immanence à travers sa propre objectivité et dans un dépassement pratique: cette fois, je comprends l'ennemi *par moi* et je me comprends *par l'ennemi*; sa *praxis* ne se manifeste pas comme pure temporalisation transcendante que je reproduis sans y participer: je la comprends directement et de l'intérieur par l'action que je produis pour me défendre contre elle. [...] En chacun des deux adversaires, la lutte est intelligibilité; mieux encore, c'est, à ce niveau, l'intelligibilité même. Si elle ne l'était pas, la *praxis* réciproque serait par elle-même dénuée de sens et de fins.⁵⁰

Farrington's rendering of the extract from 'Grandeur et faiblesses' once again obscures the link to Sartre's work – *praxis* is translated as 'real action' and 'practice of action' – and consequently once again divorces violence from its purpose, since *praxis* is always distinguished from simple processes or actions by its focus on going beyond current material circumstances.⁵¹ Perhaps even more significantly, however, a mistranslation in the penultimate line alters the substance of the argument that Fanon is pursuing:

The nationalist militant [...] discovers in real action a new form of political activity which in no way resembles the old. These politics are the politics of leaders and organizers living inside history who take the lead with their brains and their muscles in the fight for freedom. [...] They are the essence of the fight which explodes the old colonial truths and reveals unexpected facets, which brings out new meanings and pin-points the contradictions camouflaged by these facts. The people engaged in the struggle who because of it command and know these facts, go forward, freed from colonialism and forewarned of all attempts at mystification, inoculated against all national anthems. Violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organized and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them. Without that struggle, without that knowledge of the practice of action, there's nothing but a fancy-dress parade and the blare of trumpets.⁵²

Farrington's rendition of the penultimate sentence is problematic: the subject of Fanon's original sentence is not 'seule la violence', but 'seule la violence exercée par le peuple, violence organisée et éclairée par la direction'. While the shift in meaning may seem slight on a first reading – after all, Farrington does include two further clauses describing the kind of violence that Fanon has in mind – it is potentially misleading, turning the elements that form part of the definition in the original into optional descriptive elements and allowing 'violence' to stand in opposition to 'non-violence', rather than violence of a specific kind (that carried out by the people and marked by reason) to stand in opposition to violence of another kind, namely violence that is not carried out by the people, or that is without direction, goal or understanding, propelled simply by hatred, for, in Fanon's own words, 'la haine ne saurait constituer un programme'.⁵³

Conclusions

This analysis has highlighted a number of specific shifts in meaning that take place around the theme of violence through Constance Farrington's translation of *Les Damnés de la terre*, the result most frequently of the rendering of complex concepts using everyday words, but also in some cases of mistranslations. This de-philosophization of Fanon's text, however, has not only specific 'local' implications but also 'global' ones, operating at the level of the work as a whole. It is well known that Fanon's text became a best-seller through its English translation, having a particularly significant impact in the United States through its popularity within the Black Power movement,⁵⁴ but until now little attention has been paid to the connections between the textual choices made by the translator and the success of the book in English. The Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver is reported to have claimed that 'every brother on a roof top' could quote Fanon,⁵⁵ and the speeches and writings of the Black Power movement are certainly not short of references to Fanon and *Les Damnés de la terre*, including those sections analysed here.⁵⁶ Had Farrington retained the technical philosophical vocabulary used by Fanon, however, *Les Damnés de la terre* would probably have been less 'quotable'. A reader encountering the technical term 'praxis', for example, would have needed to ascertain where this term fitted within the broader tradition of usage and what exactly it meant. This would have constrained the reading process, making the text less straightforwardly applicable to other situations and perhaps acting to some degree as an inhibitor of slippages of meaning. While I am not arguing that Farrington's translation choices alone were behind what Alice Cherki has termed 'le dénigrement effarouché d'un Fanon apologiste de la violence',⁵⁷ I have sought to demonstrate that, rather than belonging to a footnote or being passed over in complete silence, those choices have a central place in the discussion, alongside such paratextual factors as Sartre's notorious preface and the striking covers and subtitles used by the publishers in the 1960s.

Notes

¹ David Macey points out a number of discrepancies between the supposed date of the meeting according to Cohen-Solal (summer 1960) and the facts which were mentioned at it, meaning that it almost certainly took place later than that, probably in spring 1961; see D. Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Biography*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 2012), p. 576 n. 15.

² Annie Cohen-Solal, *Sartre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 552.

³ Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force des choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p. 610.

⁴ Jean Khalfa, 'Claude Lanzmann in Conversation', *Wasafiri*, 20:44 (2005), 19–23 (pp. 19–20). Lanzmann indicates that he had not just one but several meetings with Fanon in Tunis prior to their meeting in Rome in 1961, which may go some way to explaining the discrepancies identified by Macey.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶ For earlier treatments of the possible links between the *Critique* and *Les Damnés*, see David Cauter, *Fanon* (London: Fontana, 1970), chapters 3 and 6, and Lewis R. Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* (London: Routledge, 1997), ch. 2.

⁷ Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, p. 448.

⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 473.

⁹ See Ben Etherington, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Decolonization? Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*', *Modern Intellectual History*, forthcoming.

¹⁰ Robert Bernasconi, 'Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* as the Fulfilment of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*', *Sartre Studies International*, 16:2 (2010), 36–47 (p. 36).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 38–40.

¹² Macey (*Frantz Fanon*, p. 411) links the intertextual reference in Fanon's title to another poem by Jacques Roumain, 'Sales nègres'. In fact, both of these poems allude to the *Internationale* and use the words 'les damnés de la terre'.

¹³ Bernasconi cites the following sentence from the *Critique* to support his argument: “‘The ‘wretched of the earth’ are precisely the only people capable of changing life and who do change it every day, who feed, clothe, and house humanity as a whole’” (Bernasconi, ‘Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*’, p. 42). It is true that the wording of the original *Critique de la raison dialectique* supports Bernasconi’s point: ‘Les “damnés de la terre”, ce sont précisément les seuls qui soient capables de changer la vie, qui la changent chaque jour, qui nourrissent, habillent, logent l’humanité entière’ (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 349). However, Bernasconi has silently amended the published English translation of the *Critique* he cites, which in fact proposes a more literal translation of Sartre’s phrase, rendering it ‘the “damned of the earth”’ (Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, transl. by Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: NLB, 1976), p. 241).

¹⁴ Bernasconi, ‘Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*’, p. 44.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, transl. by Constance Farrington (1963; London: Penguin, 2001), p. 45.

¹⁸ Bernasconi, ‘Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*’, p. 42.

¹⁹ It should be noted that the connections to Sartre’s *Critique* are somewhat clearer in Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, transl. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), but Farrington’s translation was the only available English version of *Les Damnés de la terre* for over four decades.

²⁰ Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, p. 465.

²¹ See Etherington, 'An Answer to the Question'.

²² Bernasconi, 'Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*', p. 38; Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, p. 448.

²³ According to Etherington, the Greek concept comes to Fanon through the Marxist tradition, and in particular the first volume of Sartre's *Critique*; see Etherington, 'An Answer to the Question'.

²⁴ See Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, p. 450.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 448.

²⁶ See Bernasconi, 'Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*', p. 38.

²⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961; Paris: La Découverte, 2002), p. 89–90.

²⁸ Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, p. 813. This theme is one that Sartre takes up and repeats in his preface to *Les Damnés de la terre*: 'Ils ne connaissent, disiez-vous, que la force? Bien sûr; d'abord ce ne sera que celle du colon et, bientôt, que la leur, cela veut dire: la même rejaillissant sur nous comme notre reflet vient du fond d'un miroir à notre rencontre' (Sartre, 'Préface à l'édition de 1961', in Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, pp. 17–36 (p. 25)).

²⁹ Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, p. 83.

³⁰ Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, p. 203.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

³² Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, p. 90. Ato Sekyi-Otu draws links between Fanon's analysis here and historical materialism more generally: 'For the colonized, it is not work – "the harsh school of labour" which, according to historical materialism, nurtures the proletariat's practical reason and class capacities – but violence that is the school of action. [...] It is [...] violence, not cooperation forced upon the labouring class at the point of production, that forges among the oppressed the consciousness of a shared condition and the habit of solidarity'; see A. Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 98.

³³ Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, p. 813.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 483–4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

³⁷ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, transl. by Farrington, pp. 73–4.

³⁸ Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, p. 539.

³⁹ The disappearance of the term *praxis*, with its innate connection to a goal, may lie behind Paul Nursery-Bray's erroneous assertion that '[Fanon's] violence is not strictly speaking Marxist at all. Within a Marxist framework violence is not an end in itself, but only a means to an end'; see P. Nursery-Bray, 'Marxism and Existentialism in the Thought of Frantz Fanon', *Political Studies*, 20:2 (1972), 152–68 (p. 159).

⁴⁰ Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, pp. 90–1.

⁴¹ Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, pp. 533–4; emphasis in original.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 483–4.

⁴³ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, transl. by Farrington, p. 74.

⁴⁴ Yoweri T. Museveni, for example, uses the quotation 'At the level of individuals, violence is a cleaning force' as the epigraph to his article exploring the relevance of Fanon's 'theory on violence' to liberated parts of Mozambique in the late 1960s; see Y. T. Museveni, 'Fanon's Theory on Violence: Its Verification in Liberated Mozambique', in *Essays on the Liberation of Southern Africa*, ed. by Nathan M. Shamuyarira (Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1971), pp. 1–24. Museveni argues that 'not only is violence the only effective instrument of bringing about the real overthrow of colonial rule, it is also a laxative, a purgative, an agent for creating new men' (p. 4). Leaders of the Black Power movement in America foregrounded this aspect of Fanon's writing in a similar way: Eldridge Cleaver, for example, argued that Fanon viewed violence as a way for colonial subjects to 'achieve their

manhood' and 'experience themselves as men'; see E. Cleaver, 'Psychology: The Black Bible', in *Eldridge Cleaver: Post-Prison Writings and Speeches*, ed. by Robert Scheer (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), pp. 18–20 (p. 20).

⁴⁵ See, for example, Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, pp. 53–7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴⁸ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, transl. by Farrington, p. 45.

⁴⁹ Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, pp. 140–1.

⁵⁰ Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, p. 892; emphasis in original.

⁵¹ 'Quelle différence y a-t-il donc entre processus et praxis? L'un comme l'autre sont dialectiques [...]. L'un et l'autre sont violence [...]. Mais la *praxis* se dévoile immédiatement *par sa fin*: la détermination future du champ des possibles est posée dès le départ par un dépassement projectif des circonstances matérielles, c'est-à-dire par un projet' (*ibid.*, p. 640).

⁵² Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, transl. by Farrington, pp. 117–18.

⁵³ Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, p. 134.

⁵⁴ See Rychetta Watkins, *Black Power, Yellow Power and the Making of Revolutionary Identities* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 21–52.

⁵⁵ See Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, p. 23.

⁵⁶ Eldridge Cleaver paraphrases sections of *The Wretched of the Earth*, not only in 'Psychology: The Black Bible' (see note 43, above), but also in 'The Courage to Kill: Meeting the Panthers', in *Eldridge Cleaver*, ed. by Scheer, pp. 23–39 (pp. 36–7). Similarly, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, two of the leading Black Power activists, quote at length from the conclusion of *The Wretched of the Earth* in the preface to their *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), pp. 11–15 (p. 15).

⁵⁷ Alice Cherki, *Frantz Fanon, portrait* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 11.