

DOMESTIC IMPERIALISM: THE REVERSAL OF FANON



J. WOLFE HARRIS

ABSTRACT

Frantz Fanon's works have been invaluable in the analysis of colonies and the colonized subject's mentality therein, but an analysis of the colonial power itself has been largely left to the wayside. The aim of this paper is to explicate a key element of Fanon's theoretical framework, the metropolis/periphery dichotomy, then, using the writings of Huey P. Newton and Stokely Carmichael, among others, show its reversal within the colonial power. I will analyze this reversal in three ways: first, the reversal of the relationship between, and the roles of, the metropolis and periphery; second, the role of police and the differences between the colonial police and the police within the colonial power; and third, the modified role of prisons within the colonial power.

INTRODUCTION

Mentioned by name across the writings of Angela Davis, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and Huey P. Newton, Frantz Fanon's influence on the Black Liberation movements, which emerged during the early 1960s, is undeniable, and his works remains foundational for the theoretical integrity of these movements. More than giving accurate descriptions of the psychological status of colonized subjects, Fanon sought to create an all-encompassing theory of colonialism. Within this theory is the metropolis/periphery dichotomy: the relationship between, and the roles of, the periphery from which capital is exacted, and the metropolis into which this capital is siphoned. This dichotomy, however, is only accurate within the colony: for all the theorizing Fanon did, he failed to look outward; he failed to examine the colonial powers themselves. Within the colonial powers, we see the reversal of this dichotomy: no longer is the periphery subjugated and exploited by the metropolis, but rather the metropolis—while still being the site of capital production and refinement of raw materials—is subjugated and exploited by the periphery. The aim of this essay is to explicate Fanon's metropolis/periphery dichotomy and to expand on Huey P. Newton's conception of domestic imperialism by the reversal of this dichotomy within the colonial powers.

I. METROPOLIS/PERIPHERY DICHOTOMY

Fanon, despite his prolific writing, did not ever explicitly outline the structure of colonialism; rather, his theories merely described colonialism's effects. In order to synthesize these effects, let us begin with Paul Sweezy, who, during the Dialectics of Liberation conference in 1967, outlined the fundamental aspect of the metropolis/periphery dichotomy. The result of capitalist subjugation and exploitation of colonies, he asserted, was the "transfer of wealth from the periphery



to the metropolis and correspondingly [the destruction of] the old society in the periphery and [reorganization of] it on a dependent satellite basis.”¹ In addition to this, it is also only due to this transfer of wealth that the metropolis was able to so rapidly develop. It is from this fundamental aspect of the dichotomy that the other aspects follow.

If the role of the metropolis was simply oppression of the periphery, in a purely repressive sense, it would fail. Utilizing power as both a productive and repressive force, the metropolis did not merely extract wealth and resources from the periphery, as one might do in the case of imperialism; rather, it reorganized, as Sweezy said, the structure of the periphery on the basis of dependency. Without the metropolis’s ability to refine the raw materials which were extracted from the periphery—and to a larger extent, without the colonial power’s willingness to purchase the goods made within the colonial metropolis—the periphery would starve. The economic reality of the periphery, and the colony as a whole, was, therefore, the economic reality of the colonial power, of the foreign bourgeoisie.² Moreover, the colonial power frames its exploitation as a concern for the interests of the colonized subject. This concern for interests, however, comes only after a phase of capital accumulation, wherein the colony becomes a market for the goods they produce themselves. Therefore, instead of the economically unviable model of slavery, the foreign capitalists and colonial powers sought the “protection of their ‘legitimate interests’ using economic agreements.”³ Since the colony is structured as a dependent satellite, and with the phase of capital accumulation within the colony and the consequent formation of the colony as a market, the colonial subject has “legitimate interests” in the continued existence of the metropolis/periphery dichotomy. This is the foundation upon which subjugation is hereafter justified.

While the national bourgeoisie may come to hold ownership over a number of factories or farms, the economic reality is constituted in such a way by the foreign bourgeoisie that, despite seeming economic independence, the national bourgeoisie are still entirely dependent upon the colonial power to buy their products. This dependency was fostered in a few ways, but perhaps the most notable was the United States’ conversion of various Latin American countries into one-crop economies. The result was that after fifteen years, “the US controlled 70 per cent of Latin America’s sources of raw materials, and 50 per cent of its gross national product.”⁴ Moreover, economic aid, such as

1 Paul Sweezy, “The Future of Capitalism,” in *The Dialectics of Liberation*, ed. David Cooper (New York: Verso, 2015), 99.

2 Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 122.

3 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 27.

4 John Gerasis, “Imperialism and Revolution in America,” in *The Dialectics of*

loans, are only given to the colonies for the purpose of maintaining the factories and buying manufactured goods, in order for the metropolis to continue to function as such.⁵ Alongside this conversion, Roosevelt conceptualized the colonial police: unlike American soldiers, who are more easily identified and attacked by the colonized, a police force consisting of the colonized themselves is much harder to identify as the enemy, and, furthermore, their loyalty to foreign capital “could be guaranteed by their economic ties to those interests.”⁶

The local police, in the pockets of foreign economic interests, and the subjugation of the colonies themselves to these same interests via tampering by the colonial power are the fundamental means by which the colonial power maintains control—even once all their soldiers and bourgeoisie have left—and further solidifies the metropolis/periphery dichotomy.

II. DOMESTIC IMPERIALISM

Within the colonial power, however, and specifically in each major city, Fanon’s metropolis/periphery dichotomy, whose fundamental functions and means of maintenance I have just explicated, is reversed. In all of Huey P. Newton’s writings, the concept of domestic imperialism is mentioned only once, but it is this concept, along with Stokely Carmichael’s speech at the Dialectics of Liberation conference two years prior, which makes the reversal possible. Domestic imperialism is to be broadly understood as “an imperialistic variation of imperialism. . . [through which] the whole American people have been colonized, if you view exploitation as a colonized effect.”⁷ The exploitation which I will be considering as a colonized effect is precisely the kind of exploitation and oppression which I have already explicated as present in the colony and in those who contribute to the continued existence of the metropolis/periphery dichotomy and the modified role of police—and more specifically the new role of the prisons.

The metropolis in America is the place which has the largest capital-capacity—that is, the city’s capacity to produce and reproduce capital—and simultaneously has the largest sections of poverty. To contrast, the periphery, rather than the target of economic exploitation, is the funnel into which capital, extracted from the inhabitants of the metropolis, is siphoned. Carmichael writes,

The American city, in essence, is going to be populated by the peoples of the Third World while the white middle classes will flee to the suburbs. Now

Liberation, ed. David Cooper (New York: Verso, 2015), 80.

5 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 59-60.

6 Gerasis, “Imperialism and Revolution,” 79.

7 Huey P. Newton, “On the Peace Movement,” in *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, ed. David Hilliard and Donald Weise (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 152.



the black people do not control, nor do they own, the resources—we do not control the land, the houses or the stores. These are all owned by whites who live outside the community. These are very real colonies, in the sense that there is cheap labour exploited by those who live outside the cities.⁸

In the colony, the colonized live in the periphery, and it is from the periphery that raw materials and capital are extracted and siphoned into the metropolis. In the American city, although the raw materials are still imported from either colonies or rural areas, the actual capital extraction takes place within the metropolis. The site of capital production and reproduction, despite this, has not changed. It is still within the metropolis that the factories are located, and in the case of the colony the products would be exported to the colonial power or sold back to the inhabitants of the metropolis. In the case of the American city, however, the products of the metropolitan factories are exported to the periphery and seldom are sold back to the colonized Americans. It is from this reversal of the extraction and siphoning that, as with Fanon's dichotomy, the rest follows.

The means of economic subjugation of the inhabitants of the American metropolis, however, have not changed all that significantly. The colonized Americans, within the inner cities—which are sometimes unaffectionately called ghettos—are entirely dependent on periphery capital, rather than foreign capital. Government relief, much like the economic aid and loans given to the colonies, is only meant to increase the dependency of the colonized upon the colonial system. Instead of fostering self-sufficiency, this type of aid merely provides money with which to survive, refusing to improve the conditions which make survival unsure. This is common practice in colonialism, though: by refusing to address the underlying causes of “underdevelopment” or poverty, the colonial powers reduce the colonies' independence. Thomas Sankara, in an interview shortly before his assassination, stated that if their aim was to help, they would

[g]ive us plows, tractors, fertilizer, insecticide, watering cans, drills, dams. That is how we define food aid. Those who come with wheat, millet, corn or milk, they are not helping us. They are fattening us up like you do with geese, stuffing them in order to be able to sell them later. That is not real help.⁹

In other words, if the aim of government relief was to liberate, it would provide the tools for liberation; instead, it further entrenches the colonized Americans in the system of economic subjugation.

8 Stokely Carmichael, “Black Power,” in *The Dialectics of Liberation*, ed. David Cooper (New York: Verso, 2015), 160.

9 JR, “‘Concerning Violence’ Introduces New Generations to Frantz Fanon,” *San Francisco Bay View*, last modified June 30, 2015, sfbayview.com/2015/06/concerning-violence-introduces-new-generations-to-frantz-fanon/.

III. POLICING, POLICE, AND PRISONS

The failure of the policing system in America, compared to the colonial police, is that it is not completely possible to have a “local” police force as Roosevelt conceived of for the colony; the police force within the colonial power can never be fully separate from the colonial system, and more often than not they are visibly integrated within it. Roosevelt's conception of a localized police and militia worked so well precisely because the avenues of colonialism and foreign capital became visually indistinguishable from the colonized. Prior to the localized police; there were marines and foreign police, in other words, it was a *visibly foreign* presence. After the local police were implemented, this visibly foreign presence disappeared and was replaced with a police force which was virtually indistinguishable from the colonized. In America, however, this cannot be the case, as we are already accustomed to the colonized occupying a role within the police force. There is already a long history of the inhabitants of the inner cities—the colonized of America—seeing past the veneer of inclusionist policies within police departments, as evidenced by the general aversion Black Liberation movements had towards the police. In other words, instead of seeing a black police officer as a representative of the colonized, he is seen as a traitor to his roots. The police have sought to fight this characterization of them by implementing various diversity programs or workshops, posting videos online of officers playing basketball with a group of kids in Harlem, and so on. These attempts, however, have not served to change the function of the police for which they are reproached: these are mere superficial attempts to cultivate a more palatable appearance to those who do not know the true nature of policing.

Can this, however, not be said of Roosevelt's localized police? Despite the change from a foreign presence to a native appearance, is not their function—their *raison d'être*—still the same? It is true that the local police fulfill the same purpose as the American police—namely the enforcement of the economic supremacy of the colonizer and the economic subjugation of the colonized—but the difference lies in a level of abstraction and separation which is not, and cannot be, present in American policing. In other words, the police in America are always *American* police, whereas in the colony the police are, for example, *Haitian* police: the police in the colony are, on some level, separate from the colonial system precisely because they are the police of the colony, not the colonial power. On the one hand, in the localized police of the colony, their loyalty to the colonial power is maintained through their economic subjugation—through the already existing economic dependency which has been deliberately fostered by the colonizing



force—but this is formulated in terms, to return to Fanon, of “legitimate interests.” On the other hand, the American police are not dependent on these same interests; they act, unabstracted and unseparated, on the whims and interests of the state. While individual police might have economic interests which motivate them to policing—such as the need for a wage in order to purchase food and afford rent—the *system of policing* is not beholden to the economic supremacy of the colonial power; they are rather the lackeys of this economic supremacy and are responsible for its maintenance. American police, despite their recent efforts to the contrary, can never escape this because it would mean a level of abstraction and separation that is not possible domestically; it would mean the police would no longer be beholden to the authority of the colonial power—that is, the state—and would rather act in their own “legitimate interests,” as the localized police do in the colony. In other words, in order for the American police to be separate from the colonial system, the system of policing would necessarily have to be separate from the state and the state’s interests and, instead, operate according to its own “legitimate interests.”

If the role of policing is to enforce the economic supremacy of the colonial power and the economic subjugation of the colony, what, then, is the role of prisons? It is first important to investigate the premise upon which the police and prisons are eternally justified—namely, the underlying socio-political theory which believes that the currently existing social order is “functionally stable and fundamentally just.”¹⁰ If the current order of things is fundamentally stable and just, then any action contrary to this must, *by virtue*, be undesired and offensive. It is this premise which underlies the whole of the penal system: that because the current social system is stable and just, actual or potential criminals *must* be morally depraved.¹¹ Fanon said in *The Wretched of the Earth* that “the ‘native’ is declared impervious to ethics, representing not only the absence of values but also the negation of values... In other words, absolute evil.”¹² It is only through understanding what the basic, fundamental premise is—upon which the entire penal system is justified—that the importance of Fanon’s words can be properly understood; if it is true that the penal system is founded upon this premise and that any opposition to it is therefore antithetical to, or void of, ethics, then the native—the colonized—is, by virtue of their being native, already fundamentally opposed to this order, and, therefore, morally depraved.

10 Bettina Aptheker, “The Social Functions of the Prisons in the United States,” in *If They Come in the Morning...* ed. Angela Y. Davis (New York: Verso, 2016), 51.

11 Aptheker, “The Social Functions,” 51.

12 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 6.

Understanding that the penal system is based upon the foundational claim that the currently existing social order is fundamentally stable and just, and that because of this the colonized are seen as morally depraved or ethically void, we can now investigate the role of prisons. It is upon that same premise that their role is determined: the penal system must, necessarily, guard this social order from attack, and consequently the role of the prison is “the confinement and treatment of people who are actually or potentially disruptive of the social system.”¹³ In other words, prisons confine and rehabilitate any who might do, or have done in the past, harm to the colonial order. However, due to the basic premise upon which the penal system is eternally justified, those who would oppose the colonial order are determined by the colonial power *a priori*. Those who live in the American periphery are fundamentally aligned with the social order and have no reason to seek its demise, for they are the modern colonizers and benefit from its continued existence, while the modern day colonized subject—those who are exploited by the current system—are in no way inclined to advocate for the colonial system’s existence, and it would be in fact contrary to their self-interest to do so. It is on this basis that they are deemed criminal.

Furthermore, it is due to the colonial system itself that individuals are compelled to resort to criminal activity, “not as a result of [conscious] choice—implying other alternatives—but because society has objectively reduced their possibilities of subsistence and survival to this level.”¹⁴ These criminal acts, however, are not merely criminal: they are acts which are opposed to the colonial system under which the perpetrators are subjected, and, moreover, they are acts of survival, of necessity, not of greed. They are on this basis *political acts*. The colonial system, however, cannot have its opposition so openly known. As in the case of the Haitian Revolution, any hint of successful revolt might inspire others to do the same, and news of revolt *must* therefore be suppressed from reaching the ears of the oppressed. Towards this aim, the American police have defined the political act as criminal so that revolutionary movements are discredited and, furthermore, “affirm the absolute invulnerability of the existing order.”¹⁵ The role of the prison, and the penal system in general, is therefore operational upon the assumption that the currently existing social order is fundamentally stable and just and uses this foundational premise in order to *a priori* label the colonized as criminal—as ethically void—so that the everyday political acts of revolt they commit can be redefined as *criminal* in order to eternally justify the existing order.

13 Aptheker, “The Social Functions,” 54.

14 Angela Y. Davis, “Political Prisoners, Prisons & Black Liberation,” in *If They Come in the Morning...* ed. Angela Y. Davis (New York: Verso, 2016), 35-36.

15 Davis, “Political Prisoners,” 31-33.



CONCLUSION

Over the course of this essay, I have explicated the essential structure of Fanon's metropolis/periphery dichotomy in the extraction of capital from the periphery and siphoning of capital to the metropolis, in the economic subjugation, and in the role of Roosevelt's colonial police. Furthermore, taking this essential structure and expanding on Huey P. Newton's conception of domestic imperialism, I have shown that within the colonial power there is a reversal of Fanon's dichotomy: the metropolis, while still being the site of capital production and reproduction, is now also the site from which capital is extracted, and it is into the periphery, rather than the metropolis, that this capital is siphoned. The same economic subjugation which existed in the original metropolis/periphery dichotomy is still present. Although economic aid previously functioned as the capital which the colonized would use to invest in and buy the products of the factories of the metropolis, now it functions as mere means of survival. Both types, however, have the common goal of furthering the economic dependence of the colonized subject upon the colonial power structure. The colonial police—in the colony indistinguishable from the other colonized subjects—are, in America, completely visible and as such take up the very different project of defining the political and the criminal as a means to suppress the effectiveness of liberatory actions and further entrench the colonized in their dependence.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
J. Wolfe Harris, currently a junior at University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, studies philosophy and history. Wolfe is primarily interested in political philosophy and critical theory, although his current research is focused on philosophic responses to the real possibility of human extinction—climate change. He hopes to graduate by spring 2020.

