

## Revolutionary in Counter-Revolutionary Times<sup>1</sup>: Elaborating Fanonian National Consciousness into the Twenty-First Century

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One of the unique challenges of reading *Les damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*) today is that while it is an irredeemably revolutionary text, we live in a counter-revolutionary moment or in a global context that has tried very hard to discredit even the possibility of revolution. Fanon's text does not only narrate the effective undertaking of an anti-colonial struggle – of what is required for people to identify the actual causes of their alienation and unfreedom and together to will their elimination – it also outlines the various, often dialectical challenges of restructuring a society from the bottom up. Guiding and evident in the latter is the flourishing of what Fanon suggestively called *national consciousness*. Elaborating its meaning and ongoing usefulness is the focus of this essay.

### The Will in General and the General Will

National consciousness can be illuminated through understanding its relationship to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's conception of

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<sup>1</sup> *Este artigo é apresentado tal como originalmente escrito. This article is presented as it was originally written. Este artículo se presenta tal como fue escrita originalmente. Questo articolo é presentato nella stessa form in cui è stato scritto. Cet article est présenté comme il a été écrit. Dieser Artikel wird präsentiert, wie sie ursprünglich geschrieben wurde.*

the general will. While challenged as auguring a repressive collectivism that would trample the individual liberties at the core of modern conceptions of freedom, the general will, the centerpiece of Rousseau's portrait of democratic legitimacy, remains the most important challenge to the prevailing alternative, which would suggest that the aggregation of private interests of individual men and women is the best that a democratic society can achieve politically.<sup>2</sup> Indeed it was in the name of something akin to a submerged nation and general-will-in-the-making that those struggling to bring about an end to occupation charged colonial society with political illegitimacy.

Political and social orders, which, in Rousseau's account, were the only formations through which right or justice could be pursued, did not emerge organically out of nature but were instead based in conventions.<sup>3</sup> Most dangerous among these were those that suggested that people who could coerce compliance from others in so doing conferred legitimacy upon themselves.<sup>4</sup> The desire to have one's ability to be self-determining protected by others could not be secured by sheer physical domination. What could potentially stave off the tendency to collapse into sheer contests of willful force was for the state to be directed by the general will or what the differences of a people united in trying to create less precarious conditions for their lives had in common.

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<sup>2</sup> For examples of such criticisms, see C.E. Vaughan, "Introduction," in *The Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1915); Lester Crocker, "Rousseau's *Soi-distant* Liberty," in *Rousseau and Liberty*, edited by Robert Wokler. (Manchester, UK: University of Manchester Press, 1995); and J.L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1952/1986).

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du Contract Social*. Chronologie et introduction par Pierre Burgelin. (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), Chapter One, Section Two.

<sup>4</sup> Rousseau, *Du Contract Social*, Book I, Chapter 3.

The general will is what forms social bonds and is what makes it possible for societies, as opposed to mere collectivities or amalgamations of individuals, to exist.<sup>5</sup> Conjoining “generality” with “willing,” Rousseau suggested that the polis and political identity necessarily mediates between what Patrick Riley<sup>6</sup> has called the “minute particulars” or reified particularities that would fix their borders as stone and the universal, which would seek absolute limitlessness. Within certain, permeable bounds, the general will seeks to integrate meaningfully abiding differences. Simply stated, it is the reflective expression of the people as citizens considering the necessary conditions for their specific, ongoing, shared existence. Or put differently, it is what emerges when the whole community considers questions that pertain to the entire community.

Acts of the general will are those of sovereign legislation that aim at general well-being and common conservation. It is a set of ideas or conclusions with which one cannot disagree without having been fundamentally misled. Its aim is to unite individuals into a single body that makes the infliction of isolated harm impossible so that all are mutually implicated.<sup>7</sup> Although Rousseau did not think that one could achieve absolute economic equality, the aim of the general will was to secure conditions in which citizens were sufficiently equal that general laws could effect all comparably. In societies in which one person was affluent enough to buy another while others needed to sell themselves, the interests of each would necessarily be opposed. Under such conditions, no overarching general will could incorporate both.

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<sup>5</sup> Rousseau, *Du Contract Social*, Book II, Chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Riley, *The General Will Before Rousseau: The Transformation of the Divine into the Civic*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Rousseau, *Du Contract Social*, Book I, Chapter 6.

This was the case in the Roman Republic in which patricians and plebeians in fact formed two states in one.<sup>8</sup> Rousseau emphasized that the equality he described, while certainly not natural, was not a “speculative fiction.”<sup>9</sup> If abuses were inevitable, they could and should be regulated. It is precisely because all other forces tended to destroy equality that politics, which articulated otherwise differently located and disparate people into a shared identity, could play the role of counterweight. On this view, sovereignty and the general will are indivisible and inalienable, since the general will is general or it is not. Guiding and embodying the general will is, in other words, also the preservation of this generality or the future possibility of the general will.

Finally, the general will, which tends toward equality, is contrasted with the will in general or the sum of private interests and preferences of individual men and women.<sup>10</sup> The general will does not, as some have suggested, seek to eliminate these more particular interests. It does frame them as secondary and subsidiary to a shared will that sustains a domain of general life that requires a mutuality and reciprocity rooted in consent that can be both given and retracted. In healthier polities, the general will and will in general are more likely to coincide since, in these instances, individual citizens maintain a clearer sense of how intertwined are individual and community needs and concerns. While a general will can be arrived at numerically through voting, it is less the number of votes that affirms its content as the interest that unites them. It is the outcome of most citizens’ answer to the question of that to which we consent to as right for all.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Rousseau, *Du Contract Social*, Book IV, Chapter 2.

<sup>9</sup> Rousseau, *Du Contract Social*, Book II, Chapter 11.

<sup>10</sup>Rousseau, *Du Contract Social*, Book II, Chapter 3.

<sup>11</sup>Rousseau, *Du Contract Social*, Book IV, Chapter 2.

While the general will is neither foreign nor alien to us, it is only one will of many that we feel and may be muted or trumped. It may not speak to us as audibly as private interests that might frame it as gratuitous and burdensome.<sup>12</sup> In addition, effective leaders of groups smaller than the polity may frame the pursuit of the general will that sustains them (which is more particular and less comprehensive than the polity itself) as sufficient. Even then, because what legitimates a given political outcome is an ability to suggest that it is of common benefit, they may cynically mask narrower ambitions under its banner. Pursuing these as if they were indispensable to the preservation of generality (while they in fact will challenge and undercut it), renders the relevant divergent set of interests less negotiable, more likely to be treated as an exclusive, antagonistic end. In other words, while Rousseau hoped that the general will would be self-evident to every citizen, it could be very difficult to discern. In a hope to avoid the destructive consequences that could follow from manipulating such ambiguity, Rousseau argues that we must commit in advance to being forced by others to obey the dictates of the general will, even when we might seek to break with it or its specific content. Absent this, it could become little more than an empty formula.<sup>13</sup>

When trying to answer the question of how people unaccustomed to being interdependent might become so, Rousseau introduces the figure of a legislator or foreign visionary that, much like Max Weber's successful charismatic leaders, offers an inspiring portrait of a shared future the pursuit of which would transform all.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, he insists on the need for a civil religion that would cultivate a set of dogmas designed to sanctify

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<sup>12</sup>Rousseau, *Du Contract Social*, Book I, Chapter 7.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Rousseau, *Du Contract Social*, Book II, Chapter 7.

a spirit of sociability that would not tolerate intolerance.<sup>15</sup> We may evade the general will, hiding from the expectations that it suggests, argued Rousseau, but it did not die in such instances. Legitimacy, the body politic, and politics, as a discrete set of relations, do.

For many readers, especially those writing in the U.S. in the 1950s, Rousseau's vision of politics anticipated and echoed the worst aspirations of their fascist and communist political antagonists. In their view, it promised totalitarian outcomes in which a government, while not sovereign, faced no divided and therefore limiting powers. Without clearly delineated constraints, it would seek to eradicate any and all partial associations that might interfere with collective identification or mediate meaningfully between the individual and the polity. In so doing, dissenting individuals, lacking necessary protections, would be drowned in an intrusive collective and conforming culture in which their aspirations and hopes would be wholly subordinated to those of everyone else. Emboldened leaders would easily frame whatever were their own interests as the general ones of all citizens. Worst of all, they would be empowered by Rousseau's own ominous phrase, framing as an expression of citizen's own moral freedom forcing them to comply with an interest that was neither shared nor equal in its consequences.<sup>16</sup>

In the view of critics of "positive freedom," any non-repressive modern society will teem with diverse conceptions of the good life or of the nature of the common good. Unity and agreement on a broad scale on what could be considered right

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<sup>15</sup>Rousseau, *Du Contract Social*, Book IV, Chapter 8.

<sup>16</sup>Again, see Vaughan, Crocker, Talmon, and, in addition, Leonard Schapiro, *Totalitarianism*. (London: Macmillan, 1972) and Steven Johnston, *Encountering Tragedy: Rousseau and the Tragedy of Democratic Order*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

for all, on this view, could only be secured through coercive manipulation backed by force.<sup>17</sup> As a result, the best that one can do politically is to devise rules for mutual toleration, to set conditions for peaceful co-existence in which each can pursue their interests and preferences to the extent that they are able with minimal governmental interference. A prerequisite for this is placing debates over the ultimate purpose of collective life outside of the formal domain of politics, instead enabling people to negotiate such questions within voluntary communities of civil society that, unlike political life, they could enter and exit at will.<sup>18</sup>

While this vision of modern freedom as “negative liberty” is itself an outcome of liberal and bourgeois revolutions that sought to break the absolute power of theocratic and monarchical states, it is one that frames the political rights of individuals as those that secure their ability to separate themselves from others who appear primarily as potential limits on their free pursuit of their own private ends. While a useful model for shoring up protections of private property from trespassers, this offers no collective language through which to articulate legitimacy or illegitimacy. In other words, one cannot only in narrow asocial terms of private preferences articulate the normative ideals that underpin an emancipatory view of politics, ones that would insist that those who rule do so in ways that fall short of benefiting or developing a repressed and colonized nation.

While Rousseau warned that societies with eroded general wills could not be mended, there were also general wills that

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<sup>17</sup>For the classic, representative statement of this position, see Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty” in *Four Essays on Liberty*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

<sup>18</sup>See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism, Second Edition*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

were still emerging.<sup>19</sup> This was especially the case in formerly colonized nations, among them Rousseau focused on the island of Corsica and on Poland. It is what Fanon also hoped would emerge out of the nationalism through which the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria had been waged, through the ongoing and dialectical praxis through which disparate groups allied to create societies that were no longer colonial.

### **Nationalism and National Consciousness**

Although his early theoretical work on racism and colonialism focused primarily on the question of disalienation in terms requiring an interrogation of the human sciences, especially psychiatry, Fanon found himself in a difficult situation as head of the psychiatric division at Blida-Joinville Hospital in Algeria at the dawn of the Algerian War. His experience as a soldier twice decorated for valor in World War II, his medical knowledge, and his commitment to struggles for freedom led to his aiding the Front Liberation Nationale (FLN), his eventual resignation from his state-supported position of head psychiatrist, and his formally joining the FLN. The observations and arguments he subsequently made in *Les damnés* are thus informed by his on-the-ground experience in addition to his theoretical acumen.

Fanon suggested that it was only through directly fighting forces of repression that a submerged Algerian nation or its general will, squelched and rendered irrelevant by colonial relations, could begin to spring to life.<sup>20</sup> He warned that where fatality permeated people, those who oppressed them were never

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<sup>19</sup>Rousseau, *Du Contract Social*, Book II, Chapter 8.

<sup>20</sup>Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre*, *préface*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), 169; *The Wretched of the Earth*, Preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, trs. Constance Farrington. (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 131.



blamed.<sup>21</sup> Instead the diverse people who together constitute the colonized turned to magic, myth, and internal tribal feuds, all of which preexisted colonialism, in forms of avoidance that amounted to “collective auto-destruction.”<sup>22</sup> Although occupying the same physical territory, the colonized had little reason to think of themselves as sharing a political identity or as belonging to one nation with a potentially sovereign will. Indeed their divisions were many: There were, after all, those who managed to benefit and those excluded from the advantages of colonial exploitation. People living in the countryside saw those living in the towns as having taken on European dress and speech, as having betrayed the national heritage.<sup>23</sup> Urban party and trade union organizers who made tentative, arrogant ventures into rural areas frequently ignored the authority of respected traditional leaders or the longstanding significance of local clan and tribal diversity<sup>24</sup> and generally feared the spontaneous violent outbreaks of the peasantry. Finally, there were revolutionary political and intellectual minorities from the towns who broke with the legalism and reconciliatory approaches of recognized local leaders who were imprisoned and then exiled and radicalized by country people ready through armed insurrection to take their land back. In an opposite movement were the *lumpenproletariat* who fleeing the destitution of the country swelled the urban fringes. Unwilling to be reformed by a colonial society that they could only ever enter with the use of force, they came to direct this otherwise unpredictable and explosive action decisively toward spearheading “the procession of the awakened nation.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Fanon, *Les damnés*, 85/54.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Fanon, *Les damnés*, 150/112.

<sup>24</sup>Fanon, *Les damnés*, 151/113.

<sup>25</sup>Fanon, *Les damnés*, 168/130.

It was initially in efforts to cast off a shared enemy, a shared source of alienation, that people placed unequally and disparately within the polity developed a sense of a collective fate, a sense of themselves as an emergent nation. For it and they to enter history required a combination of all engaging in a chain of discrete, local irrevocable dangerous actions from which there was no turning back and the deliberate rooting out of local rivalries that could stall or interrupt an onward march toward sovereignty.<sup>26</sup> In a confraternity more typical of a church, or the indivisibility of which Rousseau spoke, yesterday's enemies joined together to widen a national assault on their occupiers.

Even then, however, if a “racial feeling” or determination to reject all who were foreign was enough to enter a revolutionary fight, it was not enough to sustain it.<sup>27</sup> Hatred and resentment alone made even some of the most resolute easily manipulated, easily bought off. Some would be blinded by the simplest of humane gestures, becoming convinced that nicer mundane treatment by the colonists (which, in fact, were each extorted concessions), itself constituted a victory. And others still would be tempted with slightly more, with promises of abandoning the others who continued courageously to fight, they would move into positions once occupied by settlers, settling with a will of some, with little or no interest in restructuring the roles themselves. They would not, as an actual decolonial project suggested, continue the reconstructive efforts necessary to make the last first.

Doing so would require supplementing, broadening, and reconstructing this initial nationalism with political, economic, cultural, and therapeutic components. Guiding and emerging out of each and all was the normative ideal of *national consciousness*.

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<sup>26</sup>Fanon, *Les damnés*, 170/132.

<sup>27</sup>Fanon, *Les damnés*, 177/139.

Fanon first argued for the indispensability of radically democratic participation. Colonial relations rendered the vast majority of colonized people political children, beneath citizenship, whose aspirations and anger were irrelevant to determining the shape and direction of their polity. In anti-colonial struggle, people, through fighting, made themselves subjects of their own history, seizing responsibility for its present and future. They had been told that they were incapable of such agency, only able to understand the language of force. Through collective decision-making, Fanon describes the nurturing of the humanity of the people – their eyes and ears expanding in a landscape befitting their dignity.

But for governmental institutions to become a locus of belonging and identification, they had concretely to demonstrate that they connected one part of the nation to the others through resource and infrastructural provision.

Many, with the ousting of a community of settlers, would hope that the nation could be an authentic expression of that which was local. This would lead many into an orientation of cultural retrieval, of seeking that which was most traditional to this place. This quickly could devolve into battles over which traditionalism was the purest expression of a people who now in fact faced new and different challenges. While recognizing that Algerians did indeed have a cultural past was essential to affirming their humanity as cultural agents, doing so more meaningfully required seeing them as people who could together articulate living culture through which to forge a shared, political world of the today.

But the challenge of fighting for the emergent nation was not without costs. The brutality of a reversed Manicheanism left scars, some of which could not be undone. One did not want those traumatized by the battles now empowered to run the country. One would need to be able to honor them as appropriate and deserved while turning to the next generation to develop new

models for collective living that grew indigenously out of their shared situation.

For Fanon, doing justice to the risks taken and lives lost in revolutionary battle required ongoing, dialectical constructive work of cultivating a unique scope of political identity, that of the nation, which would necessarily mediate among class, regional, tribal, ethnic, and racial differences, insisting that all shared in a past and future in which all were mutually implicated. Securing such sensibilities did not only require prioritizing their cultivation but linking legitimate political activity to the project of evenly distributed economic and political development.

He never diminished the difficulty of this challenge: while insisting that economic redistribution on a massive scale was urgent and essential (lest societies be shaken to pieces), he was as unforgiving of the national bourgeoisie for not putting themselves in the service of the people as he was that they failed to become a genuine bourgeoisie: they did not revolutionize production in the local economy in ways that would upset the existing global division of labor. If they had disproportionately to seize the nation's wealth in what amounted to thieving from governmental coffers, they could at least have refuted the role of Europe's intermediaries, developing a distinctive, national model of what it would mean to be a capitalist class.

While Fanon clearly distinguished the possibilities of *national consciousness* from the failures of a narrowed and increasingly cynical nationalism, the former is more an evocative and challenging idea than one that is fully fleshed out. It is clear that national consciousness, as Rousseau's general will, seeks out and expresses what different people have in common; that it moves beyond an antagonism to foreigners who can quickly be redefined as racial and ethnic others in a *reductio ad absurdum*. It is what enables and in turn nurtures ongoing mobilization and is

therefore hijacked and undercut by policies that rely on the retreat of most of the citizenry into induced passivity. While drawing on the cultural resources that all bring to the table, it seeks to combine and fuse these into distinctive new national forms in an open-ended constructive process that will be radically rejected by those who in power plays for scarce resources claim that one version of traditionalism is the singular and authentic one that should dominate. It can finally only emerge out of ongoing praxis, ever incomplete political, cultural, economic, and explicitly therapeutic efforts to reduce the causes of unfreedom, to make political institutions more responsive, better loci of and expressions of a consciousness of what will cultivate national growth. Absent a sense of political work as never done, the most recent period of mobilization will instead be reified into that which embodied “the nation’s” aims and identity and will snidely be invoked by those able to frame the will of some as if it were identical with an actual general will.

Rousseau’s conception of the general will, while that which tried in the most classically modern terms to insist that sovereignty could only belong to the active citizenry and that governments, to be legitimate, would have to make a task of seeking that which could be shown to maintain rough equality, thereby benefiting the citizenry as a whole, gave little account, save turning to a mythic legislator, of how a society with norms of legitimacy could emerge out of contexts of illegitimacy. Instead Rousseau’s discussion, save in the examples of Corsica and Poland, focused on legitimacy as an act of preservation, of maintaining conditions and relations under which it first emerged.

In Fanon, national consciousness emerges only out of deliberate challenges to relations of subordination and alienation. It takes shape through collaborative struggles first to oust those people, wills, and interests fundamentally opposed to the emergence

of an indigenous citizenry's will and then to move beyond this to developing institutions that would develop a nation that had been an appendage to another, metropolitan center. This was ongoing and dialectical, demanding that each generation take on the next stage of responsibility, trying to devise models that reflected local needs and aspirations. Even then, it is clear that while one could nurture national consciousness and that it might even, in some instances, blossom, it functioned primarily as a normative ideal through which the larger aim of political legitimacy, of relations that were no longer fundamentally exploitative, might be clarified and understood.

### **By Way of Conclusion**

One of the marks of a counter-revolutionary moment is the massive and systematic undercutting of the few niches in which some semblance of collective self-governance remains. Part and parcel of this development is the rise of relativistic challenges to the possibility of being able to defend some political policies and programs as more broadly beneficial to the polity than their alternatives (as better instantiations of a general will). While many people have accepted as reality the ideological positions that undergird neoliberalism – that efforts deliberately to devise political solutions to shared troubles will always be so deeply flawed that the battles involved are better left unwaged; that the only models of organizing collective life have already been conceived and can at best be modestly modified – the 2011 year opened with a spate of uprisings moving contagiously through the parts of North Africa from which the Fanon we study thought, lived, and wrote. Tunisians and Egyptians have called their efforts revolutionary: as instances of a national will of a large, diverse, tenaciously resolved and courageous group of people who, facing

life-threatening repression, watched what they demanded – the stepping down of a geriatric leader who embodied the obstacle to their aspirations – come to pass. It is not clear whether what will come next will be revolutionary in the sense that we have just explored, whether it will move from removing what squelched a fuller realization of a general will to the fuller reconstruction of the society from the bottom up. It is highly likely that Mubarak, for instance, will be replaced by a small bourgeois cadre linked to the military and better aligned with this stage of the development of globalized capitalism. If this were to lead to the development of a genuinely national bourgeoisie, this would itself be an important development. Even if its role would ultimately be as the next line against which people seeking a fuller realization of national consciousness must struggle.

Most striking is the seeming impossibility of countering counterrevolutionary norms without some notion of a general will or of national consciousness, of demands linked to preserving a discrete form of political identity that is smaller than the globe but that mediates among more particular and smaller forms of identity and belonging. It is in the name of a unit that incorporates meaningful and abiding differences of class, race, ethnicity, religion, and gender, that one tries to counteract otherwise inevitable inequalities, to articulate a sense of shared fate that is deliberately constructed by we, ever flawed and ever aspiring, political animals.

