
THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

By Frantz Fanon

The author was a Martinique-born Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist, philosopher, revolutionary, and writer whose works are influential in the fields of post-colonial studies, critical theory, and Marxism. As an intellectual, Fanon was a political radical, Pan-Africanist, and Marxist humanist concerned with the psychopathology of colonization, and the human, social, and cultural consequences of decolonization.



Frantz Fanon

In his celebrated book “*The Wretched of the Earth*” Frantz Fanon penned his deep insights of the relations between colonizer and colonized which he

distilled from his years in Algeria during the period of its national liberation struggle. The book is a searing psychological analysis of colonial conquest and occupation and, as such, is often cited as the first of its kind. Writing in 1961, he combined psychological with class analysis, making his work not only revolutionary but highly original. In this chapter, he dissects the form and content of the liberation leaders who become the new elite (the underdeveloped bourgeoisie). Readers who can recall the litany of crimes of corruption and maladministration of

countries in their post-colonial era, will be in awe of his amazingly prescient mind.

History teaches us that the anti-colonialist struggle is not automatically written from a nationalist perspective. Over a long period of time the colonized have devoted their energy to eliminating iniquities such as forced labour, corporal punishment, unequal wages, and the restriction of political rights. This fight for democracy against man’s oppression gradually emerges from a Universalist demand for nationhood.

But the unpreparedness of the elite, the lack of practical ties between them and the masses, their apathy and, yes, their cowardice at the crucial moment in the struggle, are the cause of tragic trials and tribulations. Instead of being the coordinated crystallization of the people’s innermost aspirations, instead of being the most tangible, immediate product of popular mobilization, national consciousness is nothing but

a crude, empty, fragile shell. The cracks in it explain how easy it is for young independent countries to switch back from nation to ethnic group and from state to tribe - a regression which is so terribly detrimental and prejudicial to the development of the nation and national unity. As we shall see, such shortcomings and dangers derive historically from the incapacity of the national bourgeoisie in underdeveloped countries to rationalize popular praxis, in other words their incapacity to attribute it any reason.

The characteristic, virtually endemic weakness of the underdeveloped countries' national consciousness is not only the consequence of the colonized subject's mutilation by the colonial regime. It can also be attributed to the apathy of the national bourgeoisie, its mediocrity, and its deeply cosmopolitan mentality.

AN UNDEVELOPED NATIONAL BOURGEOISIE

The national bourgeoisie, which takes over power at the end of the colonial regime, is an underdeveloped bourgeoisie. Its economic clout is practically zero, and in any case, no way commensurate with that of its metropolitan counterpart which it intends replacing. In its wilful narcissism, the national bourgeoisie has lulled itself into thinking that it can supplant the metropolitan bourgeoisie to its own advantage. But independence, which literally forces it back against the wall, triggers catastrophic reactions and obliges it to send out distress signals in the direction of the former metropolis.

This national bourgeoisie possesses neither industrialists nor financiers. The national bourgeoisie in the underdeveloped countries is not geared to production, invention, creation, or work. All its energy is channelled into intermediary activities. Networking and scheming seem to be



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its underlying vocation. The national bourgeoisie has the psychology of a businessman, not that of a captain of industry. And it should go without saying that the rapacity of the colonists and the embargo system installed by colonialism hardly left it any choice.

Under the colonial system a bourgeoisie that accumulates capital is in the realm of the impossible. To our thinking, therefore, the historical vocation of an authentic national bourgeoisie in an underdeveloped country is to repudiate its status as bourgeois and an instrument of capital and to become entirely subservient to the revolutionary capital which the people represent.

We will see, unfortunately, that the national bourgeoisie often turns away from this heroic and positive path, which is both productive and just, and unabashedly opts for the anti-national, and therefore abhorrent, path of a conventional bourgeoisie, a bourgeois bourgeoisie that is dismally, inanely, and cynically bourgeois.

THE NATIONAL BOURGEOISIE AS INTERMEDIARY OF CAPITALISM

We have seen that the objective of the nationalist parties from a certain

period onward is geared strictly along national lines: They mobilize the people with the slogan of independence, and anything else is left to the future. When these parties are questioned on their economic agenda for the nation or the regime they propose to establish they prove incapable of giving an answer because, in fact, they do not have a clue about the economy of their own country.

Yet the national bourgeoisie never stops calling for the nationalization of the economy and the commercial sector. In its thinking, to nationalize does not mean placing the entire economy at the service of the nation or satisfying all its requirements. To nationalize does not mean organizing the state on the basis of a new programme of social relations. For the bourgeoisie, nationalization signifies very precisely the transfer into indigenous hands of privileges inherited from the colonial period. Henceforth it demands that every major foreign company must operate through them, if it wants to remain in the country or establish trade.

The national bourgeoisie discovers its historical mission as intermediary. As we have seen, its vocation is not to transform the nation but prosaically serve as a conveyor belt for capitalism, forced to camouflage itself behind the mask of neocolonialism. The national bourgeoisie, with no misgivings and with great pride, revels in the role of agent in its dealings with the Western bourgeoisie.

At the core of the national bourgeoisie of the colonial countries a hedonistic mentality prevails because on a psychological level it identifies with the Western bourgeoisie from which it has slurped every lesson. It mimics the Western bourgeoisie in its negative and decadent aspects. In its early days the national bourgeoisie of the colonial countries identifies with the last stages of the Western ➤



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bourgeoisie. Don't believe it is taking short cuts. In fact it starts at the end. It is already senile, having experienced neither the exuberance nor the brazen determination of youth and adolescence.

This bourgeoisie especially in the aftermath of independence has no scruples depositing in foreign banks the profits it has made from the national resources. Major sums, however, are invested for the sake of prestige in cars, villas, and all those ostentatious goods described by economists as typical of an underdeveloped bourgeoisie.

RACIAL AND NATIVIST MANIPULATION

We have said that the colonized bourgeoisie which attains power utilizes the aggressiveness of its class to grab the jobs previously held by foreigners. In the aftermath of independence, faced with the human consequences of colonialism, it wages a ruthless struggle against the lawyers, tradespeople, landowners, doctors, and high-ranking civil servants "who insult the national dignity." It frantically brandishes the notions of nationalization and Africanisation of the managerial classes. In fact, its actions become increasingly tinged with racism. It bluntly confronts the

government with the demand that it must have these jobs. And it does not tone down its virulence until it occupies every single one of them.

The urban proletariat, the unemployed masses, the small artisans, those commonly called small traders, side with this nationalist attitude; but, in all justice, they are merely modelling their attitude on that of their bourgeoisie. Whereas the national bourgeoisie competes with the Europeans, the artisans and small traders pick fights with Africans of other nationalities. We have switched from nationalism to ultra-nationalism, chauvinism, and racism. There is a general call for these foreigners to leave, their shops are burned, their market booths torn down and some are lynched.

RACIAL AND NATIVIST MANIPULATION

As we have seen, the inadequacies of the bourgeoisie are not restricted to economics. Achieving power in the name of a narrowminded nationalism, in the name of the race, and in spite of its magnificently worded declarations totally void of content, irresponsibly wielding phrases straight out of Europe's treatises on ethics and political philosophy, the bourgeoisie proves itself incapable of implementing a programme with even a minimum humanist content.

The racism of the young national bourgeoisie is a defensive racism, a racism based on fear. Basically it does not differ from common tribalism or even rivalry between clans or confraternities. It is easy to understand why perspicacious international observers never really took the lofty speeches on African unity very seriously. The flagrant flaws are so numerous that one clearly senses that all these contradictions must first be solved before unity can be achieved.

DEMOCRATIC FAILURE AND RISE OF AUTOCRACY

The national bourgeoisie also proves incompetent in domestic politics and institutionally. In a certain number of underdeveloped countries the parliamentary rules are fundamentally flawed. Economically powerless, unable to establish coherent social relations based on the principle of class domination, the bourgeoisie chooses what seems to be the easiest solution, the single-party system. It does not possess as yet that ease of conscience and serenity that only economic power and control of the state system can give it. It does not establish a reassuring State for the citizen, but one which is troubling.

Instead of inspiring confidence, assuaging the fears of its citizens and cradling them with its power and discretion, the State, on the contrary, imposes itself in a spectacular manner, flaunts its authority, harasses, making it clear to its citizens that they are in constant danger. The single party is the modern form of the bourgeois dictatorship stripped of mask, makeup, and scruples, cynical in every aspect.

Such a dictatorship cannot, in fact, go very far. It never stops secreting its own contradiction. Since



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the bourgeoisie does not have the economic means both to ensure its domination and to hand out a few crumbs to the rest of the country - so busy is it lining its own pockets not only as fast as it can, but also in the most vulgar fashion - the country sinks ever deeper into stagnation. And in order to hide this stagnation, to mask this regression, to reassure itself and give itself cause to boast, the bourgeoisie has no other option but to erect imposing edifices in the capital and spend money on so-called prestige projects.

We know that in the developed countries the bourgeois dictatorship is the product of the bourgeoisie's economic power. In the underdeveloped countries, however, the leader represents the moral force behind which the gaunt and destitute bourgeoisie of the young nation decides to grow rich. The people, who for years have seen him or heard him speak, who have followed from afar, in a kind of dream, the leader's tribulations with the colonial powers, spontaneously place their trust in this patriot. Before independence, the leader, as a rule, personified the aspirations of the people - independence, political freedom, and national dignity. But in the aftermath of independence, far from actually embodying the needs of the people, far from establishing himself as the promoter of the actual dignity of the people, which is founded on bread, land, and putting the country back into their sacred hands, the leader will unmask his inner purpose: to be the CEO of the company of profiteers composed of a national bourgeoisie intent only on getting the most out of the situation.

The leader is so out of touch with the masses that he manages to convince himself they resent his authority and question the services he has rendered to the country. The leader is a harsh judge of the ingratitude of



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the masses and every day a little more resolutely sides with the exploiters. He then knowingly turns into an accomplice of the young bourgeoisie that wallows in corruption and gratification.

The former colonial power multiplies its demands and accumulates concessions and guarantees, taking fewer and fewer precautions to mask the hold it has over the national government. The people stagnate miserably in intolerable poverty and slowly become aware of the unspeakable treason of their leaders. This awareness is especially acute since the bourgeoisie is incapable of forming a class. Its organized distribution of wealth is not diversified into sectors, is not staggered, and does not nuance its priorities. This new caste is an insult and an outrage, especially since the immense majority, nine tenths of the population, continues to starve to death. The way this caste gets rich quickly, pitilessly and scandalously, is matched by a determined resurgence of the people and the promise of violent days ahead.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE PARTY

From time to time, however, the leader rallies his forces, speaks over the radio and tours the country in order

to reassure, pacify, and mystify. The leader is even more indispensable since there is no party. During the struggle for independence there was in fact a party headed by the current leader. But since that period the party has sadly disintegrated. Only the party in name, emblem, and motto remains. The organic party, designed to enable the free circulation of an ideology based on the actual needs of the masses, has been transformed into a syndication of individual interests.

Since independence the party no longer helps the people to formulate their demands, to better realize their needs and better establish their power. Today the party's mission is to convey to the people the instructions handed down from the top. That productive exchange between the rank and file and the higher echelons and vice versa, the basis and guarantee of democracy in a party, no longer exists. On the contrary, the party now forms a screen between the masses and the leadership. The party has been drained of life. The branches created during the colonial period are today in a state of total demobilization.

The militant is running out of patience. It is now we realize how right certain militants were during the liberation struggle. In fact, during the struggle, a number of militants asked the leading organizations to elaborate a doctrine, to clarify objectives and draw up a programme. But under the pretext of safeguarding national unity the leaders categorically refused to address such a task. The doctrine, they retorted, was national unity versus colonialism. And on they forged, armed with only a fiery slogan for a doctrine, reducing any ideological activity to a series of variants on the right of peoples to self-determination and the wind of history that would inevitably sweep away colonialism. When the militants asked that the wind of history be given a little more in depth analysis, the leaders retorted with the notion of hope, >>

and the necessity and inevitability of decolonization, etc.

After independence the party sinks into a profound lethargy. The only time the militants are called upon to rally is during so-called popular festivals, international conferences, and Independence Day celebrations. The local cadres of the party are appointed to administrative jobs; the party itself becomes an administration and the militants fall back into line and adopt the hollow title of citizen.

After a few years the disintegration of the party becomes clear and any observer, however superficial, can see for himself that the only role of the former party, now reduced to a skeleton, is to immobilize the people. The very same party, which during the liberation struggle became the focus of the entire nation, now decomposes. The current behaviour of the intellectuals, who on the eve of independence had rallied around the party, is proof that such a rally at the time served no other purpose than to have their share of the independence cake. The party becomes a tool for individual advancement.

THE THREAT OF NATIONAL SOCIALISM AND FASCISM

Inside the new regime, however, there are varying degrees of enrichment and acquisitiveness. Some are able to cash in on all sides and prove to be brilliant opportunists. Favours abound, corruption triumphs, and morals decline. Today the vultures are too numerous and too greedy, considering the meagreness of the national spoils. The party, which has become a genuine instrument of power in the hands of the bourgeoisie, reinforces the State apparatus and determines the containment and immobilization of the people. The party helps the State keep its grip on the people. It is increasingly an instrument of coercion and clearly anti-democratic.



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The party is unknowingly, and in some cases knowingly, the accomplice of the mercantile bourgeoisie. Just as the national bourgeoisie sidesteps its formative phase to revel in materialism, likewise, at the institutional level, it skips the parliamentary phase and chooses a national socialist-type dictatorship. We now know that the short sighted fascism that has triumphed for half a century in Latin America is the dialectical result of the semi-colonial State which has prevailed since independence.



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COLLECTIVE STRUGGLE AND AN END TO CHAUVINISM

During the period of nation building every citizen must continue in his daily purpose to embrace the nation as a whole, to embody the constantly dialectical truth of the nation, and to will here and now the triumph of man in his totality. If the building of a bridge does not enrich the consciousness of those working on it, then don't build the bridge, and let the citizens continue to swim across the river or use a ferry. The bridge must not be pitchforked or foisted upon the social landscape by a *deus ex machina*, but, on the contrary, must be the product of the citizens' brains and muscles. And there is no doubt architects and engineers, foreigners for the most part, will probably be needed, but the local party leaders must see to it that the techniques seep into the desert of the citizen's brain so that the bridge in its entirety and in every detail can be integrated, redesigned, and re-appropriated. The citizen must appropriate the bridge. Then, and only then, is everything possible.

Any hint of a caste consciousness should be eliminated. We have seen in the preceding pages how nationalism, that magnificent hymn which roused the masses against the oppressor, disintegrates in the aftermath of independence. Nationalism is not a political doctrine, it is not a programme. If we really want to safeguard our countries from regression, paralysis, or collapse, we must rapidly switch from a national consciousness to social and political consciousness.

As we have seen, a government needs a programme if it really wants to liberate the people politically and socially. Not only an economic programme but also a policy on the distribution of wealth and social relations. In fact, there must be a concept of man, a concept about the future of mankind. **NA**