



RETRIEVING INSIGHTS FROM FANON: SYSTEMIC AND SOCIAL VIOLENCE

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In his classic work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon laid out an extensive explanation of how an oppressed people, which does not fight fiercely and self-consciously against its own oppression, will witness the emergence of those who turn the pent-up anger, disdain and righteous rage they have for their oppressor into self-destructive explosions and aggression against themselves and others of their people. And in this month of marking his coming into being, and in the light and context of the recent rise of gang-related shootings and killings in the Black community, I thought of him and how relevant and resourceful many of his ideas remain for us.

He was in the 60s for Us, our organization and our people, as well as the rest of the world in oppression and struggle, an essential and ever-radiant light that reached across the horizon of history and enabled the days of liberation to dawn. Born in the Caribbean in Martinique, Fanon came into revolutionary consciousness practicing psychiatry in Africa in Algeria. He had discovered in the midst of his work that the central source of the psychological problems suffered by the Algerian people he treated and studied was rooted in oppression by the sick and savage system of colonialism and that they could only ultimately cure themselves in and thru struggle to end it and build a world of human freedom and flourishing.

Fanon reminded us we cannot honestly or meaningfully talk about violence among the oppressed without talking about the violence of the oppressive society in which they find themselves. This may be military violence of an occupying and suppressive army, the paramilitary violence of the police of various kinds, mob and vigilante violence or what he calls the “*peaceful violence*” of the system in

its daily conduct of business. That is to say, its modes of domination, deprivation and degradation in ways not normally seen as violence, i.e., structured poverty and unemployment, disparities, discrimination and blocked and unequal opportunities and access to essential goods of life.

Indeed, violence is its most inclusive meaning is not simply physical force of bombing, shooting, killing, beating, torturing, occupying or warring that society does under the mystification, camouflage and color of law and the specious justification of might. Violence is also all unjust and callous practices which injure, damage and destroy. It is, in its root sense, a *violation* of the rights and dignity of the human person, especially the most essential right to life, a life of dignity and decency, security of person, health and well-being, education and the context and capacity as Marcus Garvey says, to “come into the fullness of ourselves” as human beings. Thus, there is daily violence done to the poor and less powerful, the young, ill, elderly, disabled and others vulnerable. And it is in this context and these conditions that social violence, turned inward against the people, emerges, and that the damaged and disoriented, Fanon contends, doubt themselves, deny themselves, condemn themselves and mutilate themselves and similar others, psychically and physically.

Yes, we must confront and deal effectively with the reduction of violence by some young people, especially in gangs or in gang-related activities. As African people who first defined humans as possessors of dignity and divinity and taught the sacredness of life, we can never get used to the wanton shooting and killing without conscience or concern for others. For it represents a vile and vicious disregard for human life and the moral

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principles and practice which honor, protect and promote it, bringing death, devastation and immeasurable grief to the affected families and communities and to all who care and are concerned. But again, this means we must confront and deal effectively with the social conditions that form the shaping forces of their lives and daily lived experience and engage them in both a struggle against their contradictions and the unjust constraints society has imposed on their lives and the lives of our people. For rightful struggle is both curative and transformative.

Clearly, there are no easy answers, no short-hand fix or formula, no safe or sane way to avoid confrontation with the problem and attempting to solve it in the best and most effective way. So, we begin by understanding it as a social problem, not a racial one, a problem of social violence, a problem of health, security and well-being, requiring a social solution, a well-thought out coordinated effort that is adequately funded and supported by appropriate social agencies. After all, crime and violence are American or societal problems, rooted in a history centuries old.

The complexity of the problem of social violence in our community and society involves at its core, *gangs, guns and drugs*; police, political and gun dealer corruption; racist and racialized conceptions; and socio-economic conditions negative to human life and development. Thus, our efforts must be focused and linked in complementarity, collaborative and inclusive ways. Key also is encouraging, cultivating and supporting youth in addressing this challenge among them and

in the community, and accepting the responsibility of building the good and peaceful world they and we all want and deserve to live and flourish in. Thus, we need also, not simply to discuss the problems of youth, but rather stress and reaffirm the potential, possibility and achievement of those youth who offer *valuable models* for others.

Finally, Fanon reminds us that in the midst of oppression and resistance, “the enlightened observer takes note of the existence of a kind of masked discontent, like the smoking ashes of a burnt-down house after the fire has been put out which still threaten to burst into flames again.” And whether that flame is one of freedom or self-destruction depends on the organized presence and practice of life-affirming and life-enhancing alternatives, founded in a culturally conscious, spiritually and ethically grounded, politically strong and economically viable community.

And it means, Fanon states, building a unity in and for struggle which “can only be achieved through the upward thrust and leadership of the people”, who realize “that everything depends on them; that if we stagnate it is their responsibility, and that if we go forward it is due to them also.” In a word, the magic and miracles we hope and pray for of ending social and systemic violence and living a good and meaningful life, require a faith and philosophy founded in work, tested and tempered in struggle, and ultimately realized in the varieties of good we, ourselves, bring into the world, regardless of the allies we encounter and enlist in our ongoing thrust and striving upward.

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