

Anti-Colonialism

EMILE CHABAL

Anti-colonialism is the only entry in this book to include the prefix ‘anti’. At first sight, this is problematic. It suggests that anti-colonialism is a purely derivative discourse, always a pale echo of a dominant colonial ideology. A thoroughgoing anti-colonial thinker would – rightly – ask why anti-colonialism is reduced to the level of a subordinate ideology when, say, socialism, republicanism or fascism have their own distinct identities within the intellectual canon. But the normative semantics of the term do at least have one advantage: they remind us that anti-colonialism cannot be understood without its opposite and enemy: colonialism. An intellectual history of anti-colonialism cannot ignore the social and economic conditions of colonialism – whether that means the slow movement of slave ships across the Atlantic in the eighteenth century, the expropriation of land by the French government in North Africa in the nineteenth century, or the murderous guerrilla war fought by the Vietnamese in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

Right from the start, anti-colonialism was a philosophy of action, designed to analyse existing conditions and propose immediate solutions to the terrible plight of those living under French colonial rule. There was nothing derivative about this at all. On the contrary, it required extraordinary originality of thought. The imaginative solutions and anguished cries of anti-colonial thinkers far surpassed the dull ideological justifications of French imperialists. In the face of violent persecution, anti-colonial thinkers tried to find bridges between ‘French’ and ‘indigenous’ ideas that could push both the colonized and colonizers into reforming the colonial system. This project frequently failed. The French co-opted or ignored what anti-colonial thinkers said, and indigenous peoples dismissed the rarefied cogitations of political philosophers and poets speaking in their name. But anti-colonial thinkers did, eventually, get their revenge: the global revolution of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s was living proof of the power of anti-colonial ideas. For

a fleeting moment, anti-colonialism supplanted colonialism as a dominant ideology.

Anti-colonialism is therefore inseparable from – and as old as – colonialism itself, even if it has taken different forms in different contexts. In the French case, the modern history of anti-colonialism begins, like so many other things, with the French Revolution. It was the Revolution that set up the key paradox of French anti-colonialism: namely, how to realize the emancipatory, universalist and egalitarian potential of the French Revolution within a colonial reality of servitude, difference and hierarchy. There have been three broad types of anti-colonial response to this problem within the Francophone world. First, ethical or humanist anti-colonialism, which has emphasized the mistreatment of indigenous peoples and has urged colonial authorities to treat the colonized with ‘respect’. This discourse was popular with abolitionists in the nineteenth century and young, white anti-colonial activists in the 1950s, and it remains present today in the legacy of international development aid. Secondly, economic anti-colonialism, which took on increasingly Marxist or communist overtones in the twentieth century. This was the stock-in-trade of nationalist leaders who led their countries to independence, and has continued in contemporary anti-globalization rhetoric surrounding neo-colonialism. Finally, a culturalist form of anti-colonialism, articulated around the characteristics of racial, ethnic or cultural groups. The most famous example of this was the *négritude* movement, but it has made a re-appearance in recent decades around civil rights campaigns for Muslims, blacks and other ethnic minority populations.

All three of these strands have their own pre-revolutionary genealogies, but they came together in spectacular fashion in the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), easily the most important moment of anti-colonial theory and practice after 1789. Like its metropolitan French counterpart, the Haitian Revolution was a vast and complex conflict, pitting different racialized communities against a variety of colonial forces. What began in 1791 as a slave revolt, turned into a major revolutionary struggle and led both to the (temporary) abolition of slavery in the French Empire in 1794 and the (permanent) creation of the very first independent state to be ruled by former slaves in 1804. The fact that a determined group of slaves could influence policy in faraway Paris demonstrated the political acumen of supposedly ‘barbaric’ black men and women. And Toussaint Louverture’s (1743–1803) triumphant defence of the revolution showed that an army of the colonized could hold off one of the world’s most powerful military units.

During the course of the revolution, the inhabitants of Haiti – formerly known as Saint Domingue – were exposed to every kind of colonial and anti-colonial thinking, from the intransigent pro-colonialism of the terrified French planters to the ethical abolitionism of the white French governor L'égér-Félicité Sonthonax, who first proclaimed the end of slavery on the island in 1793. They were also confronted with the strident black anti-colonialism of Louverture, and the authoritarian zeal of his successor Jean-Jacques Dessalines (1758–1806). In a short space of time, Haiti became a veritable laboratory of anti-colonial ideas. Although the reality of post-revolutionary Haiti was political stagnation and economic collapse, the legacy of its revolution spread far and wide. Just as Maximilien Robespierre and the Declaration of the Rights of Man crystallized the hopes and fears of European revolutionaries, Louverture and the abolition of slavery opened new horizons for black peoples everywhere.

The flame of the Haitian Revolution was kept alive among free and slave communities across the Caribbean and the Atlantic world in the nineteenth century. Folk tales and songs ensured that those still living under colonial rule (or slavery and, later, segregation in the United States) would remember the spectacular success of their ancestors. When, in 1938, the Trinidadian historian C. L. R. James (1901–89) published his seminal *The Black Jacobins*, he was distilling more than a century of black memories of the Haitian Revolution into a format that would be accessible for white European and American audiences. His vivid portrayal of Louverture and his Marxist-inflected interpretation of the events gave the book its coherence, but it was the depth of black memory that gave the book its power. For any African or Caribbean anti-colonial thinker, the Haitian Revolution showed that freedom was possible under almost any circumstances.

Unfortunately, the nineteenth century was not a propitious time for anti-colonial thought. Various forms of ethical anti-colonialism made some progress: slavery was definitively abolished during the revolution of 1848 and some very select colonial citizens in France's so-called 'old' colonies were given the right to vote (briefly, in 1848, and then permanently from 1870 onwards). But these were often little more than symbolic attempts at rectifying the injustice of colonialism. The reality was that the later nineteenth century in particular was a period of intensive and brutal colonial expansion. The French extended their empire across huge swathes of Asia, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Their vastly superior firepower ensured that there was little effective resistance on the ground and virtually none amongst the metropolitan French elite. The imperialist and anthropological theories of

racial dominance that flourished under the Third Republic (1870–1940) meant that, until the First World War, anti-colonial ideas were inaudible.

Two global events put an end to this period of relative quiescence: the First World War and the Russian Revolution of 1917. The former drew millions of colonial soldiers into European armies and forced colonial administrators to reckon with a large number of indigenous people who had paid a ‘blood debt’ to their colonial masters and expected due recompense. The latter signalled the triumph of a radical new philosophy of emancipation – communism – which had the potential to transform the world order. It is hardly surprising, then, that the interwar period was the second major anti-colonial moment in modern French history, after the revolutionary period of the late eighteenth century. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, bright young activists from across the French Empire crossed paths in Paris – an ‘anti-imperial metropolis’, in the words of the historian Michael Goebel – in search of solutions to the ever-worsening social, economic and cultural conditions in France’s overseas colonies.

Some of these solutions were of a directly political nature. A particularly emblematic case was that of Ho Chi Minh, who underwent his political education in Paris between 1919 and 1923. A young anti-colonial (but not communist) activist when he first arrived, he joined the French Communist Party, before travelling to the Soviet Union and China. He finally returned to Vietnam to lead the nationalist movement in 1941. His trajectory captured the emergence of a transnational anti-colonial space that opened up after the First World War and was directed by an increasingly powerful global communist movement. Today, Ho Chi Minh is remembered as a military leader, but his exposure to different forms of anti-colonialism in France – from moderate Wilsonianism to radical Marxism – was vital to his intellectual development. Many others made a similar journey. Thousands of Chinese students arrived in France in the years following the First World War, and several of these (like Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping) later had prominent roles in the communist movement. France, often despite itself, became a site of anti-colonial exchange. Even if the French state was fiercely repressing dissent across its empire, it could not entirely shake off its reputation as the land of revolution.

Interwar Paris was also the crucible of the *négritude* movement. This variant of anti-colonialism, which blended a culturalist critique of racism and an economic critique of imperialism, came about because of the encounter between three black students in Paris in the late 1920s: Aimé Césaire (1913–2008) from Martinique; Léon Gontran Damas (1912–78) from French

Guiana; and Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001) from Senegal. All three were extraordinarily gifted students who had graduated from the very best schools in the French Empire. Except that, whereas most of those who were lucky enough to receive this kind of education wanted to conform to a cultural and political ideal of assimilated Frenchness, Césaire, Damas and Senghor did the exact opposite. In their writings first, and later in their political engagements, they tried to upturn the racial and republican hierarchies of French colonialism. Inspired by the Harlem Renaissance, global communism and France's own radical traditions (such as symbolist poetry and the Haitian Revolution), they created a new movement that sought to reclaim and emancipate black peoples through poetry, art and political change.

Although very different in style and emphasis, the early writings of the three thinkers converged in their critique of racism, their analysis of the economic exploitation of the colonized, and their interest in a black aesthetic. Initially, the focus was on the transformative power of words, with all three thinkers writing vivid poems that challenged the entire history of French colonialism. By the mid-1940s, this had come together into a more coherent worldview, widely known as *négritude*. Its aim, as Damas put it in his *Poètes d'expression française* (1947), was to usher in a new age 'in which the colonized man becomes aware of his rights and of his duties as a writer, as a novelist or a storyteller, an essayist or a poet'. *Négritude* was thus conceived as an attempt to emancipate the highly-educated colonized elite from the suffocating assumptions of French and European superiority, as well as offer a template for how black peoples could reclaim their histories.

There was inevitably a political dimension to this aesthetic revolution. The three founding fathers of *négritude* all engaged directly in electoral politics after the Second World War. Damas served briefly as a *député* for French Guiana from 1948 to 1951, but Césaire and Senghor became two of the longest-serving politicians in the Francophone world. Césaire was mayor of Fort-de-France continuously from 1945 until 2001 and *député* for Martinique from 1945 until 1993. Senghor was a *député* from Senegal from 1945 until 1958, and then ruled independent Senegal from 1960 until 1980. Césaire was initially elected as a communist, before leaving the party in dramatic fashion in 1956 after writing a famous letter to the then leader, Maurice Thorez, denouncing the narrowness of class politics. Senghor was elected as a socialist within the Section française de l'internationale ouvrière (SFIO), before leaving in the early 1950s to set up his own socialist movement in Senegal. Both men became political figures of extraordinary prestige in their native lands.

Césaire and Senghor's commitment to democratic politics was a testimony to the dual political and aesthetic dimensions of *négritude*. This explains why Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950), published while he was still a committed communist, was at least as famous as his poetry. The essay was an eloquent indictment of the cultural and economic violence of French colonialism and stands as a major contribution to the post-war anti-colonial moment. It is worth remembering too that Césaire, Senghor and Damas' work was politicized and popularized by more reputable – usually white – intellectuals. For instance, the preface to Senghor's *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache* (1948) was written by Jean-Paul Sartre. His interpretation and critique of *négritude* became – to the dismay of Senghor – the main lens through which the French viewed the movement. More flattering was the poet André Breton's (1896–1966) searing preface to Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (first published in 1939, revised edition with Breton's preface published in 1947). In both cases, the validation of *négritude* by others pushed the movement to the heart of contemporary anti-colonial politics and cemented its impact. Over subsequent decades, younger thinkers like Édouard Glissant (1928–2011), Maryse Condé (1937–) and Patrick Chamoiseau (1953–) enthusiastically revised, rewrote or reinterpreted *négritude*.

The difficulty, of course, was that anti-colonial politics in the Francophone world changed radically between 1920 and 1950. If the second anti-colonial moment during the interwar period was characterized by an emerging articulation of the radical injustice of French colonialism, there was little consensus on the preferred political solution. As historians like Gary Wilder and Fred Cooper have clearly shown, full independence was often not the main demand of anti-colonial movements, even as late as the 1950s. A good example of this was Césaire. In 1945, he argued for the benefits of greater integration with France and called – successfully – for Martinique to be granted the formal status of a *département*. He believed that the point of anti-colonialism was to rectify the wrongs of colonialism, rather than to gain independence alone, and most French colonial intellectuals and administrators shared his view.

The problem was that the wrongs of colonialism were inherent to colonialism itself. Very quickly, French promises of reform evaporated. The post-war reconquest of Indochina and the pitiless repression of the uprising in Madagascar in 1947 were a sign of things to come. France's implacable opposition to demands for Indochinese autonomy ultimately led to the military defeat of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 under humiliating circumstances. Not since Louverture's triumph against Napoléon had

a supposedly rag-tag bundle of *indigènes* defeated a major European power. This exploit was repeated by the Front de libération nationale (FLN) in Algeria which finally forced the French army – and 1 million French settlers – to withdraw from France’s most prized colonial possession in 1962. The hideous violence of the Algerian conflict and the almost total destruction of the French colonial empire in the early 1960s – with the exception of some of the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and Pacific possessions – made dreams of ‘unity’ and ‘federation’ appear hopelessly outdated. Even Césaire had mostly embraced the cause of independence by the time the Algerian War was over.

The 1950s therefore represent a distinct third moment within the history of modern French anti-colonialism. In this period, the ethical anti-colonialism of colonial reformers and the utopian aesthetic revolt of the *négritude* movement were definitively outflanked by an anti-colonialism of independence and self-determination. The millions of colonial soldiers who had fought in the Second World War – sometimes for the second time – could readily draw parallels between the evils of fascism and the evils of colonialism. In the French case specifically, the irony was all the more poignant because the soldiers and generals sent to put down unrest in Indochina and Algeria often did so in the name of ‘resistance’ and claimed they were restoring France’s place in the world after the Nazi occupation. This terrifying dialogue of the deaf – in which anti-colonial activists and French generals both claimed the mantle of the French Resistance – was famously staged in Gillo Pontecorvo’s (1919–2006) epoch-defining film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), which recounted the vicious suppression of the popular uprising against French rule in Algiers in 1957.

The inspiration behind Pontecorvo’s film was one of the most emblematic intellectuals of this third anti-colonial moment: Frantz Fanon (1925–61). Born in Martinique, Fanon was another extremely gifted product of the French colonial education system. Having been taught by Césaire in the early 1940s, Fanon was initially drawn towards *négritude*. But his post-war higher education in metropolitan France exposed him to the strident communism of 1950s France and the history of psychoanalysis. These diverse influences filtered through into his two best-known texts: *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) and *Les damnés de la terre* (1961). The first dealt directly with the dialectical relationship between blacks and whites – their hostility towards each other, their dependence on each other, and the inability of blacks to express themselves except through the language and ideas of whiteness. The second, which became one of the great texts of the global anti-colonial

movement, drew on the same dialectical model, but extended the analysis to colonialism in its entirety.

By this time, Fanon had worked at the psychiatric hospital of Blida-Joinville (1953–7), before becoming directly involved in the struggle for Algerian independence. This first-hand experience of the horrors of the colonial end-game in North Africa – and the fact that he had terminal leukaemia when he composed the text – gave *Les damnés de la terre* an urgent, tragic quality. While most readers have been drawn towards the (in)famous opening chapter, which endorses violence as a rational and cathartic response to the historic violence of colonialism, the latter parts of the book are more ambiguous. Fanon was acutely aware of the devastating psychological effects of war on all sides and he expressed concerns about the potential for authoritarian post-colonial nationalisms. Sadly, he died a few days before the book was published and several months before Algeria officially gained its independence. But his intense and contradictory ideas encapsulated perfectly the thrust of Francophone anti-colonial thought in the 1950s and 1960s. Fanon, in common with other anti-colonial intellectuals like Albert Memmi (1920–), believed history had finally turned its back on colonialism.

One of the more unusual aspects about anti-colonialism during the post-war period was the wide support it received from metropolitan activists and intellectuals. We have already seen how prominent intellectuals like Sartre became involved – it is noteworthy that Fanon asked Sartre to write a preface to *Les damnés de la terre*, which virtually guaranteed the book's success – but it was not only the upper echelons of the French intelligentsia who spoke out. Thousands of people were drawn to the anti-colonial cause by the violence of the wars in Indochina and Algeria. Of the many issues that galvanized anti-colonial activists, the most important was undoubtedly the revelation of torture by the French army. It was Henri Alleg's (1921–2013) celebrated pamphlet *La question* (1958) that brought the issue to wide public attention. His graphic descriptions of the waterboarding and electric shocks he endured confirmed long-standing suspicions about the barbarity of colonial war. After selling 60,000 copies in a matter of weeks, *La question* was banned by the French authorities. But it was not enough to silence those who believed that the French state had failed to abide by the most elementary rules of war. It is an indication of the depth of unease provoked by the issue that, when General Paul Aussaresses frankly acknowledged the existence of torture during the Algerian War in an incendiary memoir published in 2001, the public outcry was just as intense as it had been in the late 1950s.

The importance of the Algerian War as a site of anti-colonial memory is a reminder that anti-colonialism did not end with decolonization. On the contrary, there is a clearly identifiable fourth anti-colonial moment that runs from the 1970s to the present day. This can be divided into three strands that correspond broadly to the three types of anti-colonialism outlined at the start. The first is the legacy of ethical anti-colonialism in the plethora of French international aid and development projects. While some of these, such as the development of oil extraction in southern Algeria, were clearly driven by economic priorities, the thousands of young French people who travelled to Africa as *coopérants* in the 1970s and 1980s often did so in the sincere hope that they could contribute to the development of strong, independent African nations. Moreover, the prominent role of French development NGOs like Médecins sans frontières (founded in 1971) renewed the tradition of sympathetic external – mostly white – concern about the plight of those living in the ex-colonial world.

The second strand is an extension of the Marxist anti-colonialism of the late colonial period. In the eyes of many anti-colonial intellectuals today, France has maintained a rapacious and manipulative hold over its former colonies, with a view to securing French economic and strategic interests. This is well captured in the concept of ‘Françafrique’, coined in 1955 by Félix Houphouët-Boigny (1905–93), who became the first president of independent Côte d’Ivoire. The term was picked up again by the journalist François-Xavier Verschave in the late 1990s to describe the peculiar neo-colonial relationship between France and its former sub-Saharan African colonies since decolonization and it has remained in French public discourse ever since. Today, it is often deployed by French anti-globalization movements like the Association pour la Taxation des Transactions financières et pour l’Action Citoyenne (ATTAC) who denounce both American and French neo-imperialism across the former colonial world.

Finally, there has been a resurgence of identity-based anti-colonialism since the 2000s. Traditionally, the French state has been extremely reluctant to acknowledge ethnic, religious and cultural difference for fear that this will lead to the unravelling of the unity of the French nation. But this has come under sustained attack from ethnic minority pressure groups like the Indigènes de la République (founded in 2005) and the Conseil représentatif des association noires (CRAN, founded in 2005). The penetration of Anglophone post-colonial thought into the French academy and the influence of American identity politics on activist organizations has made it possible – if still highly controversial – for people to articulate anti-colonial

positions through the prism of 'Islam' or 'blackness'. Such opinions are frequently vilified by more orthodox political figures and intellectuals for being 'communitarian', but there is no doubting their appeal at a time when far-right politics and racism are at the top of the political agenda.

In the twenty-first century, a curious French-speaker can find traces of anti-colonialism in an enormous variety of forms. In a narrow sense, the re-edition and re-engagement with canonical works of anti-colonial thought by Césaire, Fanon and others has brought their arguments to a new generation. But a young person in France today is more likely to encounter anti-colonialism in the reggae songs of Ivoirian singer Tiken Jah Fakoly, the cultured hip-hop of MC Solaar or the fiction of Algerian author Kamel Daoud. For these artists, anti-colonialism not only has something to say about contemporary injustice, it also draws on a lineage that stretches through the Algerian War and the interwar struggle for colonial justice, all the way back to the slave revolts in Saint Domingue. This proud tradition – and the fact that contemporary France is no closer to resolving the paradox between its universalist vocation and the everyday reality of racism and discrimination – should ensure that anti-colonialism continues to flourish for many years to come.