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Understanding the Motivation Behind Colonial Uprising

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Abstract

This paper argues that the labeling of anticolonial violence as a form of terrorism is wrong. Through the philosophical lenses of Walter Benjamin, Roberto Esposito, and Frantz Fanon, specific uprisings in Algeria and Haiti are used as case studies. Since violence is necessary to uphold colonial order, this paper contends that retaliatory violence in the form of uprisings is not unlawful, even if the violence targets civilians. Furthermore, this paper examines the line between "civilian" and "combatant" as it relates to Algeria and Haiti in particular, and shows how these categorizations are not always clear-cut; by extension, neither is the line between justified violence and terrorism.

Keywords: Colonialism, Violence, Uprising, Terrorism, Sociology

1. Introduction

In the late 1800s, in order to meet impossibly high rubber harvesting quotas, Belgian soldiers in the Congo Free State cut the hands off the Congolese as a form of motivation, even extending the practice to children (Briefel, 2015). Despite King Leopold II's promise to "civilize" the populace, this demonstrates the extreme cruelty and violence that characterized colonial rule. Similarly, under British rule, native Indian dissenters were executed en masse during the 1857 Massacre, while in Kenya, thousands of Kikuyu were tortured and killed in "gulags" during the Mau Mau Uprising (Elkins 2006).

Within this context, the term *uprising* refers to a collective act of resistance against an established authority of government structure, usually arising in the face of injustice (Goodwin, 2006). The term *terrorism* is typically defined by the use of violence–often against civilian populations–to instill fear for political or ideological purposes (Schmid 2013). In colonial settings, these definitions are rarely applied symmetrically, lacking nuance and consideration—anti-colonial uprisings should not be simplistically labeled as terrorism.

Throughout history, colonized people often rebelled against and tried to overthrow their oppressors. To have any chance of success, the colonized had to resort to violence themselves—an approach that inevitably involved the targeting of civilians. Some are quick to describe such actions as reprehensible. To challenge that perspective, this paper cites two examples of colonial uprisings in Haiti and Algeria, where the targeting of civilians was not only justified but completely necessary; furthermore, the paper argues that to call the natives' actions a form of terrorism is not only unfair but fundamentally misleading.

This paper adopts a philosophical and historical approach to investigate the moral and political interpretations of anticolonial resistance, in which the ideas of Walter Benjamin, Roberto Esposito, and Franz Fanon will be utilized. Haiti and Algeria will be chosen as case studies, as both provide large-scale anticolonial revolutions in which the line between civilian and combatant was systematically destabilized. A comparative textual analysis of philosophical texts and historical documents will be employed to show how colonial authority derives its legitimacy from naturalizing violence, and how anticolonial actors reappropriate that same violence as a necessary form of liberatory activity.

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While previous studies have addressed the topics of colonial violence and the morality or resistance, few have applied connected historical case studies to such philosophical theory. By doing so, this paper clarifies the moral and structural dynamics of anticolonial resistance and situates them in the heated contemporary debate around these issues.

2. Mythic and Divine Violence

German philosopher Walter Benjamin coined the term "mythic violence," describing the natural use of force in order to maintain authority. The keyword here, and the reason the violence is "mythic," is the word "natural"—violence should *not* be seen as an inevitability, but a consequence of a failed system (Martel, 2024). The barbarity colonialists imposed on the so-called "natives" demonstrates this point.

In contrast, native resistance to colonial rule should be considered a form of *divine violence—a* force that creates a break in the ongoing cycle of falsified imperial authority. If mythic violence is *law-preserving*, divine violence is *law-breaking*, dismantling the very framework that enables domination in the first place (Benjamin, 1996). The key question here is *who has the right to exercise this violence?* Philosopher Roberto Esposito said that a legal order only perceives violence to be harmful if it stands *outside* the law (Esposito, 2011). This issue of *location* is crucial in understanding why specific critiques of violent anticolonial action are unfounded.

The necessity of violence in the decolonization process is rooted in the very extreme forms of mythic violence that structure the colonial order itself. Fanon's concept of *sociogeny* is illustrative here, demonstrating that colonialism both imposes and enforces a false identity for the colonized in its attempts to establish a natural order (Wynter, 2013). In reality, the ideal of racial superiority is merely mythic and possesses no ontological grounding. To Fanon, it is clear that the constitutive acts of imperial law–such as segregation and land displacement–are built on a form of Manichean dichotomy, where white colonists represent "good" and the darker natives the "quintessence of evil" (Fanon, 1963, p. 41). During this process, the natives who are deemed inferior to the white settlers are not even recognized as human.

With this theoretical foundation now established, the lived realities of colonial oppression in Haiti and Algeria can now be examined as concrete manifestations of these philosophical ideas.

3. Colonial Terrorism

Rampant dehumanization of natives strikes at the heart of many, if not all, colonial societies. In Haiti, formerly Saint-Domingue, enslaved people were "worked like animals", "housed like animals," and given meager rations reserved for livestock (James, 1963, p. 10-11). Punishments like whipping, burning, and mutilation were commonplace. (James, 1963). Meanwhile, in French-occupied Algeria, colonists practically divided the nation in two; white settlers living in luxury on one side, natives crammed into squalid ghettos on the other—the arrangement demonstrates the colonists' belief that they and the natives were two completely different species. (Fanon, 1963).

When conflicts flared up, dissenters were subjected to "electrocutions, beatings, waterboarding, burning, and water deprivation along with being drugged" (Erickson, 2013). A French general even admitted that it was "easy to torture a *bougnoul*, [a racist word, meaning "rat"] because you figure he's not a human being" (Todorov, 2007).

If Benjamin hinted at the inevitability of *divine violence* to oppose mythic authority, Fanon characterizes it as a way for the colonized to reclaim their humanity. Echoing their oppressors' violent methods—playing them at their own game, as it were—the colonial order was thus shattered, and allowed the native to realize "his life, his breath, his beating heart are the same as those of the settler" (Fanon, 1963).

This sentiment represents a drastic—and dramatic—shift from peaceful attempts to combat colonialism. As colonial authority is both inhuman and morally abhorrent, ending occupation through diplomatic means is an impossible, even absurd notion – how do you "reason" with people who deem you inhuman?

During the Haitian Revolution, the mutinous slaves often chose their targets indiscriminately, attacking both French troops and civilian white settlers. Similarly, during the Algerian War of Independence, the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) resorted to guerrilla tactics that involved killing soldiers and civilians alike. In these two instances, the infrastructure of the colonial order blurred the lines between "civilians" and "combatants." Therefore, civilians become casualties of war, their deaths a means to an end, without which the natives' goal could not be achieved.

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Furthermore, when it came to the colonists, the distinction between combatant and civilian was often murky. Case in point, in the Haitian Slave Code, the whipping of a slave by any person was an authorized form of punishment. Evidently, some colonists took this principle even further, as "slaves were not unfrequently whipped to death" (James, 1963). Examples such as these show that civilians in colonial societies not only maintained a sense of implied dominance but also enjoyed lawful authorization of force. Civilians in Haiti and Algeria were even labeled "slave masters". Put differently, the very fact that you own slaves or possess native land implicates you in the conflict; saying that civilian colonists are not ethical targets of anticolonial violence is not only unrealistic, but in many cases, outright wrong.

4. Discussion

It is imperative to note the divergent contexts surrounding anticolonial resistance in Haiti and Algeria. The most striking difference comes through Haiti's role as a persistent plantation slave colony of the French, while slavery was officially prohibited in Algeria in 1848 (Brower 2009). While the French in Haiti primarily sought economic exploitation to satisfy their mercantilist economy, they aimed to mold Algeria as a place of permanent occupation and assimilation. The historical periods of the two case studies also impacted the ideological grounds for resistance: Haiti's insurrection universalized Enlightenment values of liberty and equality to challenge racial hierarchies, while Algerian resistance was primarily grounded in post-WWII anti-imperialist discourse. Regardless, both uprisings emerged from the same fundamental reality—a colonial order sustained through systemic violence that left the oppressed with no viable means of liberation other than to mirror forces of power back onto their oppressors. By comparing these two case studies side by side, both the universal and specific natures of anticolonial violence are revealed–its necessity, its moral ambiguity, and its enduring implications for how the term terrorism is defined today.

To some, the violent uprisings in both Haiti and Algeria *are* considered forms of terrorism. However, to label it so contradicts Eposito's belief that, in certain instances, a person has a *right* to exercise violence. To denounce colonial resistance as "terrorism" with all of the commonly accepted negative connotations surrounding the term is thus unjust and reactionary. The focus should not be on whether anti-colonial violence is terrorism or "evil", but rather on the larger context that informed the extremity of those actions and made them necessary in the first place.

Others may take issue with the very notion of violent resistance, calling it an unforgivable act. Violence, some contend, is never the answer. But from birth to death, the colonized knew nothing *but* violence. The constant threat of whipping, torture, or mindless killing from their oppressors served as a constant reminder that life may never be free from terror. Even when the colonized were not victims of physical violence themselves, the violence permeating colonial society held enough psychological influence to define their existence: when a child witnessed members of their family being tortured or killed, what kind of thoughts or sentiments would that child develop? Articulating the power colonized people possessed to violently rid the colonial order is not a flattery or encouragement of violence. When the colonized utilize violence, they are redirecting the only constant form of power in their lives that they have ever known to facilitate their freedom.

This discussion revolving around colonial violence and anticolonial resistance is still very much relevant today, particular in the post-9/11 context. Similar debates have reemerged in response to uprisings such as the Arab Spring, the Syrian Revolution, and ongoing struggles in Palestine. Just as in Haiti and Algeria, global powers continue to define violence asymmetrically—state-sanctioned force is legitimized as "security," while resistance by the oppressed is condemned as "terrorism" (Achcar, 2013). Understanding the philosophical roots of this asymmetry reveals how colonial logics of power and justification still persist, shaping the moral language we use to describe contemporary resistance movements (Gregory, 2004).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, writing off all forms of violence against civilians as evil without considering the cause is dangerous and reactionary. It doesn't account for the specific—and in some cases, complex—conditions in colonial societies. Since colonialism almost by definition imposes and institutionalizes violence, denying the use of violence as a liberator

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for the oppressed is like trying to win a football game playing a different sport. Furthermore, by condemning the colonized, you are upholding the very rhetoric that facilitated colonization in the first place. The same dynamics that shaped the moral narratives of Haiti and Algeria continue to inform today's discourse on resistance, reminding us that the line between terrorism and liberation remains politically, not morally, defined.

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