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De/Recolonising Development: Fanon, Rostow, and the Violence of Social Change

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Abstract: Can development be decolonised? The dominant form of contemporary development thinking prioritises capital accumulation and economic growth, guided, if necessary, by violent means by national elites and hegemonic states. This article recounts an early moment in the struggle over the form and content of development. It argues that in response to post-World War 2 decolonisation, W.W. Rostow’s Stages of Economic Growth represents the modernisation and application to development thinking of supremacist norms rooted in the standard of civilisation (recolonising development). By contrast, Frantz Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth proposed a “new humanist” alternative (decolonising development). However, reflecting and reinforcing the dominant ideology of development, the violence inherent in Rostow’s notion of development has been whitewashed (development without violence), especially within the sub-discipline of development economics, while within various strands of development thinking Fanon’s vision of development has been blackwashed (violence without development). Reclaiming Fanon’s humanism requires grappling with his insistence upon revolutionary violence as necessary to overcome supremacist forms of development.

Keywords: Rostow, Fanon, decolonising development, the standard of civilisation, Vietnam War, new humanism

How do we hold on to the baby of solidarity, shared responsibility and care, but get rid of the colonial bathwater of continued fantasies of superiority, homogeny and violent universality, civilizing the Other and the age-old white man’s burden? How can we think and enact a decolonization of International Development (Studies)? (Rutazibwa 2018:175)

Introduction

In a world where 252 men have more wealth than all one billion women and girls in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa combined, it is no surprise that discussions about decolonising development have proliferated in recent years (Ahmed et al. 2022; Antunes de Oliveira and Kvangraven 2023; Patel 2020; Shilliam 2016; Sabaratnam 2017). However, recent work on the standard of civilisation—a notion formalised by international lawyers in the 19th century to justify European colonialism—highlights
how an inherently racist ideology still guides much of world politics (Bhandar 2018; Gong 1984; Knox 2016; Tzouvala 2020).

How, given the power of this standard, is it possible to decolonise development? This article approaches this question by discussing a prior struggle to decolonise and to recolonise development. It analyses in relation to each other the intellectual and political work of Frantz Fanon (French Martinican, radical psychiatrist, political philosopher, and participant in the Algerian revolution) and Walt Whitman (W.W.) Rostow (US academic and development theorist, rising to National Security Advisor under President Lyndon Baines Johnson). These thinkers were organic intellectuals of rival social forces attempting to determine the form and content of post-colonial development. As Jean-Paul Sartre noted in his preface to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, “the Third World finds itself and speaks to itself through his voice” (Sartre 1963:10). In contrast, Rostow represented the US state’s attempt to establish American-led global capitalism through state-led violence and the construction of supportive ruling class alliances across the Third World (Glassman 2018).

Fanon and Rostow were writing when modernisation theory—where the US was portrayed as potentially representing the future to poor/non-industrialised countries that would follow its path—was the developmental common-sense (Kapoor 2020). Despite, or because of its ideological power, modernisation theory and its core tropes were also increasingly under attack from various sources—including the emergent dependency and world-systems theories, and Fanon himself.

Fanon and Rostow met, so to speak, in Vietnam. The war, in particularly the Viet Minh’s shattering defeat of the French army at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 directly influenced Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (first published in French in 1961). Rostow, by contrast, deployed his understanding of development, as elaborated in *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (first edition published 1960), to advocate and legitimate US military escalation in Vietnam to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. He did so to physically eliminate, through extreme violence, the social forces and potential socialist outcomes promoted by Fanon.

This article deploys the “incorporated comparison” approach to interpret these key development thinkers in relation to each other, by investigating how “inter-related instances are integral to, and define, the general historical process” (McMichael 1990:389). While Phil McMichael suggests that the method be deployed to comprehend differential developmental processes within historical capitalism, this article deploys the method to analyse ideological articulations of those processes. It helps illuminate the conflictual but ultimately totalising (global capitalist) context within which these authors formulated their rival conceptions of social change, and how they have been interpreted by others in various fields of development studies.

The incorporated comparison approach can also contribute to the radical geography tradition by highlighting how the ideological reproduction of white supremacy and resistance produce shifting socio-spatial differences (Conroy 2023; Hawthorne 2019). As David Harvey (2006:416) notes, precapitalist prejudices such as racism are generative of geographical differentiations and are “actively
reconstituted features within the capitalist mode of production”. Hence, the devaluation of non-white bodies “is evidence of the normal, routine, functioning of capitalist economies” (Pellow 2007:17, quoted in Pulido 2017:529). This article argues that Rostow contributes significantly to this supremacist tradition. However, resistance to such devaluing ideologies and practices, as in Fanon’s work, and in myriad struggles against white supremacy—from revolutionary wars in Haiti in the late 18th and early 19th centuries to Vietnam and Algeria in the 20th century—also generate potentially transformative socio-spatial dynamics.

The Standard of Civilisation emerged as a concept in Christendom in the medieval period as part of the ideological glue binding together diverse populations under the tutelage of the Catholic church. It was transformed, however, under the secularising power of the enlightenment, from “the original ecclesiastical dichotomy of savior/fallen into one of civilized/noncivilized” (Grovogui 1996:41). It was then formalised by international lawyers in the 19th century to assert Europeans’ “right to control non-European societies, to condemn their ‘barbarism’ or lack of ‘advancement’, to reform their governing structures, and to shape their future course of development” (Linklater 2016).

I argue that Rostow’s conception of development in The Stages of Economic Growth—still everyday fare on most development studies reading lists—represents an application of the standard of civilisation norms to development thinking. Central to it is the advocacy of the use of war to eliminate social forces inimical to the project of capitalist modernisation. By contrast, Fanon’s new humanism combines the longer tradition of socialism from below—combating and transcending capitalist exploitation through labouring class struggle and eventual control over the means of production—with a radical and highly original vision of a post-racial, post-patriarchal, post-alienated world (Hudis 2015; Mbembe 2012; Turner 1999).

Rostow and Fanon embraced different notions of violence. Rostow’s development theory was linked intrinsically to war (from counterinsurgency to a nuclear attack) to further hegemonic rule and facilitate continued imperial extraction and control in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere.1 Fanon’s conception of violence was that of labouring class struggles—against ruling classes, racism, patriarchy, and colonialism, culminating in revolution—as a means of forging a different course of human development.

Reading these authors in relation to each other also illuminates the differential reception of their ideas within the broad discipline of development studies. Within development economics, Rostow’s notion of development has been whitewashed—abstracted from violence. By contrast, in several influential contributions to the broad field of development (including cultural and post-colonial) studies, Fanon’s notion of development has been blackwashed (portrayed in the worst possible light) through reducing it to violence.

Despite such blackwashing, however, Fanon’s ideas are being deployed productively in the analysis of state formation (Salem 2018), racial capitalism (Gibson 2008; White 2020), social reproduction (Neely and Lopez 2022), and critical social work (Garrett 2021) to name but a few. To contribute further to such productive deployment of Fanon’s ideas in development studies it is, in part, necessary to rebut critiques that attempt to blackwash him.
Following this introduction, the next section outlines connections between the standard of civilisation ideology and core elements of contemporary development thinking. The third section delineates how, within much development thinking, Rostow has been whitewashed (where violence is theoretically excluded from his portrayal of development) while Fanon has been blackwashed (where violence displaces his notion of development). Section four argues that Rostow’s modernisation theory represents a modernisation of the standard of civilisation ideology and the conceptual re-colonisation of development theory and practice. Section five discusses how Fanon’s “stretching” of Marxism provides an anti-Eurocentric, anti-stagist, decolonised vision of development, directly opposed to the standard of civilisation. Section six shows how Fanon regarded the Vietnamese defeat of the French (in the wars’ earlier phase) as a milestone for the global anti-colonial movement. It notes Rostow’s central involvement in the escalation of the Vietnam war and shows how this support flowed organically from his notion of the stages of development. The concluding section argues for re-thinking the constitutive role of violence in development.

**Development of/and the Standard of Civilisation**

In 1949 Harry Truman’s presidential address inaugurated a new era of international cooperation under the auspices of the United States:

> More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery ... For the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and the skill to relieve the suffering of these people ... Our aim should be to help the free peoples of the world, through their own efforts, to produce more food, more clothing, more materials for housing, and more mechanical power to lighten their burdens. The old imperialism—exploitation for foreign profit—has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair-dealing. (Truman 1949)

Truman’s speech and much development theory since can be understood as an attempt to establish a hegemonic ideology about the capitalist development project (Kapoor 2020). Here the US symbolises the universal future of the globe, while the poverty experienced by poor countries represented a particular pathology that could be cured with the correct treatment/policies.

The two-fold significance of Truman’s speech—rejecting the legitimacy of prior imperial relations, while allocating the US a special role in assisting poor countries develop—represented an updating of the standard of civilisation norms. Its novelty is captured by the notion of the dynamics of difference. As Antony Anghie argues in the case of international law, but with comparable implications for international development:

> International lawyers [development theorists and practitioners] over the centuries maintained ... [a] basic dichotomy between the civilized and the uncivilized ... I use the term “dynamic of difference” to denote ... the endless process of creating a gap between two cultures, demarcating one as “universal” and civilized and the other as “particular” and uncivilized, and seeking to bridge the gap by developing techniques to normalize the aberrant society. (Anghie 2007:4, emphases added)
Elements of the standard of civilisation are present in foundational social scientific statements. For example, 17th century state of nature theory (Hobbes 2016) differentiated primitive from advanced peoples, while Locke’s (2014) “labour theory of property” justified the colonisation and land appropriation of the former by the latter (Bhandar 2018). The secularised variant of the standard of civilisation culminated in Adam Smith’s identification of the “four distinct stages” which mankind passes through—the age of hunters, shepherds, agriculture, and, finally, commerce (Cha 2015:752). During Atlantic slavery and the colonial period, the standard of civilisation was transformed into an ideology of white supremacy, as in Immanuel Kant’s observation that “[h]umanity exists in its greatest perfection in the white race. The yellow Indians have a smaller amount of talent. The Negroes are lower ...” (quoted in Eze 2018:104).

Norms constituting the standard of civilisation were formative to the early social sciences (including their methodologies). A Jan Helenus Ferguson, a Dutch colonial administrator, observed in his The Philosophy of Civilization: A Sociological Study, first published in 1889:

The glaring contrast between the Western Civilization in its unrelenting activity and the stagnation in development of the social organisms of Eastern Nations is a matter of intense interest to science, and the doctrine of the universality of the Christian standard of civilisation is greatly enhanced when in situating a comparison between Eastern and Western progress. (Ferguson 2017:316, emphasis added)

The binary of Western dynamism vs Eastern stagnation was the cornerstone of Max Weber’s The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, first published in 1905 (Said 1978). Weber (2001) ignores the contribution of colonialism and empire to the rise and spread of capitalism and focusses instead on the specificity of Western capitalist rationality (Allen 2017). Notably, Weber’s identification of the work-inspiring driving force of the protestant ethic and rational inner-worldly ascetism is couched in cross-class terms. The standard of civilisation ideology enabled the extension of an ideological offer of social integration “to the lower classes, without having to question the foundation of class-based society” (Hund 2014:23).

In Western Europe the standard of civilisation contained two contrasting, but potentially complementary, logics of behaviour between powerful and weaker countries/regions. In the 19th century up until the end of the Second World War, biology (as race) was largely deployed to justify white supremacy. This, however, was also combined with a commitment to “improvement”, popularly conceived of as the White Man’s Burden. On the one hand, the standard of civilisation’s biological referent legitimated the conquest, exploitation and ultimately the extermination of native populations. On the other hand, its commitment to improvement suggested paternalistic obligations, whereby powerful nations assisted the less powerful to become (more) civilised (Wight 1991).

The significance of Truman’s speech was to suggest that the former logic—of biologically and racially justified colonial domination—was an historical relic, while the US was now taking upon itself the role of facilitating the latter logic—of global paternalistic improvement (excluding the communist bloc). Rostow’s
ideological move was to replace the standard of civilisation’s relatively fixed biological referent point with a more flexible cultural one. However, his Stages of Economic Growth retained the US state’s right to engage in neo-colonial-style domination when necessary.

Development without Violence and Violence without Development: White-Washing Rostow, Black-Washing Fanon

Rostow’s and Fanon’s comprehensions of human development have been whitewashed and blackwashed, respectively. Rostow’s role in intensifying US-imposed mass violence upon the Vietnamese people is rarely associated with his stagist conception of development. In fact, despite decades of critical literature debunking Rostow’s theory, when his ideas are presented—especially in development economics textbooks—the focus is upon their economic logic rather than their inherent violence. Fanon’s notion of a new humanism has, by contrast, often been side-lined and he has been portrayed as an exponent of violence.

Within development economics textbooks, but sometimes across other strands of development studies, the presentation of Rostow’s stagist thesis is rarely combined with acknowledgement of his role in the American War on Vietnam (Szirmai 2015; Todaro and Smith 2020; Willis 2011). For example, Todaro and Smith (2020:111) note how “[o]ne of the principal strategies of development necessary for any takeoff was the mobilisation of domestic and foreign saving in order to generate sufficient investment to accelerate economic growth”. In a similar vein, Szirmai (2015:9) argues that:

An important policy recommendation deriving from Rostovian analysis is the requirement of large-scale investment in industry in the take-off stage. Foreign investment, loans and development aid can help compensate for the shortfalls in domestic savings and foreign currency requirements, compared to investment needs. Development aid, training and education can also help surmount the traditional obstacles to growth and contribute to the realisation of the preconditions for take-off.

While Rostow’s stagist conception of development has been criticised for its lack of intellectual coherence (e.g. Frank 1969; Roxborough 1980; Selwyn 2011), a consequence of political and conceptual whitewashing means that it has been largely disassociated from intense imperial violence. Even critical thinkers skirt around the issue. In his influential Encountering Development, Arturo Escobar (2011:38) mentions Rostow’s Stages, but not his involvement in Vietnam. While Gilbert Rist (2014:101) mentions Rostow’s role in Vietnam, he does not relate it to his stagist conception of development.

A diametrically opposite fate—of political and conceptual blackwashing—has often been used to characterise Frantz Fanon by reducing his ideas to violence, whilst ignoring his contribution to development thinking. For example, in Post-Colonialism: An Historical Introduction, Robert Young (2016:278) argues that Fanon’s position is “predicated upon the espousal of the virtues and necessities of
violence, with little indication of what the free society that was to follow liberation was to be like”. Edward Said (1994:236) eschews discussion of Fanon’s new humanism, arguing that he fails to offer “a prescription for making a transition after decolonization to a period ... [of] a new political order”. Sometimes, when Fanon’s notion of development is discussed, it is reduced to an identification with Stalinist Russia (Gilly 1965).

The association of Fanon’s thought with violence was made early on, and influentially, by Hannah Arendt in her On Violence. Remarkably, whilst hardly mentioning the Algerian revolution, she argued that violence increased the arbitrariness of political life and that while it changes the world “the most probable change is to a more violent world” (Arendt 1970:80). There are ironies aplenty in Arendt’s dismissal of Fanon’s notion of revolutionary transformation. She supported intellectually the violence of Jews against Nazis. She provided a path-breaking analysis of the origins of totalitarianism, rooting it in European colonial degradation of African native populations, arguing that the scramble for Africa “became the most fertile soil for the flowering of what later was to become the Nazi elite. Here they had seen with their own eyes how peoples could be converted into races and how ... one might push one’s own people into the position of the master race” (Arendt 1958:206). In these ways elements of her thought might be considered complementary to Fanon’s. However, she herself deployed the very tropes—the standard of civilisation and the benign-ness of colonialism—that Fanon critiqued. In The Origins of Totalitarianism, she argues that slavery “domesticated a certain part of the savage population” (Arendt 1958:192), and that what made the slaves “different from other human beings” was:

that they treated nature as their undisputed master, that they had not created a human world, a human reality, and that therefore nature had remained, in all its majesty, the only overwhelming reality ... [They] lacked the specifically human character ... so that when European men massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder. (ibid.)

As Patricia Owens (2017:405) explains, Arendt “harboured her own deep racial prejudices, especially when writing about Africans and people of African descent”. These were expressed in parts of her work that upheld and contributed to the standard of civilisation tropes.

Whilst brief, the above discussion illuminates some elements about how relationships between violence and development are theorised. Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey (2006:332) note how “[a]rmed resistance to Northern domination of the international system is subsumed largely under the category of ‘terrorism’ ... this term legitimates state power and delegitimizes the use of force by non-state actors”. Within much of the broad field of development studies, modernisation legitimates the violence of “benign” powers (whether state elites or hegemonic states) against “anti-modern”, “traditional” social forces. Such a framing white-washes the violence of “modernisation” while obscuring the developmental potential associated with (necessarily violent) resistance and propagation of alternatives to it.
Recolonising Development: Rostow’s Stages of Economic Growth

Rostow’s The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto (1971a) represented the culmination of his prior work. For example, in An American Politics in Asia, Rostow (with Richard W. Hatch) discussed how the US should maintain its global hegemonic position whilst undermining communism, arguing that:

"[t]he alternative to total war initiated by the United States is not peace. Until a different spirit and a different policy prevail in Moscow and Peking the alternative for the United States is a mixture of military, political and economic activity. (Rostow and Hatch 1955:vii)"

In The Stages of Economic Growth Rostow sought to pose and answer two core related questions. How, in the emergent post-colonial context, could newly independent states transform their economies to become like the USA, the most developed country at that time? And secondly, as suggested by the sub-title of the book, why should and how could newly independent elites in the Third World resist communism? Rostow’s answer was that all countries could, with the correct (pro-capitalist) cultural orientation and (anti-communist) political-economic commitment and military guidance (by national elites in concert with the US), pass through five stages of economic growth, culminating in the age of high mass-consumption, as enjoyed by the US.

Rostow’s ideas were expounded within a context of the US’s cold war with Russia, Truman’s speech about the advent of an era of democratic fair dealing, the shadow of McCarthyism, the ascent of John F Kennedy to the presidency, and Rostow’s own role in escalating the US’s pursuit of a military solution to the insurgency in Vietnam and other parts of the Third World.

In his inaugural address Kennedy deployed a Rostowian conception of US-led socio-economic change designed to bring about a world in the US’s image (including its rule by a minority elite and the preservation of their privilege): “To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves ... If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich” (Kennedy 1961).

Rostow’s Stages of Economic Growth can be interpreted, following George Kennan’s prognosis, as a contribution to the US’s attempts to contain Russia (Bromley 2008). But it was more than that. As Gaddis (2005) notes, he was convinced that the Cold War contest would play out through the feasibility and success of the rival blocs’ development projects.

Rostow argued that “[i]t is possible to identify all societies, in their economic dimensions, as lying within one of five categories: the traditional society, the pre-conditions for take-off, the take-off, the drive to maturity, and the age of high mass-consumption” (Rostow 1971a:4). Further, “economic change is, itself ... the consequence of political and social as well as narrowly economic forces” (Rostow 1971a:2), and “[t]he more general case in modern history ... saw the stage of preconditions arise not endogenously but from some external intrusion by more advanced societies” (Rostow 1971a:6). He claimed that European “[c]
Colonies were often established initially ... to organize a traditional society incapable of self-organization (or un-willing to organize itself) for modern import and export activity, including production for export” (Rostow 1971a:109). His emphasis on the external contribution to modernising national politics and culture enabled him to identify the US as the key ally to developing nation elites as they sought to navigate their way through the dangerous minefield (of the communist threat) of development.

While dominant 19th century notions of the standard of civilisation deployed (a relatively fixed notion of) biological reasoning to justify European colonialism, Rostow replaced biology with (a mutable notion of) culture. In doing so he held out the promise to all Third World elites that they could achieve development provided they adopt the correct policies. He also established the theoretical grounds for the US’s role in guiding poor countries through the stages of economic growth. As Nils Gilman (2018:143) puts it:

Just as Victorian theorists of civilization took for granted the progressive and successful nature of British society and deployed this vaunted virtue as a casuistry for their imperial projects, so Rostow represented the supposed success of the American experiment as evidence that US purposes in the world were essentially benign.

In modernising the standard of civilisation, Rostow drew upon tropes of manifest destiny and exceptionalism to explain the United States’ capacity to help developing nations through the stages of growth, rooted in its self-defined anti-colonial civilising mission. Following its 1776 revolution against Britain the US now became the first anti-colonial nation (de Tocqueville 2003), possessing a sense of “special meaning and moral responsibility” (Rostow 1971a:184). Its founding fathers combined ideologically its anti-coloniality with its puritan heritage and protestant work ethic, presented in contrast to its southern neighbours’ tardy political and economic development (Frank 1969). Consequently, US ideologies constructed an image of the new nation as embodying qualities—of political and economic freedom and market-orientated hard work—that legitimated its actions to incorporate into its sphere of influence less fortunate regions, as through the Monroe Doctrine. These tropes were incorporated into Rostow’s schema, as he argued that “developed nations would have to guide childlike Third World societies through the process of modernisation” (O’Brien 2007:186).

Rostow’s notion of catch-up development was predicated upon a theoretical assumption and a practical necessity. He assumed that most elites in the emergent Third World wanted to achieve American-style Fordist capitalism. However, such economic modernisation, necessitated that they successfully eliminate the communist threat (e.g. Rostow 1971a:165). This, however, generated a tension in his thought. In Politics and the Stages of Growth Rostow wrote how “[m]odernization in the third quarter of the 20th century—outside the communist world—is generally believed to require movement towards democratic government” (Rostow 1971b:272). Yet he often supported anti-democratic social forces:

[W]hether in the form of the dictatorships that were spawned in Latin America under the Alliance for Progress or the numerous Asian dictatorships that Rostow supported,
militarism became integral to Rostowian development politics not only theoretically but also in practice. (Glassman 2018:570)

Rostow referred to communism as a “disease of the transition” (1971a:162), portrayed pro-capitalist militaries as “an absolutely crucial figure of the transition”, and noted how such coalitions needed to be “prepared to deal with the enemies” of the objective of modernisation (Rostow 1971a:28). The logic of his political economic analysis was demonstrated repeatedly. For example, between 1965 and 1966 the Indonesian army, increasingly under the direction of General Suharto and with the support of the CIA (which provided lists of suspected communists to the Indonesian army), engaged in the genocide of over one million suspected communists, leftists, ethnic Chinese and Javanese people (Melvin 2018). Following the genocide Suharto instituted his “new order”—an anti-communist, pro-US, free-market orientated regime—with the assistance of the “Berkeley mafia”—a group of US-trained Indonesian economists. In August 1967 Rostow told President Johnson that Suharto “is making a hard try at making something of Indonesia which could be very good for us and the world” (quoted in Brands 1989:804).

Nowhere in The Stages of Economic Growth or Politics and the Stages of Growth does Rostow define or nuance differences between the communist insurgencies across the Third World. This broad-brush definition of communism as a “disease of the transition” dovetailed with (and possibly was inspired by) the McCarthyism in the United States (from the late 1940s to the 1950s) where diverse forms of working-class politics were portrayed as pro-communist. Such broad-brush terms—at home and abroad—served to legitimate their repression by the US state and its allies.

Rostow (1971a:144), concerned with facilitating an anti-communist alliance led by the US as a means of establishing worldwide modernisation, noted how:

The non-communist literate elites in these transitional societies bear a heavy responsibility for the futures of their peoples. They have the right to expect the world of advanced democracies to help on an enlarged scale.

This alliance would be fortified with US military assistance, as in the Indonesian case, which Rostow portrayed as mutually constitutive of healthy social change. Speaking to US soldiers at Fort Bragg he stated that:

I salute you as I would a group of doctors, teachers, economic planners, agricultural experts, civil servants, or those others who are now leading the way in the whole southern half of the globe in fashioning new nations and societies that will stand up straight and assume in time their rightful place of dignity and responsibility in the world community; for this is our common mission. (Rostow 1961:237)

Rostow expounded his notion of the US military as a benevolent doctor-like developmental force shortly after the killing of Che Guevara (in October 1967) while National Security Advisor to Johnson. He wrote to the latter noting that Guevara’s death “shows the soundness of our ‘preventive medicine’ assistance to countries facing incipient insurgency—it was the Bolivian Second Ranger Battalion, trained by our Green Berets from June-September of this year that cornered him and got him” (Rostow 1967).
The dependency theorist Andre Gunder Frank (1969:28, 46–47) contemporaneously summed up Rostow’s agenda:

[Rostow] ... wrote of these stages at the CIA-financed Center for International Studies on the Charles River and has been operationalizing them on the Potomac as President Kennedy’s Director of Policy and Planning in the State Department and President Johnson’s chief adviser on Vietnam ... As to the efficacy of the policy recommended by Rostow, it speaks for itself: no country, once underdeveloped, ever managed to develop by Rostow’s stages. Is that why Rostow is now trying to help the people of Vietnam, the Congo, the Dominican Republic, and other underdeveloped countries to overcome the empirical, theoretical, and policy shortcomings of his manifestly non-communist intellectual aid to economic development and cultural change by bombs, napalm, chemical and biological weapons, and military occupation?

De-Colonising Development: Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*

Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* was first published in 1961, the year he died from leukaemia. It contains a dual critique—of the French colonial regime and of emerging post-colonial African elites—including obliquely of the increasingly conservative military leadership of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN).

From 1954 the Algerian revolution pitted itself against a French colonial settler state for which “torture, concentration camps, and the murder of civilians ... [was] nothing short of official policy” (Maisey 2021). At the 1956 Soummam Conference—held mid-way through the urban battle of Algiers—the FLN leadership with Fanon’s mentor Abane Ramdane at the forefront, advocated three guiding principles of the revolution—the primacy of the political over the military and of the interior (leadership) over the exterior, and the notion of collective leadership (Abu-Manneh 2021; Turner 1999).

However, by late 1957 the French army had defeated the FLN in urban warfare, and its leadership, including Fanon, had gone into exile. This hardened the division between the “external” leadership (located primarily in Tunis) and those, including Fanon, advocating the revolution be led by those still in Algeria (the “internal” forces). As the civil war continued Fanon’s more radical colleagues were marginalised and, in the case of Ramdane, murdered (possibly by conservative forces within the FLN). The externalist leadership increasingly advocated an elite-led military strategy over a collective political struggle. It was in this context that Fanon “turned” to the peasantry (Turner 1999:393) advocating revolutionary violence to displace the French and to disable the nationalist external military leadership.

Fanon has often been associated with Maoism, to the extent that he has been portrayed as “developing anti-proletarian theories” (Molyneux 1985:73). The FLN “took to heart Mao’s much-quoted revolutionary dictum: the guerrillas’ relationship to the rural population is that of the fish to water—the latter is crucial to the survival of the former” (Vince 2015:34). It followed Maoist insurgency techniques, including “use of assassination and terror, singling out French administrators and Muslim collaborators in particular, deliberately deepening the polarity of the
conflict and forcing the population into a binary choice between sides”. It also drew inspiration from the Viet Cong, and “set about providing health care, welfare, and education services to a rural population of subsistence farming peasants” (Maisey 2021).

But Fanon was no Maoist. Rather, his conceptualisation of social change resides in the family of socialism from below (Draper 1966). He wrote Wretched just as news of Mao’s murderous Great Leap Forward was filtering out of China and much of it is devastatingly critical of Maoist-style policies. Hence, the “notion of catching up must not be used as a pretext to brutalize man, to tear him from himself and his inner consciousness, to break him, to kill him” (Fanon 2004:238).

Fanon provided a searing critique of the one-party state:

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 ... Today the party’s mission is to convey to the people the instructions handed down from the top. (Fanon 2004:115)

Against top-down domination, Fanon advocated decentralised forms of socio-economic development.

Fanon’s veiled critique of Maoism is triple pronged. It was the “externalist” FLN leadership, rather than the peasantry who were in contact with Mao, receiving weapons from the PRC via Arab nationalist such as Gamal Abdel Nasser (Haddad-Fonda 2013). Fanon’s advocacy of the peasantry as a mass revolutionary subject was qualitatively different from Mao’s which conceived of them as supporters of the revolutionary guerrilla army but not revolutionaries themselves. Further, contrary to claims that Fanon was “anti-proletarian” he advocated an alliance between the Algerian peasantry and Western workers. This places him qualitatively closer to Marx’s advocacy of the “Russian Road” (rooted in the peasant commune, the Min) than to Mao (Hudis 2015; Selwyn 2013).

In The Wretched of the Earth Fanon (2004:96) argues that:

Violence alone, perpetrated by the people, violence organized and guided by the leadership, provides the key for the masses to decipher social reality. Without this struggle, without this praxis there is nothing but a carnival parade and a lot of hot air. All that is left is a slight readaptation, a few reforms at the top, a flag ...

For Fanon, violence in the case of the Algerian revolution, and potentially applicable to other contemporary cases of decolonisation, has a triple role: to generate a thoroughgoing de-colonisation, to transcend attempts by nationalist elites to capture the revolution, and to enable the masses to realise their capacity to establish an historically novel form of democratic development. He hoped that this revolutionary force would unleash the cooperative spirit necessary for the emergence of a new humanism, as without it, decolonisation would descend into a situation of renewed elite, albeit African, rule:

The peoples of Africa have recently discovered each other and, in the name of the continent, have decided to pressure the colonial regimes in a radical way. The national bourgeoisies, however, who, in region after region, are in a hurry to stash
away a tidy sum for themselves and establish a national system of exploitation, multiply the obstacles for achieving this “utopia”. (Fanon 2004:110)

Fanon “stretched” Marxism to advocate anti-colonial socialist revolution (Fanon 2004:4). He was profoundly influenced by Ethiopia’s anti-imperialist/anti-fascist war against Mussolini in the 1930s (Shilliam 2019). He was among several “Third World Marxists” who, in the words of Aimé Césaire (2010:150), wanted “Marxism and communism be placed in the service of black peoples, and not black peoples in the service of Marxism and communism”; consequently, Marxism had to be “rethought by us, rethought for us, converted to us” (see also Knox 2016).

Fanon’s notion of anti-colonial, emancipatory (anti-ruling class, anti-racist, anti-patriarchal) class-based violence is a response to the qualitatively greater violence imposed by colonialism on the “native” populations, and a prognosis of how the latter could throw off the political/military and psychological rule of colonialism (Abu-Manneh 2021). In Black Skin, White Masks, first published in 1952, he highlighted how the standard of civilisation norms were deployed to govern interactions between colonised and colonisers, noting how “[t]he colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards” (Fanon 2008:9). Fanon specified how “[t]he Negro problem does not resolve itself into the problem of Negroes living among white men but rather of Negroes exploited, enslaved, despised by a colonialist, capitalist society that is only accidentally white” (Fanon 2008:157). In The Wretched of the Earth, he described and analysed colonialism as form of extreme, systemic, violence:

For centuries the capitalists have behaved like real war criminals in the underdeveloped world. Deportation, massacres, forced labor, and slavery were the primary methods used by capitalism to increase its gold and diamond reserves, and establish its wealth and power. (Fanon 2004:57)

However, with de-colonisation this situation appears to have changed, and in the hands of Truman, Kennedy, Rostow, and others, a range of opportunities for newly independent countries are now held to exist. In Toward the African Revolution Fanon observes the discursive shift in the standard of civilisation ideology that occurred following the Second World War. His analysis applies directly to Rostow’s replacement of “race” with “culture” as the core determinant of a society’s readiness to move through the stage of development, to Truman’s declaration of the emergent age of “democratic fair dealing”, and to Kennedy’s promise to help post-colonial countries to “help themselves”:

For a time, it looked as though racism had disappeared. This soul-soothing, unreal impression was simply the consequence of the evolution of forms of exploitation ... The need to appeal to various degrees of approval and support, to the native’s cooperation, modified relations in a less crude, more subtle, more “cultivated” direction. It was not rare, in fact, to see a “democratic and humane” ideology at this stage. The commercial undertaking of enslavement, of cultural destruction, progressively gave way to a verbal mystification. (Fanon 1967:37)
In response to the continued salience of the standard of civilisation norms, Fanon advocated a radical new humanism:

The Third World must start over a new history of man which takes account of not only the occasional prodigious theses maintained by Europe but also its crimes, the most heinous of which have been committed at the very heart of man, the pathological dismembering of his functions and the erosion of his unity, and in the context of the community, the fracture, the stratification and the bloody tensions fed by class, and finally, on the immense scale of humanity, the racial hatred, slavery, exploitation and, above all, the bloodless genocide whereby one and a half billion men have been written off. (Fanon 2004:238, emphasis added)

Rejecting stagist notions of development associated with Stalinised Marxism (see Zeilig 2015), he argued that “In the underdeveloped countries a bourgeois phase is out of the question” (Fanon 2004:118). Further, and reprising Trotsky’s notion of “permanent revolution”, he argued that “[t]heoretical question ... i.e. whether the bourgeois phase can be effectively skipped, must be resolved through revolutionary action and not through reasoning” (Fanon 2004:119).

Rather than catch-up development Fanon’s new humanism aimed to contribute to a situation where “what we want is to walk in the company of man, every man, night and day, for all times” (Fanon 2004:238). How then could this alternative approach to human development occur? While Edward Said (1994) argues that Fanon had no notion about what would come after the anti-colonial socialist revolution, this is not quite the case.

Unlike many revolutionaries (then and now) Fanon’s was not a male-orientated vision of social change. He argued that Algerian women were “fighting two colonialisms”—of Muslim and Western patriarchy (Turner 1999:399). Furthermore “[w]omen shall be given equal importance to men, not in the articles of the constitution, but in daily life, at the factory, in the schools, and in assemblies” (Fanon 2004:142).

Part of this emancipatory dynamic would be a radically new form of popular sovereignty, distinct from top-down Arab/African socialism and nationalism that were emerging from de-colonisation: “If the national government wants to be national it must govern by the people and for the people, for the disinheritied and by the disinherited” (Fanon 2004:144). Resource nationalisation must not take on the aspect of rigid state control (Fanon 2004:123) as in the then Soviet bloc and emergent independent African states. Rather, “[t]o nationalize the tertiary sector means organizing democratically the cooperatives for buying and selling. It means decentralizing these cooperatives by involving the masses in the management of public affairs” (Fanon 2004:123–124, emphasis added). Civil servants should be accountable directly to the democratically organised peasantry (Hudis 2015:127). Yet this could be only the start:

[T]he choice of a socialist regime, a regime entirely devoted to the people, based on the principle that man is the most precious asset, will allow us to progress faster in greater harmony, consequently ruling out the possibility of a caricature of society where a privileged few hold the reins of political and economic power without a thought for the nation as a whole. (Fanon 2004:56)
Fanon acknowledged the advances of enlightenment thought: “All the elements for a solution to the major problems of humanity existed at one time or another in European thought” (2004:236). While the standard of civilisation discourse sought to use race and culture to cement a class alliance between capital and labour at the apex of the Western-dominated world system, Fanon expounded a labouring class socialist internationalism, which included a key role for the European working classes.

This colossal task, which consists of reintroducing man into the world, man in his totality, will be achieved with the crucial help of the European masses who would do well to confess that they have often rallied behind the position of our common masters on colonial issues. In order to do this, the European masses must first of all decide to wake up, put on their thinking caps and stop playing the irresponsible game of Sleeping Beauty. (Fanon 2004:62)

Fanon’s new humanism opposed rival forms of elite-led developmental models rolled out by Washington and Moscow (see Selwyn 2017). It was based on a decentralised cooperative conception of the economy, rather than one based on private property or state-direction. It looked to a future of human relations free from the burdens of racism, patriarchy, and capitalist exploitation. But for such a society to emerge he advocated a revolutionary violence sufficiently powerful to simultaneously eliminate colonial rule and bring to bear a new humanist subject of development.

**Fanon and Rostow in the Vietnamese Crucible**

The Vietnam War represented a pivotal event for both men. The Viet Minh’s devastating defeat of the French army at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 directly influenced Fanon’s writing and thinking about development. Rostow, by contrast, deployed his theory of capitalist development to justify and encourage US military escalation in Vietnam, and beyond.

The so-called First Indochina War (1946–1954) was waged by the French colonial government and French-supported forces against the Viet Minh. The French were supported by the USA, increasingly so after Mao’s 1949 victorious revolution, to the extent that the latter footed almost 80% of the former’s war bill by the early 1950s (Latham 2000:158). In March 1954 French general Henri Navarre deployed 13,000 French paratroopers around the village of Dien Bien Phu to destroy the Viet Minh. His strategy failed entirely. The battle lasted seven weeks, and the Viet Minh forced Navarre’s surrender. Following France’s defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the 1954 Geneva Conference formally divided Vietnam into pro-communist North and pro-Western South (Latham 2000). In response to the Viet Minh’s victory, Fanon wrote how:

> [t]he great victory of the Vietnamese people at Dien Bien Phu is no longer strictly speaking a Vietnamese victory. From July 1954 onward the colonial peoples have been asking themselves: “What must we do to achieve a Dien Bien Phu? How should we go about it?” A Dien Bien Phu was now within reach of every colonized subject ...
answer to the strategy of a Dien Bien Phu defined by the colonized, the colonizer replies with the strategy of containment ... (Fanon 2004:30–31)

One French officer described their defeat at Dien Bien Phu as an “unfortunate accident” (The New York Times 1964). However, the Viet Minh’s victory was the result of years of planning and social change within North Vietnam. Christopher Goscha (2022:10) describes how, following Mao’s 1949 revolution, North Vietnam, increasingly under Ho Chi Minh’s leadership, developed into a war communist state:

The party would now run the armed forces and the state. To do both, Ho and his entourage implemented a series of Sino-Soviet methods of revolutionary state craft: rectification campaigns, struggle sessions, emulation movements, new hero worship, intensive cadre training, a personality cult for Ho, central planning, state banking, food requisitioning, and land reform.

Three months after the battle of Dien Bien Phu, the Algerian revolution erupted (Ruscio 2004). It was within, and to, this movement that Fanon argued for a revolutionary socialist path of new humanist development.

The US’s response to France’s defeat at the hands of the Viet Minh was to intervene increasingly directly in Southern, then Northern Vietnam, then Laos and Cambodia. Rostow deployed his theoretical schema to urge escalation of mass state-led violence. His long-established idea—of combining military, political, and economic force to the US’s advantage in the Cold War—were adopted by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. As David Milne (2007:201) notes, “Rostow was not the sole reason why America bombed North Vietnam, but his contribution was of fundamental importance”.

Following President Kennedy’s assassination, President Johnson appointed Rostow National Security Advisor. The new president claimed, in Rostowian fashion, that the US could aid the South Vietnamese state to construct in the Mekong Delta New Deal-style public works, such as a modern Tennessee Valley Authority (Milne 2008:133). Rostow’s “thesis” of how the US could win the war was based upon the idea that:

By applying limited, graduated military actions reinforced by political and economic pressures on a nation providing external support for insurgency, we should be able to cause that nation to decide to reduce greatly or eliminate altogether support for the insurgency. (quoted in Gibbons 1995:51)

Following the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964 (when captains of two US naval ships made unverifiable claims that they were under attack by Vietnamese torpedoes), Rostow wrote to the US Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, arguing that “We should seek to guide the forces set in motion by the communist attacks to the maximum extent possible” (Rostow 1964, quoted in Milne 1964:144). US troops in the region increased from 16,000 in 1963 to over 500,000 by 1968 (Neale 2001). Rostow argued that increased bombing of the North—under Operation Rolling Thunder—would lead to victory. In October 1967 he told Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara “if we stop the bombing it will bring them back up and permit them to increase their commitment in the South” (quoted in Milne 2008:201).
As the war turned ever more against the Americans, Rostow moved from proposing a “direct attack on North Vietnam sufficiently costly to induce Hanoi to end its war against South Vietnam” (Rostow 1972:286), to advocating the use of nuclear weapons to secure US victory (Milne 2008:94). He deployed the language and ideology of his stagist development theory to couch the war as one against communist “scavengers” of the modernisation process and to legitimate US military escalation, which caused the deaths of more than a million people (Rummel 1998).

Conclusions

Upon independence in March 1962 French settlers fled Algeria abandoning their farms and factories. For three years workers self-managed many of these urban factories and farms. In June 1965 the conservative military wing of the FLN under Houari Boumédiène staged a coup, terminating attempts at socialist economic construction. Fanon’s warnings about the politically narrow vision of the emergent post-colonial elites were confirmed.

Writing in The Diffusion of Power, when the United States’ military failure was undeniable, Rostow (1972:448) argued that had President Johnson deployed troops earlier, in greater numbers, and more vigorously, he could have saved the day. In making this claim Rostow remained true to his commitment of the use of extreme violence to further hegemonic rule and facilitate US-style capitalist development.

Following US withdrawal from the region in 1973, North Vietnamese forces conquered and incorporated South Vietnam into what would become the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. After a decade of further warfare (against the Khmer Rouge) the socialist state combined pro-market reforms with political repression—including “[a]rbitrary restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly” (Amnesty International 2018)—to achieve World Bank-approved high rates of economic growth (World Bank 2023). Fanon’s warnings about the dangers of states using catch-up development to justify brutalisation of populations were justified again.

The proliferation of writing concerned with decolonising development challenge established notions of social change centred upon (often unstated) assumptions of Western white supremacy. They illuminate the Eurocentrism and racism, rooted in modernised variants of the standard of civilisation discourse, that inform much contemporary development thinking and practice. Indeed, the standard of civilisation hierarchies are continually reproduced—from structural adjustment, conditional debt relief, aid programmes, and good governance discourse (Chang 2008), to the deployment of randomised control trials designed to “improve” subjects’ behaviour (Kvangraven 2020). It remains to be seen whether this standard can be opposed and transcended, that is, whether development can be truly decolonised?

Fanon provides an essential intellectual foundation from which to construct a decolonial form of development, and yet his advocacy of a new humanism has often been buried by the association of his ideas with violence. Nevertheless, his
vision—one rooted in cooperation, international solidarity, the elimination of oppressive differences of race, class, and gender—is one that resonates in the contemporary world because these differences have been reproduced in new ways under contemporary global capitalism.

By discussing Rostow’s and Fanon’s work from an incorporated comparison approach couched within a radical geographic perspective, this paper highlights the often dialectical, co-productiveness of struggles, the contexts within which they occur, and their theoretical contributions to attempts to shape the form and content of development. Part of the power of programmes to recolonise development entail the whitewashing of “justified” forms of violence (when in support of establishing dominant forms of development) and the blackwashing of “unjustified” forms of violence (those attempting to establish alternative forms of development).

Fanon’s advocacy of socialist, anti-colonial violence was consistent in its own terms—as a necessary force to oust the colonialist power, to overcome the tendencies towards the emergence of oppressive states managed by newly independent nationalist elites, and to form a new humanist subject of development. However, it has been delegitimised across parts of the development studies community, whilst Rostow’s stagist theory of development has been abstracted from his advocacy for a murderous state-imposed violence. Given that the de-/re-colonisation of development was, is, and will be, an intensely violent process, how do proponents of its decolonisation seek to conceptualise their own forms of violence—intellectually and in practice? Hopefully this paper will contribute to these discussions.

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Data Availability Statement
Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study

Endnote
1 While Rostow recognised the importance of states in the modernisation process, it is worth noting that neoliberal theorists, such as Friedrich Hayek, also defended violence in establishing “free markets” (see Selwyn 2015).

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