

Black soul white artifact

Fanon's clinical
psychology and
social theory

JOCK McCULLOCH

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Introduction

In February 1945 a young black soldier from the Antilles, fighting for the Free French forces in Europe, was awarded the Croix de Guerre for heroism in combat. The soldier's name was Frantz Fanon and the award was presented by Colonel Raoul Salan. Ten years later these two men were fighting on opposite sides in the Algerian revolution. Salan became a commander of the French forces in North Africa and later led the notorious Fascist Organisation Armée Secrète. Fanon was fated to become one of the legendary figures of Africa's decade of revolution. The irony of his meeting with Salan remained with Fanon throughout his life. It was a reminder of the forces of accident and fate which did so much to shape Fanon's own destiny.

Frantz Fanon was born on 20 July 1925 on the small island of Martinique. He received his education at the *lycée* where Aimé Césaire was one of his teachers. After returning home from war service Fanon completed his secondary schooling before embarking for Paris and a higher education. Fanon arrived in Paris in 1947 with the intention of studying dentistry but soon turned to medicine and then to specialisation in psychiatry. After graduating under one of the most radical psychiatric teaching programmes then available, Fanon took a position at the hospital at Blida, outside of Algiers. During his years in Algeria Fanon worked in the daytime treating war casualties. These casualties included French soldiers suffering mental disorders in consequence of their daily work torturing FLN suspects. At night Fanon treated the victims.

Fanon survived at least two assassination attempts on his life only to fall victim to leukaemia which was finally diagnosed late in 1960. After learning of his illness Fanon wrote his most famous work *The Wretched of the Earth*. This book was composed in the space of ten weeks while Fanon was ill and burdened with the knowledge of the

certainty of his approaching death. Fanon died in a hospital in Washington DC on 6 December 1961. He was thirty-six years old.

During a period of less than eight years Fanon wrote three books which have become standard texts on the subject of colonialism and racial oppression. Since his death his personality has also become a symbol for revolutionary romanticism.

Fanon's life can be seen as tragic in the sense that both the revolution for which he fought and his own unique contribution to revolutionary theory were left incomplete. Since his death, only specific and often peripheral aspects of his work have attracted attention, and usually for the worst possible reasons. Fanon has rarely, if ever, been taken seriously as a political theorist. The epoch to which Fanon belonged and the generation of which he was a member are now passed. Therefore the time has come to judge the significance of Fanon's work. Since his death *Black Nationalism in North America* has done much to break down the myths which for generations had mortgaged the future of black Americans. The last two decades have also seen a tightening of the grip of First World economies over the former colonial nations. There are now fewer societies in which racism is an integral part of the mechanics of political control. But this does not exclude the need for a scientific exploration of the relationship between racism and class rule from the perspective of the oppressed. This is one of the reasons why Fanon is still important.

Frantz Fanon is the only major writer who has attempted to approach the problems of national liberation and social revolution from the vantage point of psychopathology. This alone serves to distinguish him from other contemporary political theorists; it also creates substantial difficulties in the interpretation of his work.

Fanon's writings are most original and most worthwhile where he operates outside the boundaries of orthodox political theory. Unfortunately his inventiveness has helped to confine criticism to those features of his life and work which assail the sensibilities of both Marxists and liberals. This fact has tended to obscure Fanon's major intellectual achievements. Above all else it has hampered recognition of the fact that his work embodies the predicament of African socialism.

The complexity of Fanon's writing is indicated by the number of genealogies with which his theory may be linked. As a psychophilosophical analysis of the relation between individual ills and the social, political and cultural orders, Fanon's work may be likened to that of Géza Róheim, Erich Fromm, Alfred Adler, Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud. Conversely, Fanon's West Indian origins place him in the company of E. W. Blyden, Marcus Garvey, Aimé Césaire and

George Padmore. In terms of this genealogy, Fanon's work is an attempt to resolve the problems of personal identity created by the strained relationship between African, European and New World cultures. Alternatively, Fanon may be likened to Marx, Lenin, Debray, Guevara and Mao, as a theorist advocating revolutionary change to oppressive and redundant social systems. It is also feasible to compare Fanon's psychology of colonialism with that school of ethnopsychiatry represented by Porot, Carothers and Mannoni. In this context *Masks* and *The Wretched* are critical works designed to attack the idea of the underdevelopment of the African's personality. Fanon's writings also place him in the company of those such as Nyerere, Nkrumah, Cabral and Touré who fought for an independent Africa. Finally, Fanon can be seen as a member of a broad contemporary European philosophical tradition; like Nietzsche, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Jaspers his work is a quest for personal authenticity and meaning in a post-Christian world of moral uncertainties.

These intellectual and political figures are variously people with whom Fanon shared a common project (Fromm, Blyden), individuals from whom Fanon drew inspiration (Nietzsche, Sartre, Césaire), or opponents whose presence is felt in Fanon's work in the form of a continuing dialogue, however disguised (Lenin, Mannoni). This diversity has encouraged the dangerous practice of approaching Fanon in terms of a search for sources or influences. Since these influences are so great in number it is not surprising that this practice has often succeeded in losing Fanon in the process. To avoid this problem the initial task for any analysis is to expatiate Fanon's dominant intellectual preoccupations and to explore the manner of their resolution in the course of his intellectual development. It is to just this task that the present work is addressed.

All of Fanon's works form part of a single theoretical construct. This construct is both unified and essentially coherent even though the manner of Fanon's presentation of his theory is often fragmented and obscure. There is no epistemological or methodological break between Fanon's earlier and later works. The proof for this interpretation is found in Fanon's clinical psychiatric writings which he published in medical journals during his years in Algeria and Tunisia. These psychiatric writings show *how* Fanon traversed the gulf separating an individualistic psychopathology and the theory of revolutionary nationalism found in *The Wretched*. As such the clinical writings represent the only avenue through which Fanon's psychology of colonialism can be adequately judged.

The three principal paradigms around which Fanon's theory is

woven are *negritude*, *ethnopsychiatry*, and what may loosely be termed *African socialism*. It is only through an exploration of Fanon's response to these paradigms that the broad dimensions of his theory may be traced and identified. For example, Fanon's psychology of colonialism is largely unintelligible unless read as a counter-psychology to that presented in Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban*. It is of no more than passing interest that these three paradigms also reflect aspects of Fanon's personality: *negritude* his quest for personal identity, *African socialism* his desire to 'return to Africa' and *ethnopsychiatry* his professional training and occupation. Many of the elements of Fanon's theory of colonialism can be seen reflected in his own life's experience. In his life as in his writings we find the themes of dispossession, enforced subordination before fools, and rage against injustice. Whether these experiences made of Fanon himself a colonial neurotic is not an interesting question. Nor should this question be of concern to any person other than those who knew and loved the man. It is not for any such biographical reason but rather because Fanon was both unique and representative of a generation that it is important to examine his intellectual legacy.

The areas of Fanon's work which have attracted the most severe criticism are his class analysis of Africa, his advocacy of violence, and his generalised and abstract theory of revolution. Until now these problem areas have been explored almost exclusively in relation to his biography. It cannot be denied that there are major flaws in Fanon's theory. What is in dispute is the nature of the evidence amassed in criticism of him. Before all else it is necessary to prepare the ground for a critique of Fanon by establishing conclusively the origins of the major weaknesses in his theory. Such an examination proves that the principal flaws are due to the undigested influence of *negritude* especially upon his theory of class struggle, and to the discord between Fanon's political project and his socio-psychiatric methodology. Once this has been done then we can begin to understand Fanon's work for what it is.

Fanon's greatest achievement is as the chronicler of colonialism. In describing the condition of being colonised he provided a psychopathology of colonial domination that is both unique and compelling. Yet *The Wretched* is not, as is so often supposed, a handbook for revolutionary action. It is a panegyric to the inevitable failure of the African revolution.