

Frantz Fanon: The Revolutionary Who Wrote a Revolution

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When discussing the effects of colonialism and decolonization, typically the focus is on the economic and political effects, and the effects on the former colonial powers. However, in the early 1950s and 1960s, psychologist and philosopher Frantz Omar Fanon took an alternative view on colonialism, his work becoming influential in post colonial studies and liberation movements across the Third World. He focused not on colonial powers, but rather the oppressed people of colonies and the psychological and social effects on them. His philosophical and psychological works, such as *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) examined the effects of colonialism and oppression on the psyche; a raw and unapologetic look at how colonialism affected black people from his lived perspective, as a black man, a soldier, and an intellectual. Moreover, his work as a psychologist laid the groundwork for many, more humane treatments used today.

Despite leading a short life, dying prematurely at the age of 36 due to leukemia, his legacy lives on through the ideologies of activists, writers and fighters for liberation across the world. Frantz Fanon was a revolutionary who wrote a revolution.

Fanon's journey as a revolutionary seems contradictory to his early life. His family were part of the black middle class on the French colonial island Martinique, his father being a customs inspector and his mother owning a hardware store. Members of his social stratum often assimilated to 'white' French culture - learning solely French history, speaking 'white' French rather than Antillean

Creole. Fanon describes the conflict between his assimilated identity and his black identity, writing, "I am a white man for unconsciously I distrust what is black in me that is the whole of my being".¹ This is a theme that recurs throughout his work - how the desire to assimilate has damaged black people culturally and psychologically. Despite his initial assimilation, he eventually chose to resist, joining the French army during World War II. It was the immense amount of racism he experienced from his fellow soldiers, as well as the people whose lives he saved, that further pushed him to become an intellectual revolutionary. Quite simply, what he lived, he wrote and he wrote what he lived.

Fanon's early work examines the psyche of black men and women within the scope of colonialism and oppression. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he discusses the psychological trauma felt by black people because of oppression and alienation. This is significant as he clearly addresses the shortcomings of traditional psychologists, such as Sigmund Freud, and philosophers, such as Karl Marx, both of whom influence his work, but who ignored the traumatic effects of racism in society and how it affects the psyche. This piece of work was written whilst Fanon lived and worked in France as a psychologist, and his experiences of racism, as well as the continuing struggle between his revolutionary and assimilated identity, was clearly influential. It can be seen that Fanon was not only writing for black people generally, in the sense of them being subjects of the colonial system, but also working through his own psyche.

¹ Fanon, F., 1986. *Black Skin, White Masks*, London: Pluto Press.

Fanon explained that black people were emotionally traumatised from how they were treated and the pressure to assimilate despite never being fully accepted by white society, no matter how hard they worked. He delved into French philosopher, and fellow anti-colonialist, Jean-Paul Sartre's work on the gaze - how others in society perceive us and how this constructs identity. The way white people see black people - as beneath them, worthless, and as the 'other' - further alienates and oppresses them. However, being in a white-dominated society, this trauma is never allowed to be processed. Fanon took a radical step in his affirmation that black people were victims of a dominant ideology that had oppressed them psychologically, despite prevailing ideas in psychiatry at the time that viewed black people as criminals or naturally violent.

Fanon became increasingly radical after the eruption of the Algerian Revolution in 1954. Having seen and treated the psychological trauma suffered by both French soldiers ordered to torture Algerian revolutionaries, and the Algerian revolutionaries themselves, Fanon left his post as psychiatrist in Algeria's Blida-Joinville hospital in 1956; severing his ties with his assimilated identity and thereby devoting his time to the revolution. His focus broadened, developing from his early examinations of the structures of an anti-black world and the psychological trauma which they caused Fanon wrote pieces criticising the French government, with many of his most important writings in this period being published in French-language newspapers across Africa, in particular the Algerian National Liberation Front newspaper *El Moudjahid*. His most important essays include 'Algeria Unveiled' (1959), which examines the relationship between oppressed religious traditions and how they fit within revolution. Fanon argued for reclaiming old and repressed religions such as Islam and other traditions in a postcolonial Algeria. He argued that these traditions and their reclamation can be used by communities to resist colonial rule as long as they are evaluated after independence for their suitability in the new society. In another essay, 'Algeria's European Minority' (1959),

Fanon examined how white people in colonised nations can be affected by anti-colonial struggles. Fanon argued that revolutionary solidarity across racial lines was in fact possible and necessary, but recognised that just as black people were locked into a negative ideology, so too were white people. This can be seen as an early recognition of interracial alliances within racial politics.

More controversially, Fanon, despite being a man of peace, argued that decolonization had to be a violent process for colonised countries to gain freedom and cure themselves of the inferiority complex bestowed upon them through colonial institutions. This argument is outlined in *The Wretched of the Earth*. After his observations in Algeria, he came to the conclusion that colonial rule was maintained through violence. He wrote, "decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature...their first encounter was marked by violence and their existence together - that is to say the exploitation of the native by the settler - was carried on by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannons".² So, in order to free a society from this violence, the colonized subjects must respond in kind - with violence. This is how revolutionary wars, such as the one in Algeria and the many that have since followed, are seen as a natural and necessary progression towards freedom. It was Fanon who coined the now infamous phrase, "By any means necessary", often attributed to Malcolm X. The phrase is seen as a succinct summary of the general idea of necessary violence.

Fanon argued that the use of violence against the oppressor was a cathartic experience. In *Black Skin White Masks*, he argues that there, "must exist - a channel, an outlet through which the forces accumulated in the forms of aggression can be released".³ In other words, in order to break free from oppression, and to process the psychological trauma of alienation and colonial overrule,, violence must be used. Therefore, colonial subjects are able to restore their sense of self and identity, something Sartre describes, in his preface of Fanon's work, as, "Man recreating himself".⁴

Fanon expressed in his work that the only

² Fanon, Frantz, and Sartre, Jean-Paul. *The Wretched of the Earth*. United Kingdom, Grove Press, 2004.

³ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

⁴ Fanon and Sartre, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

way the French thought they could deal with Algerians was through violence due to their beliefs about them - that they were beneath them, and could not be dealt with rationally. Therefore, as a collective, they must respond in kind to gain freedom. For Fanon, violence was a way to mobilise the oppressed against the oppressor.

However, being primarily a man of peace, Fanon went on to detail that violence shouldn't be used lightly - an observation that is sometimes missed when discussing or utilising Fanon's work. He makes sure to outline the dangerous effects of violence, that it is not only physically damaging but, as an ever-present part of colonial life, mentally damaging. It is clear that his time working in the largest psychiatric hospital in Algeria, where he treated the victims of colonial torture, showed him this. The lasting effects on both the colonised subject and oppressor can be harrowing. Moreover, he points out that revolutionaries should look beyond violence. Violence is not enough to build a new society after tearing down the old one. The focus of revolutionary movements should be on creating a new cultural identity and a peaceful, sustainable society, not solely the revolutionary struggle. By setting these limitations and conditions, Fanon attempted to ensure that violence is used properly in order to meet its aims, not used gratuitously.

Fanon studied philosophy, politics and psychoanalysis. Whilst he is primarily known for his more political works, Fanon was foremost a psychologist. Biographer David Macey claims that Fanon was a, "conventional psychologist" for the era, however, this is a clearly disputable opinion. Fanon was one of the few psychologists who advocated against institutionalisation in favour of community care - treating mentally ill people within the community in order to allow for seamless transition back into it. In his letter of resignation to the governor-general of Algeria in 1956, he argued, "Madness is one of the means by which the human being can lose their

freedom" and that, "psychiatry is the medical technique that proposes to help the human being no longer be a stranger to their environment."⁵ Moreover, he was against the use of lobotomies and electroconvulsive therapy - common but dangerous practices of the time. Fanon's compassion extended to all oppressed people - not just just oppressed by their skin colour, but by their minds, and how traditional psychiatry further alienated them.

Fanon's name may not be as widely known as those he influenced, but his ideas remain the groundwork for anti-colonial and national liberation movements across the world. *The Wretched of the Earth* inspired revolutionary leaders such as Malcolm X in the United States, Ernesto Che Guevara in South America and anti-apartheid leader Steve Biko in South Africa. Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* suggests, to an extent, that he was himself inspired by the young man to whom he had long been an inspiration. The book heavily influenced the black power movement in the United States. *The Wretched of the Earth* was on the curriculum for new members of the Black Panther Party and Fanon's ideas on necessary violence in order to free oneself has become a fundamental idea for radical movements across the world, from Latin America to Palestine. Fanon's work is still heavily influential with contemporary African literature, such as Tsitsi Dangarembga, a Zimbabwean writer whose book *Nervous Conditions* (1988) features his ideas on assimilation. There are, of course, criticisms of the application of Fanon's ideas by many revolutionaries mentioned, but his influence on the modern era cannot be doubted.

Fanon became the spokesperson of millions through his unapologetic rage against oppression and the alienation of every oppressed person, combined with his uncompromising compassion. He created ideas that have birthed movements and liberated nations and will continue to do so for generations to come.

⁵ Beneduce, Roberto, and Gibson, Nigel C.. *Frantz Fanon, Psychiatry and Politics*. United Kingdom, Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017.

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