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## READING FANON IN THE 21ST CENTURY

**I** BELONG IRREDUCIBLY TO my time', wrote Frantz Fanon in his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*. That time was, of course, the era of anti-colonial struggles. Born in the then French colony of Martinique in 1925, where he was a student of Aimé Césaire, Fanon fought with the Allied forces in the Second World War and then trained in Lyon as a physician and psychiatrist. His remarkable *Black Skin, White Masks* was published in 1952 and had a significant impact in intellectual circles in France at the time. It was a passionate *cri de cœur*—'the experience of a black man thrown into a white world'.<sup>1</sup> In 1953 Fanon was appointed to the Blida Psychiatric Hospital in Algeria, just a year before the outbreak of the War of Independence. He rapidly became outraged by the stories of torture that his Algerian patients recounted to him. Already a sympathizer with their cause, he resigned his post and went to Tunisia to work full time for the Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Algérienne (GPRA). He wrote extensively for *El Moudjahid*, the official journal of the revolution.

In 1960, the GPRA sent him as its ambassador to Ghana, at that time the de facto centre of the movement for African unity. The GPRA wanted him to reinforce links not only with Ghana, but with the various nationalist movements in Africa still struggling for their independence, and whose leaders regularly passed through Accra. It was there that I first met Fanon in 1960 and where we had long discussions about the world political situation. He was both very encouraged by the global sweep of the national liberation movements, and disturbed by the signs he saw already in the limitations of the leadership of many of these movements—discomforts he would discuss at length in his last book. Soon thereafter,

he fell ill of leukemia. He went first to the Soviet Union and then to the United States for treatments, which were fruitless. I was able to visit him in hospital in Washington, where we discussed the nascent Black Power movement in the United States with which he was fascinated. He exploded with anger about US policies in the world. He said 'Americans are not engaged in dialogue; they still speak monologues'. In the last year of his life, he devoted himself principally and furiously to writing the book published posthumously as *The Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>2</sup> Fanon lived to read the famous preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, which he thought superb. The title of the book, *Les damnés de la terre*, was, of course, drawn from the opening lines of the Internationale, the song of the world workers' movement. He died, much too young, in 1961.

It was this work, not *Black Skin, White Masks*, which brought Fanon his world reputation, including of course in the United States. The book became something like a bible for all those involved in the many and diverse movements that culminated in the world revolution of 1968. After the initial flames of 68 died out, *Wretched of the Earth* receded into a quieter corner. In the late 1980s, the various identity and post-colonial movements discovered his first book, upon which they lavished attention, much of it missing Fanon's point. As he wrote in the Introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon thought that to overcome the alienation of the black man would require more than what Freudian psychoanalysis had to offer. Freud had argued the need to move beyond a phylogenetic to an ontogenetic explanation; for Fanon, what was required was a sociogenic explanation. Although *Black Skin, White Masks* would have a second life as a central text in the postmodern canon, thirty years after it was published, the book was in no way a call to identity politics. Quite the contrary, as Fanon's lines in the concluding pages make clear:

The disaster of the man of colour lies in the fact that he was enslaved.

The disaster and inhumanity of the white man lie in the fact that somewhere he has killed man.

And even today they subsist, to organize this dehumanization rationally. But I as a man of colour, to the extent that it becomes possible for me to exist absolutely, do not have the right to lock myself into a world of retroactive reparations.

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<sup>1</sup> The words of Francis Jeanson, who wrote the Preface to the original French edition, *Peau noire, masques blancs*.

<sup>2</sup> New York 1963, henceforth WE. Translations amended by the author.

I, the man of colour, want only this:

That the tool never possesses the man. That the enslavement of man by man cease forever; that is, of one by another. That it may become possible for me to discover and to love man, wherever he may be.

The Negro is not. Any more than the white man.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever Fanon was, he was not a postmodernist. He might rather be characterized as one part Marxist Freudian, one part Freudian Marxist, and most part totally committed to revolutionary liberation movements. If he belonged to his time, however, his work still has much to offer ours. The very last sentence of *Black Skin, White Masks* is this: 'My final prayer: O my body, make of me always a man who questions!' It is in this spirit of interrogation that I offer my reflections on the utility of Fanon's thought for the twenty-first century.

I am struck, on rereading his books, firstly by the degree to which they make very strong declarations of which Fanon seems entirely confident, especially when he is being critical of others; and secondly, by the way these declarations are usually followed, sometimes many pages later, by Fanon spelling out his uncertainties about how best to proceed, how to achieve what needs to be accomplished. I am also struck, as was Sartre, by the degree to which these books are not at all addressed to the powerful of the world but rather to the 'wretched of the earth', a category that overlaps heavily for him with 'people of colour'. Fanon is always angry at the powerful, who are both cruel and condescending. But he is even angrier at those people of colour whose behaviour and attitudes contribute to sustaining the world of inequality and humiliation, and who often do so merely to obtain crumbs for themselves. In what follows, I will organize my reflections around what I think are three dilemmas for Fanon—the use of violence, the assertion of identity and the class struggle.

What gave *The Wretched of the Earth* so much punch and attracted so much attention—both of admiration and of condemnation—was the opening sentence of the first chapter, 'Concerning Violence':

National liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood to the people, commonwealth: whatever may be the headings used or the new formulas introduced, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, London [1967] 1970, pp. 164–5.

<sup>4</sup> WE, p. 35.

Is this an analytical observation or a policy recommendation? The answer may be that it is meant to be both. Perhaps Fanon himself is not sure which of the two meanings takes priority; and perhaps it does not matter. The idea that fundamental social change never occurs without the use of force was not a new one. All the radical emancipatory traditions of the nineteenth century had believed that the privileged never cede real power voluntarily; power is always wrenched from them. This belief helped define the presumed difference between a 'revolutionary' and a 'reformist' path to social change. Yet in the post-1945 period, the utility of the distinction between 'revolution' and 'reform' was wearing thin—wearing thin among the very militants of the most impatient, angry, uncompromising movements. And therefore, the use of violence, not as sociological analysis but as policy recommendation, was coming into question.

If 'revolutionary' movements, once in power, seemed to accomplish much less than they had promised, it was equally true that 'reformist' movements did not do much better. Hence the ambivalence about the policy on violence. Algerian nationalists had lived through this cycle in their own biographical experience. Ferhat Abbas, president of the GPRA from its foundation in 1958 to 1961, had spent the first thirty years of his political life as a reformist, only to admit that he and his movement had got nowhere. He concluded that violent uprising was the only meaningful tactic if Algeria did not wish to be forever a colony, and 'enslaved'.

In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon seems to be making three points about the use of force as a political tactic. First of all, in the 'Manichean' colonial world, its original source is located in the continuing violent acts of the colonizer:

He of whom *they* have never stopped saying that the only language he understands is that of force decides to give utterance by force. In fact, as always, the settler has shown him the way he should take if he is to become free. The argument the colonized person chooses has been furnished by the settler, and by an ironic turning of the tables, it is the colonized person who now affirms that the colonialist understands nothing but force.<sup>5</sup>

The second point is that this violence transforms both the social psychology and the political culture of those who were colonized.

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<sup>5</sup> WE, p. 84.

But it so happens that for the colonized people this violence, because it constitutes their only work, invests their characters with positive and creative qualities. The practice of violence binds them together as a whole, since each individual forms a link in the great chain, a part of the great organism of violence which has surged upwards in reaction to the settler's violence in the beginning. The groups recognize each other and the future nation is already indivisible. The armed struggle mobilizes the people; that is to say, it throws them in one way and one direction.<sup>6</sup>

The third point, however, seems to contradict the optimistic tone of the second, the seemingly irreversible path towards national and human liberation evoked in the opening chapter. The second and third chapters of the book, written during the ongoing war for national liberation in Algeria, are particularly fascinating for the light they throw on 'Concerning Violence'. The second chapter, 'Spontaneity: Its Strengths and Weaknesses', is a generalized critique of nationalist movements. Their 'inherent defect', Fanon says, is their focus on 'those elements which are the most politically conscious: the working classes in the towns, the skilled workers and the civil servants'—that is to say, a tiny portion of the population, which hardly represents more than 1 per cent:

The overwhelming majority of nationalist parties show a deep distrust towards the people of the rural areas . . . The Westernized elements experience feelings with regard to the bulk of the peasantry which are reminiscent of those found among the town workers of industrialized countries.<sup>7</sup>

This inherent defect is precisely what makes them fail to be revolutionary movements, which cannot be based on a Westernized proletariat but must rely rather on the uprooted peasantry, blocked on the outer fringe of the urban centres:

It is within this mass of humanity, this people of the shanty towns, at the core of the lumpenproletariat that the rebellion will find its urban spearhead. For the lumpenproletariat, that horde of starving men, uprooted from their tribe and from their clan, constitutes one of the most spontaneous and the most radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> WE, p. 93.

<sup>7</sup> WE, pp. 108–11.

<sup>8</sup> Fanon was here obviously influenced by the Battle of Algiers and its role in the Algerian revolution. WE, p. 129.

Fanon passes from this paean to the detribalized lumpenproletariat to an analysis of the nature of nationalist movements once in power. He is ferocious and unforgiving, and denounces them in one of the most famous sentences in this book: 'The single party is the modern form of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, unmasked, unpainted, unscrupulous and cynical.' The national bourgeoisie of underdeveloped countries 'should not be opposed because it threatens to slow down the total, harmonious development of the nation', he declares. 'It should simply be stoutly opposed because, literally, it is good for nothing.' He then proceeds to a denunciation of nationalism, pure and simple:

Nationalism is not a political doctrine, nor a programme. If you really wish your country to avoid regression, or at best halts and uncertainties, a rapid step must be taken from national consciousness to political and social consciousness . . . A bourgeoisie that provides nationalism alone as food for the masses fails in its mission and gets caught up in a whole series of mishaps.<sup>9</sup>

It is at this point that Fanon turns to the question of identity, my second theme. He initiates the discussion by saying that, of course, vaunting ancient civilizations does not feed anyone today. But it serves the legitimate purpose of taking a distance from Western culture. The racialization of culture was the responsibility initially of the colonizers, 'those Europeans who have never ceased to set up white culture to fill the gap left by the absence of other cultures'. The concept of Negritude, Fanon argues, 'was the emotional if not the logical antithesis of that insult which the white man flung at humanity.' But, he goes on, 'this historical obligation which has brought the men of African culture to racialize their claims . . . will tend to lead them up a blind alley.' Fanon is very critical of any attempt to assert cultural identity that is independent of, not located within, the political struggle for national liberation. In the fourth chapter, 'On National Culture', he writes:

To believe that it is possible to create a black culture is to forget that Negroes are disappearing . . . There will never be such a thing as black culture because there is not a single politician who feels he has a vocation to bring black republics into existence. The problem is to get to know the place that these men mean to give their people, the kind of social relations that they decide to set up and the conception they have of the future of humanity. It is this that counts; everything else is mystification, signifying nothing.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Respectively, WE, pp. 165, 175–6, 203–4.      <sup>10</sup> WE, pp. 212–4, 234–5.

His closing thrust is quite the opposite of identity politics:

If man is known by his acts, then we will say that the most urgent thing today for the intellectual is to build his nation. If this building is true, that is, if it interprets the manifest will of the people and reveals the eager African peoples, then the building of a nation is of necessity accompanied by the discovery and encouragement of universalizing values. Far from keeping aloof from other nations, therefore, it is national liberation which leads the nation to play its part on the stage of history. It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. And this twofold emerging is ultimately only the source of all culture.<sup>11</sup>

In the Conclusion to *Wretched of the Earth*, however, as though he had gone too far in understating the merits of a different path for Africa—a non-European path—Fanon points to the example of the United States, which had made as its goal that of catching up with Europe, and succeeded so well that it ‘became a monster, in which the taints, the sickness and the inhumanity of Europe have grown to appalling dimensions’. For Fanon, then, Africa must not try to ‘catch up’ and become a third Europe. Quite the contrary:

Humanity is waiting for something other from us than such an imitation, which would be almost an obscene caricature. If we want to turn Africa into a new Europe and America into a new Europe, then let us leave the destiny of our countries to Europeans. They will know how to do it better than the most gifted from among us. But if we want humanity to advance a step further, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries . . . For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man.<sup>12</sup>

In Fanon’s weaving, in both books, around the question of cultural identity, of national identity, we see the fundamental dilemma that has plagued all anti-systemic thought in the last half-century and probably in the next as well. The rejection of European universalism is fundamental to the rejection of pan-European dominance and its rhetoric of power in the structure of the modern world-system—what Aníbal Quijano has termed the coloniality of power. But, at the same time, all those who have been committed to the struggle for an egalitarian world, or to what might be called the historic socialist aspiration, are very wary of what Fanon

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<sup>11</sup> WE, pp. 247–8.

<sup>12</sup> WE, pp. 315–6.

called the ‘pitfalls of national consciousness’. So we continue to weave, for to do so seems the only way to remain on a path to a future in which, in Fanon’s words, humanity ‘advances a step further’.

My third theme, the class struggle, is never centrally discussed as such anywhere in Fanon’s writings. And yet it is central to his world-view and to his analyses. For, of course, Fanon was brought up in a Marxist culture—in Martinique, in France, in Algeria. The language he knew and that of all those he worked with was impregnated with Marxist premises and vocabulary. But at the same time, Fanon and those he worked with had rebelled, forcefully, against the ossified Marxism of the Communist movements of his era. Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* remains the classic expression of why intellectuals of the colonial world (and of course not they alone) withdrew their commitment to Communist parties and asserted a revised version of the class struggle. The key issue in these debates was the question, which are the classes that are struggling? For a long time, the discussion was dominated by the categories of the German Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The basic argument was that, in a modern capitalist world, the two classes that were in fundamental conflict and dominated the scene were the urban, industrial bourgeoisie and the urban, industrial proletariat. All other groupings were remnants of dead or dying structures and were destined to disappear, as everyone came to blend into, define themselves as, bourgeois and proletarian.

By the time Fanon was writing, relatively few people regarded this as an adequate or reliable summary of the real situation. The urban industrial proletariat was nowhere near a majority of the world’s population and in general, did not seem to be a group that had nothing to lose but its chains. As a result, most movements and intellectuals were in search of a different framing of the class struggle that fitted better as sociological analysis and served more effectively as the basis of radical politics. There were many proposals of new candidates for the historical subject who would be the ‘spearhead’ of revolutionary activity. Fanon thought he had located them in the detribalized, urbanized, lumpenproletariat. But he admitted his doubts when he depicted the ‘pitfalls of spontaneity’.

In the end, what we have from Fanon is more than passion and more than a blueprint for political action. He offers a brilliant delineation of our collective dilemmas. Without violence the wretched of the earth can

accomplish nothing. But violence, however therapeutic and however effective, solves nothing. Without breaking from the domination of pan-European culture, it is impossible to move forward. But the consequent assertion of particularity is stultifying and leads inevitably to 'pitfalls'. The class struggle is central, provided we know which are the classes that are really struggling. But lumpen-classes, on their own, without organizational structure, burn out.

We find ourselves, as Fanon expected, in the long transition from our existing capitalist world-system to something else. It is a struggle whose outcome is totally uncertain. Fanon might not have said so, but his books are evidence that he sensed it. Whether we can emerge collectively from this struggle and into a better world-system is in large part dependent on our ability to confront the three dilemmas discussed by Fanon—to confront them, and to deal with them in a way that is simultaneously analytically intelligent, morally committed to the 'disalienation' for which Fanon fought, and politically adequate to the realities we face.