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FRANTZ FANON: HIS LIFE AND WORK

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FRANTZ FANON: HIS LIFE AND WORK

by Mr. William Strickland

I have been asked to review the life and work of Frantz Fanon as the first presentation in this programme, but before doing so I feel compelled to make a small confession.

I have been studying Fanon for a number of years—principally in an effort to clarify the relevance of his theories to the black freedom movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Yet though I am on familiar terms with the material of Fanon's life, I found this seemingly simple task of biographical commentary one of the most difficult things I have ever had to do.

It was difficult because it is not easy to put on paper the sense of admiration and appreciation that grows on one who is researching Fanon; a kind of unconscious kinship develops so that one begins to feel a certain proprietary air about a man whom one has never met. This makes it difficult to transcend one's subjective involvement to get at the deeper truths of his life and work. My confession, therefore, is that I have not been able to do this entirely, and so what follows must be understood as a review of the life and work of Fanon as *I understand it*. (I will say in partial self-defence that the most casual reading of works on or about Fanon reveal a similar subjectivity, both pro and con.)

There is another point which should be made before we begin and that is that there are still many, many unexplored and unexplained areas of Fanon's life. The two most highly regarded Fanon biographers, for instance, Irene Gendzier (1973) and Peter Geismar (1971) disagree—*inter alia*—on the relatively simple fact of how many children there were in the Fanon family, and neither ever mentions the first names of Fanon's parents. The definitive biography of Fanon has still to be written.

Fanon was born a little more than half a century ago in the French West Indian island colony of Martinique. The specific year was 1925 and two other remarkable black men were born that same year: Amilcar Cabral and Malcolm X.

Fanon grew up in what both Gendzier⁶⁹ and Geismar⁷⁰ term an "upper middle-class family", the youngest of four boys in a family of nine or ten.⁷¹ In 1936, at the age of eleven, Fanon was sent by his parents to the private school for black children in Martinique, the Lycée Schoelcher. The lycée charged a small tuition which, we are told, precluded 96 percent of the pop-

⁶⁹ Irene Gendzier, *Frantz Fanon: A Critical Study* (New York, Pantheon, 1973), p. 10.

⁷⁰ Peter Geismar (*Fanon*, New York, Dial Press, 1971), p. 12.

⁷¹ The exact number of children in Fanon's family is disputed by Geismar and Gendzier.

ulation from receiving the classical French education available there.⁷² Although the school was racially segregated, this did not cause any particular protest from the Martiniqueans. In 1939-1940 two momentous events occurred which were to have a decisive impact on Martinique in general and on young Fanon in particular. The first was the outbreak of the Second World War, the subsequent fall of France and the installation of the Vichy collaborationist government of Marshal Pétain. For the next four years some 10,000 Vichy troops occupied Martinique, behaving, according to Fanon, like "authentic racists."⁷³

The second momentous event was "the return to his native land" of Martinique's then most famous son, Aimé Césaire. Césaire came home to teach at the lycée and to extol the virtues of *négritude*. Fanon claimed that this created a minor sensation since it was the first time that "a lycée teacher—a man, therefore, who was apparently worthy of respect—was seen to announce quite simply to West Indian society 'that it is fine and good to be a Negro'."⁷⁴ Thus did French colonialism, in the person of the Vichy government, and black consciousness, in the person of Césaire, introduce themselves to the teen-aged Fanon.

Fanon's reaction to Vichy colonialism was characteristic: he took action. Slipping out of Martinique to the British-controlled island of Dominica, he joined the Caribbean Free French Movement in 1943. Later that year after Vichy had surrendered, Fanon returned home but he did not stay long. In 1944 he volunteered for active duty in the regular French army in order to fight in Europe.

On the way to Europe he spent several months in North Africa; first in Morocco and then in Algeria. He was nineteen years old and it is his first contact with the country for which he would later sacrifice his life. This stay in North Africa and the trip across the sea were important in two respects.

As a result of the occupation some Martiniqueans had come to believe that the racism of Vichy was the racism of "the bad French" only "for everybody knows that the true Frenchman is not a racist."⁷⁵ However, the voyage to Casablanca and the months stationed in North Africa cured Fanon and his friends of that notion. Observing their officers and the racial structure of the Free French Army, they saw that the "Free French" were also infected with the virus of racism. They also observed how colonialism had restructured the world into a racial pecking order that fragmented the unity of the oppressed:

⁷² Geismar, *op. cit.*, p. 12. Some critics, notably Albert Memmi, have seized upon this fact to attack Fanon's "bourgeois origins." (See Albert Memmi, "Fanon", *New York Times Book Review*, 14 March 1971, p. 5).

⁷³ Gendzier, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (New York, Grove Press, 1962).

"The Negro is told: You are the best soldiers in the French Empire; the Arabs think they are better than you, but they are wrong."

At the time Fanon did not fathom the reasons behind these contradictions nor did he realize that he was to grapple with this problem of false consciousness among the colonized for most of the rest of his life.

In the summer of 1944 Fanon volunteered to leave North Africa to join the allied invasion of Europe. He was reassigned to the Ninth Division of Colonial Infantry, First French Army. The Division landed near Marseille and began marching northward to engage the Germans. In mid-November Fanon was slightly wounded. Then, apparently in December, he volunteered to lead a small party to bring ammunition to the forward positions in a battle outside of Besançon, a town to the southeast of Paris. He was wounded by mortar shrapnel and sent to a military hospital outside Lyon for a two month convalescence. After being released from the hospital he was awarded the *croix de guerre avec étoile de bronze* by Colonel Raoul Salan, commander of Fanon's Sixth Regiment, and promoted to corporal. Prophetically, Lyon and Salan were to figure prominently in Fanon's future.

After the war Fanon returned to Martinique and reentered the lycée to prepare himself for the university. He and his brother Joby also participated in the political campaign of Aimé Césaire, who was elected to the French Assembly as the Communist Party's deputy from Martinique in the first election of the new Fourth Republic.⁷⁶

In 1947 Fanon's father died and he decided to return to France to take advantage of a scholarship he had won to attend the university of his choice in metropolitan France. His initial intention was to study dentistry in Paris. However, after three weeks of introductory courses in dental school, Fanon abandoned dentistry and journeyed to Lyon to study medicine. He was a wounded war veteran, a peripheral participant in the politics of the French left and an international traveller in search of his vocation and his destiny. He was at the time twenty-two years old.

For the next six years Fanon was to live, study, and anguish in France. He enrolled in the medical school at Lyon, became involved in student politics, edited one issue of a black student newspaper called *Tam-Tam*, and began writing the series of essays which were to be published in 1952 as *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Black Skin, White Masks).

Confronted by the racial hostility, indifference, and the paternalism of the metropole, Fanon tried in this first book to resolve the question of being black in a white world. That the book was written in the torment of his own personal search for answers is clear from the introduction:

⁷⁶ Geismar, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

This book should have been written three years ago. . . . But these truths were a fire in me then. Now I can tell them without being burned.⁷⁷

The book is significant for what it tells us of Fanon's state of mind at the time. It is a stage in the evolution of his thought which contains the seeds of ideas which will flower in his later work. But its fundamental approach and analysis is psychological-existential. The problem of the Negro, neurotic in colonial society, is defined, primarily, as a question of consciousness. Although the social order is itself oppressive, it is the victim who must overcome his sense of non-recognition and non-existence by utilizing his free will:

"I believe that the fact of the juxtaposition of the white and black races has created a massive psychoexistential complex. I hope by analyzing it to destroy it."⁷⁸

What he subsequently came to believe is that the analysis of colonialism is necessary, but not sufficient.

In 1951 Fanon received his medical degree, returned to Martinique and then went during the following year to France to marry Josie Dublé and take up his residency in psychiatry at the hôpital de Saint-Alban under the expatriate Spanish professor, François Tosquelles.

After Césaire and Sartre, Tosquelles is the third major intellectual influence on Fanon, and Tosquelle's "materialistic psychiatry",⁷⁹ which emphasized work therapy and patient involvement in the treatment of mental illness, was to be the basic approach Fanon would attempt to practice in Algeria when he went there in November 1953 to become one of the six Chefs de service in the Blida hospital, some 35 miles south of Algiers.

For the next three years Fanon attempted to revolutionize the practice of psychiatric medicine at the hospital, while becoming ever more deeply drawn into the course of the Algerian revolution, which had erupted in 1954. At great risk to himself, Fanon began to use the hospital facilities to treat wounded soldiers of the FLN. At the same time he was, ironically, also treating members of the police, whose adoption of torture as a general policy of combatting the revolution had produced many neurotic symptoms among "les gendarmes".

Having made the commitment to put his medical skills at the service of the revolution, it was only a matter of time until Fanon made the final irreparable break with France. He did so in 1956 by submitting his resignation to the President Minister, Robert Lacoste, in a letter which is one of the most remarkable mini-manifestos of modern times. In it Fanon stated:

⁷⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 9.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁷⁹ Geismar, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

"For nearly three years I have placed myself wholly at the service of this country and of the men who inhabit it. I have spared neither my efforts nor my enthusiasm. There is not a parcel of my activity that has not had as its objective the unanimously hoped for emergence of a better world.

But what can a man's enthusiasm and devotion achieve if everyday reality is a tissue of lies, of cowardice, of contempt for man? . . . The function of a social structure is to set up institutions to serve man's needs. A society that drives its members to desperate solutions is a non-viable society, a society to be replaced".⁸⁰

He had come a long way from *Black Skin, White Masks*, a long way from the search for individual answers to problems which are, at bottom, rooted in the social system itself. Now he saw that the system was the enemy, that it was the destroyer of personality, the defiler of human potential. Once that realization was attained, it became self-evident that such a society was "non-viable . . . a society to be replaced."

Under threat of arrest, Fanon left Algiers early in 1957 for France. He moved to Tunis where he worked for the FLN Health Service and was attached to the Ministry of Information. During this period he taught at the university and became a member of the editorial committee of *El Moudjahid*, the newspaper of the revolution.

In 1959 he published his second book *L'An Cinq de la Revolution Algerienne (A Dying Colonialism)*, and in 1960 was appointed permanent FLN representative to Ghana. He had already been acting as an unofficial spokesman-diplomat representing the revolution in conferences throughout Africa. Now he tried to recruit volunteers to fight in Algeria and attempted as well to open up a southern front in Mali to widen the war and provide needed logistical support for the *wilayas* (military regions as delineated by the FLN).

Fanon returned from this southern mission exhausted. He had leukemia. After a medical visit to the Soviet Union, he began work on the book that was to become *Les Damnés de la Terre*.⁸¹ Geismar claims that:

"The book attests to a ten week eruption of intellectual energies . . . that Fanon . . . was worried that some of his descriptions were too vivid, too angry, the result of his feelings that so many of the liberation movements were being compromised or corrupted."⁸²

After a three month struggle in the United States, in which a temporary remission occurred and Fanon, characteristically, began planning his next

⁸⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, New York, Grove Press, pp. 52-53.

⁸¹ In 1967, *Toward the African Revolution*, a collection of diary notes and essays from *El Moudjahid* was published posthumously.

⁸² Geismar, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

project, he lapsed into a coma and died on 6 December 1961. So the journey-struggle had ended. The life, so brief and brilliant and bold, which had streaked across the sky of history like a meteor, had fallen, at last, to earth.

Fanon did not live to see that the Algerian revolution was to triumph in just six more short months and that France would be forced to grant independence at Evian. But his own rites of passage had been fulfilled. He had traversed the distance from slavery to freedom, the distance from "native" to man, the distance from Martinique to the liberated territory of Algeria, his final resting place.

It has not been the purpose of this essay to discuss Fanon's ideas in any comprehensive way. Nor has it been possible to include all the details and persons who played important, indeed decisive roles in Fanon's life. The intent, rather, has been to describe in a somewhat sketchy and too hasty manner the chief features of that life.

It is not possible to conclude this essay, however, without saying a personal word about the meaning of Fanon to me.

When the *Wretched of the Earth* reached these shores it provoked a storm of reaction. It was heresy because, against the officially and culturally sanctioned non-violent black struggle, Fanon said that violence was the way. The emotion surrounding that debate has obscured an appropriate understanding of the larger challenges of Fanon's thought. For it was Fanon that gave many of us who were participants in that struggle, pause. We had an ideology freedom, but Fanon said that that was not enough; that the struggle for liberation had, at the same time, also to be a struggle to build the new society. In addition Fanon took away from us the easy comfort of lambasting the enemy for he raised for us, in a way that it had never been raised before, the question of the primacy of our own internal contradictions. Amilcar Cabral, who knew Fanon, put it best at the Tri-continental Conference in Havana in 1966:

"Our agenda includes subjects whose meaning and importance are beyond question and which show a fundamental preoccupation with struggle. We note, however, that one form of struggle which we consider to be fundamental has not been explicitly mentioned in this programme . . . We refer to the struggle against our own weaknesses. Obviously other cases differ from that of Guinea, but our experience has shown that in the general framework of daily struggle this battle against ourselves—no matter what difficulties the enemy may create—is the most difficult of all, whether for the present or the future of our peoples."⁸³

⁸³ Amilcar Cabral, *Revolution in Guinea*, (London, Stage One, 1969), p. 74.

The essential and eternal value of Fanon, I would suggest, is that he confronted us—all of us who would be free—with the problem of our own contradictions; taking us beyond the easy and presumed virtue of our condition as oppressed to lead us to see the responsibility for our condition. It is not enough then for right to be on our side, one must also struggle to be right; to overcome the culture of the past which threatens to undermine the future. And he posed one other question that we as a people have not yet recognized or lived up to. In his letter to Lacoste, he concluded by saying

For many months my conscience has been the seat of unparadonable debates. And their conclusion is *the determination not to despair of man, in other words, of myself* (emphasis mine.)⁸⁴

Fanon cast the third world in the role of accepting responsibility *not only for itself but also for mankind as a whole*. And what this means, I think, is critical if the revolutionary process is to continue to evolve in a progressive direction.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the challenge to liberate man through reason and revolution was willingly accepted by the white West. Within that tradition the Russian revolution, whose meaning is still obscured, was the last great revolution of the West. Since that time the concern for the furtherance and advancement of man has passed from white hands—though not from white pieties—to flame anew in the breasts of non-white, non-western men. All of these men of the Twentieth century who have had something new to say to the world have been visionaries—and nearly all have been poets as well. Mao Tse Tung, Ho Chi Minh, Amilcar Cabral, Che, Fanon . . . Is this not then the tradition that Fanon was asking us to live up to, the meaning of his last written words:

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 we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man?* (emphasis mine)

⁸⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, p. 54.