

Frantz Fanon's Contribution to Psychiatry: The Psychology of Racism and Colonialism

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Frantz Fanon was born in Martinique, educated in France, and, after psychiatric training, administered a psychiatric hospital in Algeria. He made numerous contributions to psychiatry which are described in this paper. He is best remembered, however, for his four books: *Black Skin, White Masks*; *Toward the African Revolution*; *A Dying Colonialism*; and *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon became a spokesman for third-world denizens of all nations by describing in sensitive, clinically astute terms the psychology of racism and its untoward effects upon oppressor and oppressed. He also described the dehumanization and psychological treatment inherent in colonialist exploitation. With Dr. Fanon's premature death at the age of 37 in 1961, the world was deprived of one of the most eloquent and skilled spokesmen for those who are oppressed by the pro-white, anti-black paranoia which is racism. This paper describes in detail the nature of his singular contributions.

Introduction and Overview

Frantz Fanon is one of the most outstanding behavioral scientists the world has known. His contribution to an understanding of the psychology of oppression has been singular. None of Fanon's biographers has done a psycho-historical study, but each in turn¹⁻⁴ has tended to focus almost exclusively on the social and political parameters in Fanon's works to the exclusion of the inner and outer psychological forces that propelled Fanon in certain ideological directions. This is comprehensible when we consider the

backgrounds, orientations, and motivations of the biographers, as well as the fact that all were white. Scant attention has been accorded Fanon's concern with social psychiatry, milieu therapy, and the substitution of partial hospital units for large psychiatric institutions which would result in decentralization, lessened staffing requirements, and more sensitive care. Realizing the virtual impossibility that the newly independent black nations could train physicians in sufficient numbers to meet the needs of the populations at risk, he espoused the establishment of a corps of paraprofessionals who would render medical care after appropriate preparation by professionals. The focus, especially in the western world, has been on Fanon's anti-colonial views.

Fanon the "revolutionary" (as exemplified by the *Caute* biography) aroused the anxiety of the white American middle class "anxious to keep informed on that which threatens them," as opposed to Fanon the psychiatrist, theoretician, and commentator on pro-white, anti-black paranoia.

This presentation will focus on Fanon's contribution to psychiatry, the psychology of racism (pro-white, anti-black paranoia) and the psychological aspects of colonial exploitation.

Fanon's first book, *Black Skin, White Masks* was published in 1952. His book *A Dying Colonialism* was published in 1959. *The Wretched of the Earth* (originally published by Francois Macpero under the title *Les Damnés de la Terre* in 1961), and *Toward the African Revolution* were both published in

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1967. There was, in addition, a series of articles that have received scant attention.

Fanon's Career in Perspective

Fanon's career in psychiatry began in 1953 at the time of his appointment as Chief of Service, Blida Hospital, Algeria. It was there, while attempting to put into practice the principles learned from Dr. Francois Tosquelles, that he became aware of the necessity for considering the social conditions of the lives of his patients. One could apply various terms to Fanon's new psychiatric Weltanschauung—"ego-psychology," "adaptational psychiatry"—all of which equate to a socio-cultural-psychiatric frame of reference. This was a significant alteration in Fanon's orientation, because it served to set the stage for greater involvement in the milieu of his patients and in social impact upon the development of neuroses and maladaptive behavior. At the time that Fanon began as Chief of Service at Blida Hospital, Algeria, with a population of ten million, had eight psychiatrists and 2,500 psychiatric beds. With a zest that was at times awesome to staff, Fanon established a number of clinical innovations at Blida Hospital. Restraints were minimized; the distinction between "native" and European was prohibited; open wards were established for those patients whose clinical status warranted it; the establishment of occupational therapy programs for patients took place; and, above all, there was the according of due consideration to the immediate life experience and social milieu known to each patient prior to his hospitalization. When one considers that the community mental health center movement and the emphasis on social and community psychiatry was not to attain acclaim in the United States until the 1970s, Fanon was precocious in his clinical reformations at Blida in the years 1953-1956. The Algerian revolution had begun and impacted upon Fanon's work at Blida. He became restless to make a more direct contribution to the revolution, finally submitting his resignation to the Resident Minister of the Territory, with the statement:

During close to three years, I have put myself totally at the service of this nation and the people who live in it. I have spared

neither enthusiasm nor effort. There is not one bit of my energy which has not been directed toward the cause of creating a more liveable world. But what matters the enthusiasm and the care of one man if daily the truth is hidden by his cowardice and contempt for mankind?

What is the value of good intentions if their realization is made impossible by lack of spirit, sterility of ideas, and hatred for the people of this nation?⁴

It was no accident that Fanon progressed from the writing of *Black Skin, White Masks* in 1952 to the period of "incubation" at Blida, to be followed by his resignation, his move to Tunis, and increasing activity in the Algerian Revolution.

Black Skin revolved around two central themes: (1) the fact of blackness and the education to "whiteness" as expressed in language and the relationships between blacks and whites in the Caribbean and France and (2) the analysis of the above phenomena utilizing a psychoanalytic frame of reference and a view of racism equating it to pro-white, anti-black paranoia.

Fanon began with language as a tool of assimilation or as a barrier to entrance into the majority culture. The situation described by Fanon is applicable "wherever a colonial situation introduced a colonizer whose language differed from that of the colonized." He then moved to a consideration of the role of education as an important parameter in the channeling, via games, of aggression of Martiniquean black children. "It was the purpose of some children's games, psychodramas, some folk tales, to provide the catharsis which society needed to expel its collective anxieties."¹ In the stories written for white children, the characters symbolizing evil and fear were represented as black, with the perverse consequence that a black child, in identifying with the hero, identified with the white figure against the black one (himself). This dynamic is universal and in fact pervades the literature and myths of the Western world in which blackness is equated with evil, depravity, and baseness, whereas whiteness is equated with purity, virtue, and intellectuality.

Fanon was impressed by the mutuality in the relationships of blacks and whites so that not only were oppressed and oppressor affected psychologically by racism, but also the master-servant paradigm referred to by Hegel was

operative, resulting in the participation of two parties in a pathogenic process. "It was the same formula which Sartre applied to his anti-Semitic Christian and Jew which led him to affirm that it is the anti-Semite who creates the Jew."¹ In psychoanalytic terms this analysis is as accurate as the masochist-sadist paradigm. Since, historically, blacks existed prior to racism and Jews prior to anti-Semitism, a rigid utilization of a mutuality format is inappropriate, and results in a failure to appreciate the fact that racism is engendered by psychological, sociological, economic, political, and other factors. Fanon was to move from a psychoanalytic to a political-economic orientation with the passage of time and with continued exposure to and appreciation of societal contributory factors.

Black Skin, White Masks

It was the malignancy of black-white relationships in Martinique that led Fanon to question whether the races could engage in wholesome relationships—especially those relationships that are sexual. In the chapter "The Woman of Color and the White Man,"⁵ Fanon's hypothesizes that a black woman in a sexual liaison with a white man unconsciously fantasizes that she is "whitened" by the relationship. Fanon, interestingly, selects a black man, Jean Veneuse, who is overtly neurotic and in love with a white woman—only to pose the question as to whether "given the nature of the society he lived in, is it possible to have normal relationships between men and women of different color?"⁵ Fanon describes in vivid terms the sexual myths prevalent concerning blacks and the fact that these images depict the black as developmentally inferior and therefore serve to justify his subordinate position and treatment.

One may speculate as to why Fanon did not elaborate upon his theory further and explicate the dynamics of projection onto blacks of those unacceptable attitudes, feelings, thoughts, etc, held by whites. One reason may be that Fanon sought to resolve the ambivalence about blackness (black=evil, white=pure, and whiteness is unattainable=black self-hatred) by turning toward the concept of negritude.

He discovered himself to be a transplanted son of slaves; he felt the valuation of

Africa in the very depth of his body and aspired only to one thing: to plunge into the great black hole! . . . It thus seems that the West Indian, after the great white error, is now living in the great black mirage.⁶

Fanon's reference to the work of Mannoni, a French psychoanalyst, was in part a method of demonstrating the unsuitability of psychoanalysis as a frame of reference that could understand racism and in part an opportunity to challenge the "dependency complex." Fanon also seemed to be challenging the instinctual orientation of psychoanalysis, and the fact that the psychoanalysis of his period did not put stock in institutional/societal factors as having a role in character development and in the production of neurosis.

One source of Fanon's interest in "negritude" (in *Black Skin*) was inspired by Aimée Césaire, a fellow Martiniquean:

Historically, the concept of negritude derived from a number of related themes in the Caribbean literature of the 19th and 20th centuries. But more specifically, it developed out of the indigenous movement in the former French colony of Haiti, where the initial price de conscience of the Negro living in a white world took place. One merging theme was that of the forgotten richness of Negro-African history. . . . It was not, however, in the Caribbean, but rather in Paris, in the heart of the French imperium, that the specific literary movement associated with the concept of negritude took shape in the 1930s. Its three principal inspirers, all poets, and later politicians, were Aimée Césaire, Leopold Senghor of Senegal, and Léon Damas of French Guiana.³

Caute describes Fanon's evolution as a tripartite one: the dealienated man (*Black Skin, White Masks*), the free citizen of Algeria (*A Dying Colonialism*), and the socialist revolutionary (*The Wretched of the Earth*).³

A Dying Colonialism

In *A Dying Colonialism*, published in 1959,⁷ Fanon, having begun in *Peau Noire* the exploration of mutual relations between oppressor and oppressed, continues by working on the complex economic and political factors that underlay the colonial expansion, but more significantly "the internal, psychic effect which resulted from the confrontation between Frenchmen and Algerians." Fanon's thesis was that the Revolution was transforming individu-

als as well as the relationships between individuals.

The following passage from *A Dying Colonialism* exemplifies Fanon's reference to the Psychology of Colonization:

It is the white man who creates the Negro. But it is the Negro who creates negritude. To the colonialist offensive against the veil, the colonized opposes the cult of the veil. What was an undifferentiated element in a homogeneous whole acquires a taboo character, and the attitude of a given Algerian woman with respect to the veil will be constantly related to her overall respect to the foreign occupation. The colonized, in the face of the emphasis given by the colonialists to this or that aspect of his traditions, reacts very violently. The attention devoted to modifying this aspect, the emotion the conqueror puts into his pedagogical work, his prayers, his threats, weaves a whole universe of resistances around this particular element.

Central to Fanon's thesis is the lack of communication between colonizer and colonized and the mistrust underlying this lack. *A Dying Colonialism* is significant in terms of Fanon's own evolution from consciousness to action on the Algerian issue. "It is clear from *A Dying Colonialism* that this book marked a transition for Fanon from a period in which he had concentrated on psychiatric problems and work, to one in which he committed himself to more direct political action.⁷

Several factors entered into this transition:

1. The disappointing experience at Blida and an increasingly adaptational approach to human behavior,
2. The emotional and physical traumata that were sequelae to the Algerian Revolution,
3. The failure of traditional psychiatric approaches to ameliorate the "human condition" in the context of the Algerian Revolution,
4. The emotional impact of visiting Martinique after Fanon's completion of his medical studies, and
5. The European experience with racism.

When *A Dying Colonialism* was published in 1959, Fanon had become involved in the Algerian struggle. Geismar's treatment of the book is superior to Caute's. "Each essay in *A Dying Colonialism* addressed itself to a single factor in revolutionary life, and expanded to give a picture of the whole nation coming to life. The first essay began with a simple idea: that clothing

reveals much about a group of people. Within the revolution, "women had discarded the veil."² The second chapter concerned the radio. After 1956, radio had become one of the most important weapons that the nationalists used against the French. *A Dying Colonialism* might be considered as laying the groundwork for some future rapprochement between the European and the Moslem within an independent Algeria. Fanon's hope was that this book would incite world-wide support for the Algerian Revolution.

The contrast between *Black Skin* and *A Dying Colonialism* is marked in that one has to strain to discern the psychological parameter in the latter work, although the theses of clothing and communication require no symbolic translation. Fanon has evolved into a political activist—a man of action.

The Wretched of the Earth

Fanon's goal in writing *The Wretched of the Earth*, accomplished in the unbelievable time of three months, was to "arouse, excite, anger, and activate"⁸ those who were victims of racist exploitation.

While most critics of *The Wretched of the Earth* have focused on the political parameter and the utilization of violence as a means of throwing off the colonial yoke, few have seized on the psychological messages contained within Fanon's most monumental tome. I am reminded of a statement made by the late Robert Kennedy in South Africa in 1966.

Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or strikes out against injustice, or acts to improve the lot of others, he sends a tiny ripple of hope, and . . . those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.⁹

It is fascinating that a white man could make such a violent statement barely five years after a black man, Fanon, made a similar statement and yet the responses to each be so disparate. White reviewers and readers completely miss the theme as to the reactive nature of the native's violence—a reaction that is related to years and centuries of the most heinous violence perpetrated against him, his children, and his women.

Sartre in his excellent introduction comprehends the nature of the violence described by Fanon:

If this suppressed fury fails to find an outlet, it turns in a vacuum and devastates the oppressed creatures themselves. In order to free themselves they even massacre each other. The different tribes fight between themselves since they cannot face the real enemy—and you can count on colonial policy to keep up their rivalries. . . .¹⁰

Initially, the rage of the oppressed individuals is retroflected or turned against self and brother. Brother is pitted against brother and . . .

they take the greatest precautions against their own kind by setting up supernatural barriers, at times reviving old and terrible myths, at others, binding themselves by scrupulous rites. It is in this way that an obsessed person flees from his deepest needs. . . . They dance; that keeps them busy; it relaxes their painfully contracted muscles; and then the dance mimes secretly, often without their knowing, the refusal they cannot utter and the murders they dare not commit.⁸

he (Fanon) shows clearly that this irrepressible violence is neither sound and fury, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even the effect of resentment: It is man recreating himself. I think we understood this truth at one time, but we have forgotten it—that no gentlemen can efface the marks of violence; only violence itself can destroy them. The native cures himself of colonial neurosis by thrusting out the settler through force of arms.¹⁰

The real contribution of *The Wretched of the Earth* is not the critique of violence, but the analysis of political development in the third world, specifically Algeria and Africa, in which the question of violence plays an important role. Those who focus on Fanon and violence have missed the point totally.

In *The Wretched* Fanon was talking again of the need for the liberation of all of those who were enslaved. Much as Fanon the psychiatrist had talked of the psychic liberation of those enslaved by the shackles of pro-white, anti-black paranoia, in each of his subsequent works, Fanon, the psychiatrist-political activist-humanist, was addressing the issue of liberation in a broader context. His evolution was inevitable, necessary, and positive, for it would have been impossible for a man possessed of his sensitivity and humanitarianism to appreciate the origin and nature of the psychic pain endured by both colonizer and colonized without broadening his base of understanding. Implicit in that process was the adoption of an activist posture.

Toward the African Revolution

Fanon's philosophy regarding pan-Africanism emerges in *Toward the African Revolution*. His stated goal was "To put Africa in motion, to cooperate in its organization, in its regrouping, behind revolutionary principles. To participate in the ordered movement of a continent—this was really the work I had chosen."⁶ Geismar considers Fanon a pan-African "revisionist." "He attempted to impress Africa with the importance of the Algerian war at the same time that he spoke of the limits of the older plans for continental unity. He wanted to lay the groundwork for more meaningful pan-Africanism after national independence."²

Fanon and Lumumba met during this period. Reference is made to Lumumba in *Toward the African Revolution*. It was Fanon's feeling that Lumumba's trip to the United States to request aid represented his doom, because many in Washington and New York recognized the energy and increasing radicalism of Lumumba—"He had to be liquidated."⁶

Comments and Conclusion

Each of Fanon's biographers, while alluding to his psychoanalytic orientation, emphasizes his political activities. This is a well known pro-white, anti-black ploy designed to provoke anxiety, rage, misunderstanding, and violence. My posture is that Fanon never abandoned his psychoanalytic posture, but merely refined it and translated theory into practice.

There are still colonies, exploitation, and racism, and the psychological insights provided by Fanon enable us to understand contemporary colonization and exploitation. One such "colony" consists of 1.4 million citizens, two thirds of whom are third-world individuals. They are vulnerable to mental illness, and among the most impoverished, health impaired group in New York City, having an average annual income of \$2,900, with high rates of Medicaid/Medicare reciprocity, aid to dependent children, unemployment, and all indices of social pathology.

Mental illness, crime, and violence are rampant. Despite these deplorable conditions, no relief is in sight. The "colony" is called The Bronx. The

State, City and voluntary mental health sectors all have colluded to commit violence upon this community by providing inequitable services and funding to this borough. The Bronx received \$18.25 per capita and Manhattan, \$35 for mental health programs. The populations are identical. The City provides 16 million dollars to the Bronx, and 43 million dollars to Manhattan for mental health programs. There are 900 mental health hospital beds in the Bronx and 3,000 in Manhattan. But the average annual income in Manhattan is twice that of the Bronx. Could there be a more lucid example of Fanon's preachments in *The Wretched of the Earth*? The Bronx is not the only such colony. There are many throughout these United States and throughout the world. Fanon has been of immense assistance in the understanding of such phenomena.

This has been a review of the contribution of Frantz Fanon to psychiatry, and the psychology of racism and colonialism. With his death at the age of 37, the world lost a scientist, a humanitarian, and a prophet. The fact that his works have been misinterpreted, maligned, and ill-used and the fact that he has not received his due tribute was predictable, and in a sense confirmation of the views expressed in *Black Skin*—"The black physician is only a step away from disaster."

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