

## The Social Psychiatry of Frantz Fanon

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*Frantz Fanon, a black psychiatrist, was both concerned with human liberation and committed to a cult of violence. His own life exemplified the lack of gratification in practicing a psychiatry focused on the individual in a social milieu where the glaring ills were not intrapsychic fantasies but real problems of poverty, racism, and colonialism. Fanon's experience in denouncing a bourgeois psychiatry and becoming a revolutionist points up some contrasts with the North American style of social psychiatry.*

... psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment.

—FRANTZ FANON

**F**ANON'S LIFE GOAL was to divest disinherited people from their double burden, as he saw it, of sociogenic madness and of bourgeois psychiatry. He was born in Fort-de-France, Martinique, in 1925, was educated as a psychiatrist in France, and was in practice as a psychiatrist and revolutionary in Algeria. Fanon served as an anti-French Algerian emissary to Ghana and other African countries. After his leukemia had been diagnosed in Ghana, a country of the Third World, he sought a cure in the other two worlds. He went briefly to the Soviet Union for treatment of his leukemia but finally wound up at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, where he died on December 7, 1961. He was international, cosmopolitan, and humanistic during his short span of life; he has become an intellectual figure of great importance since his death. He was not a simple thinker whom one can discuss lightly; psychiatrists in the

United States must begin to consider his contributions.

Four volumes of his writings had appeared in English translation by the end of 1969 (1-4). I have drawn the materials for this brief presentation of Fanon's social psychiatry from these sources.

### Biographic Sketch

Fort-de-France was the old capital of Martinique, which had been part of France's colonial empire since 1635. The Martiniqueans who surrounded Fanon in his childhood and youth felt a strong positive identification with all things French. Although only a minority in Martinique was white and European, French colonization (while proclaiming its softness) had been both thorough and brutal. As a result, the blacks derived positive self-esteem when they made themselves to be as white and French as possible. When they set up a "group to be unlike" they chose the Africans. Blackness was a feature of the negative reference-group. Fanon grew up in a milieu where French was good, even as black or African or West Indian was bad.

Fanon perceived the stunning impact of the fall of France and the Pétain submission to Nazi Germany. What were the adulating colonies to make of this defeat? They saw fulfilled the wish that "the great be brought low." Fanon also observed the impact of the marooning of several thousand French soldiers and their families in the French West Indies during World War II. A contempt grew out of their proximity that was never to leave him and many of his contemporaries. Late in the war, after joining the First French Army, Fanon served in North Africa, and in Oran he saw that North Africans despised him both for being in the French forces and for being black. Strangely, despite having these two strikes against him, it was to Algeria that Fanon later returned for the revolutionary activities that, by absorbing him,

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assisted in materializing his ultimate identity.

After the war, Fanon went to France to complete his medical studies in Paris and to study psychiatry in Lyons. In France he married a white woman, joined the *Présence Africaine*, a group of intellectuals, and met Jean-Paul Sartre. His psychiatric thesis was to be about racism. He surveyed 500 persons in France concerning their associations with such words as "Negro." The final result was the book *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (1), published when Fanon was 27 years old: "In this work I have made it a point to convey the misery of the black man. Physically and affectively, I have not wished to be objective. Besides, that would be dishonest: It is not possible for me to be objective" (1, p. 86). Nevertheless he asserted: "I do not trust fervor. Every time it has burst out somewhere, it has brought fire, famine, misery . . . . And contempt for man. Fervor is the weapon of choice of the impotent" (1, p. 11).

In 1952, in short, he was militant but still liberal. By late 1953, Fanon was appointed medical director of the psychiatric hospital at Blida-Joinville, Algeria. That hospital now bears Fanon's name. During 1954 and 1955, and into 1956, he functioned as a "double agent" while earning his living at that post. He was officially and publicly a psychiatrist for the French colonial establishment, but underground he became ever more deeply involved in the anticolonial struggle led by the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale (FLN).

By 1956 the liberal searching that characterized *Black Skin, White Masks* had ceased and Fanon, now radicalized, had adopted a position of total commitment to violent struggle against the French. In 1956 he resigned his job at the psychiatric hospital, protesting that psychiatry should not be used to add to the estrangement and alienation of the Algerians. In September 1956 he attended the First Congress of Black Writers in Paris; but he returned to North Africa, now to Tunis, where he functioned as chief political editor of *Al Mujahid*, a periodical issued by the FLN. Fanon was shifting decisively from a brooding, inward-turning intellectual (for whom psychodynamic theory was of value) to an externalizing *guerillero* (for whom a more Marxian rhetoric was congenial).

In March 1960, Fanon was sent to Ghana by the Algerian Provisional Government. Toward fulfillment of a dream to unite white and black Africa, Fanon went on a reconnaissance to northern Mali in the summer of 1960 to determine if supplies could move up into Algeria from the southern frontier. By this time his leukemia had been diagnosed and Fanon began the hopeless quest for a cure in the Soviet Union and the United States. Shortly before his death *Les Damnés de la Terre* (3) was published, its title echoing the battle cry of the *Internationale*: "Arise ye prisoners of starvation, arise ye wretched of the earth." In this book, with a preface by Sartre in which he appeared to be trying to outdo Fanon in espousal of violence, Fanon's earlier humanism and social psychiatry were muted in favor of a shrill preachment of violence:

... for the colonised 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 violent 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 (3, p. 73).

As Isaacs (5) pointed out, there was something exceedingly French, and ever more French, about Fanon's perspective in becoming "an apostle of violence" who embraced "the primeval doctrine that manhood is won only by the drawing of blood." The violence of French colonialism had indeed brought in a bitter harvest. Fanon died on the "imperialistic soil" of the United States, agitated and confusedly paranoid in his final hours, according to his friend Simone de Beauvoir (6). The Algerians, with whom he had felt a bond of fraternity, brought his body back to Tunis, and a commando transported it to Algeria for burial. It seems likely that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency assisted Fanon in his final weeks, and even made the burial arrangements.<sup>1</sup> His widow and young son are presumably now in Algeria. Several of Fanon's political essays were published posthumously (4).

<sup>1</sup> The story of the CIA's role was reported sensationally in *Der Spiegel* (7).

### From Soul to Social Structure

In briefly discussing the psychiatric contributions of Frantz Fanon, I will focus on the psychiatric theorist more than on the political theorist or street fighter, as Robert Coles (8) called two other roles Fanon played. Perhaps one of the most striking characteristics of Frantz Fanon is just that—his playing of diverse, unexpected roles and his shifting from the metaphors familiar to psychoanalysis into those familiar to social science and, then again, into those familiar to the street man or the guerrilla fighter.

Fanon's major psychiatric contribution came in his presentation of the psychology of colonialism and racism, of systematic political violence and counter-violence, of the reactive or situational psychoses, and of family roles and relations. Each of these topics will be reviewed briefly.

Fanon repeatedly contended that the afflictions of mankind are reality problems, not merely fantasies. The poor are plagued by poverty, for example, the Jew by persecution, the black by exploitation and self-derogation, and the colonized by being on the bottom in their own land. Fanon railed against a "psychologism" that dealt with all of these estranging afflictions as if they were purely fantasies or mere states of mind. Repeatedly he reminds us that torture hurts the victim more than it does the torturer. Repeatedly he proclaims: psychiatry, if it works successfully, brings on disalienation, not alienation, and a psychiatry that supports alienation is itself pathologic. For Fanon there was no question of inducing "adjustment" to a vicious social system.

#### *Colonialism and Racism*

Fanon would have us understand that ideological analyses are often inadequate, inasmuch as colonialism is not a thinking machine. In another context he stated: "Colonialism is not a type of individual relations but the conquest of a national territory and the oppression of a people: that is all. It is not a certain type of human behavior or a pattern of relations between individuals" (4, p. 81).

Similarly, racism is not just a state of mind but also an elaborately structured system of exploitation. "Beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny" was his maxim.

Fanon's psychology was a social psychology; his psychiatry, a social psychiatry. In his studies of both colonialism and racism he manifestly relied upon the concepts and tools of social analysis. He realized that psychodynamics, by keeping attention centered on the individual, was easily susceptible to conservative application.

In all his writings Fanon resorted, from time to time, to psychoanalytic terminology and conceptualization, but it was typically in the service of "unmasking" Negrophobia, colonialism, moral cowardice, or conventionality. Herein lay his "brilliant knack for transforming clinical insights into political poetry" (9). Yet, as we shall soon see, that other grand cognitive system, Marxist critique, itself devoted to unmasking, became the preferred metaphoric and mythic system for Frantz Fanon (4, p. 187). Fanon was not an avowed orthodox Marxist, but he habitually wrote in a vein that attracted Marxists—or their heirs the Leninists or Maoists, who cherished the peasantry, not the proletariat. Beginning with the psychic alienation of subjugated persons, Fanon felt it necessary to "extend into the domains of other sciences" (1, p. 48). Ultimately he would proclaim that "in some circumstances the *socius* is more important than the individual" (1, p. 105) and, later in the book: ". . . we are driven from the individual back to the social structure. If there is a taint, it lies not in the 'soul' of the individual but rather in that of the environment" (1, p. 213).

Clinical psychiatry in itself was no longer sufficient; in order to become sufficient it had to be a psychiatry that had been illuminated and enriched by social science. Fanon put the setting, the context, the situation, the environment, the culture, and the social truths at the forefront in any efforts at reasonable explanation. In short, he propounded the basic tenets of comprehensive medicine, of social medicine, and of social psychiatry—all in relation to the problems of racism and colonialism.

The entire literary output of Frantz Fanon might well be viewed as a rich and subtle playing and replaying of the theme of exploitation of man in the modern world. Fanon was a social psychiatrist driven by his humanism to unmask inhumanity. Of course, *man is exploited by man*, and that

requires an analysis of both exploiter and exploited, their interacting delusional systems, their basic patterns of defense and ideology formation, and their basic social and economic positions with respect to each other. Fanon would remind us that, despite our "exhaustiveness" and concentration on the psychology of the exploiter, it is the *exploited* who comes off worse and is more alienated or deranged.

#### *Violence in Racist and Colonialist Society*

Fanon probably stands second only to Georges Sorel (10) in his efforts toward legitimizing political violence in modern times. Fanon and Régis Debray (11) have made a related contribution to this subject, as I have shown elsewhere (12). For the present, it must suffice to touch on only some of the sociopsychiatric features of Fanon's emphasis on violence.

Fanon portrayed violence as a tactic of the utmost timeliness for the Third World in its efforts to overthrow the colonial exploitation to which it had been subjected. Violence as a tactic was considered by Fanon to have the characteristics of activism, visibility, and concreteness; all of these, he thought, commended it to win. It was said to have pragmatic superiority over ideology. The use of violence was accompanied by an array of militaristic virtues (manly solidarity, heroism, youthfulness, physical prowess, etc.).

In Fanon's opinion the readiness to engage in violence is fused to a set of anti-urban sentiments that approximate an agrarian romanticism: ". . . in the colonial countries the peasants alone are revolutionary, for they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The starving peasant, outside the class system, is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays" (3, p. 48). It has been suggested that the French would have proceeded straight away to murder the followers of Ghandi had the French colonized India (13), and Fanon reacted strongly against colonial violence with his advocacy of "revolutionary" or anticolonial violence: "The colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence. This rule of conduct enlightens the agent because it indicates to him the means and the end" (3, p. 67).

By the time he died, Fanon had embraced the cult of violence for its own sake. He be-

came a sick man obsessed with cataclysm, whereas the younger Fanon had expressed horror at the excesses of killing and wantonly brutal murder that were set on foot when people rose up against oppression:

Because we want a democratic and a renovated Algeria, because we believe one cannot rise and liberate oneself in one area and sink in another, we condemn, with pain in our hearts, those brothers who have flung themselves into revolutionary action with the almost physiological brutality that centuries of oppression give rise to and feed (2, p. 25).

#### *Situational (or Reactive) Psychic Disorders*

The mental disorders to which Frantz Fanon gave most attention, inaptly translated as "reactionary," were those that in North America are known as reactive and situational disorders. Whatever our disdain for Fanon's tendency to oversimplify intrapsychic experiences, we can only respect his inclination to emphasize the importance of the social structure in the genesis of mental disorder. The cases of madness that were presented in *Black Skin, White Masks* and in *The Wretched of the Earth* are lacking in psychiatric sophistication but they are rich in recognizing what society and culture can induce in human beings.

#### *Importance of the Family*

Fanon acknowledged, as do psychoanalysts, the paramouncy of the family, but he saw the family as all of one piece with the national social system. He stated baldly that oedipal conflicts were virtually nonexistent in Martinique, that homosexuality did not occur in the Antilles, that adolescence did not appear in Algerian females, and so on—all standing as examples of how psychopathology, family structure, and society are interrelated and mutually dependent.

In his apt zeal to interconnect family and society, Fanon likely erred in his overestimation of what a national struggle against colonialism could do to the family. For example, when he attributed the most far-reaching effects to the Algerian struggle for independence, he was required to ignore that *modernity* in and of itself changes family life. The conjugal pattern, as Goode (14) showed, is becoming the mode in diverse social contexts, worldwide. It is hardly due to the "purification" resulting from political murder, despite Fanon's opinion: "The mingling of

fighting experience with conjugal life deepens the relations between husband and wife and cements their union. There is a simultaneous and effervescent emergence of the citizen, the patriot, and the modern spouse" (2, p. 114). Likewise, Fanon would appear to have given an overly political or "politicized" interpretation of the utilization and abandonment of the veil by North African women. Nonetheless, his depiction of the pervasiveness of modern social change is well founded.

Fanon, in summary, used dynamic psychiatry in three ways: 1) he employed psychodynamic theory at times to aid his argumentation and resorted to Freudian concepts (also Marxist ones) to "unmask" what he discerned as distortion and obfuscation; 2) he turned away from psychiatry in the course of his intellectual development and growing commitment to revolution by violence, and came to prefer social and political theory; and 3) he returned, invariably, to "the soul" of the individual as a result of his humanistic drives and passions. His adoption of dynamic psychiatry served two opposite functions—on one hand, to moderate his intolerant partisanship, and on the other hand (as in *The Wretched of the Earth*), to heighten and sharpen the polemic effect of his partisan writing.

Sartre began asking him about his psychiatric experiences and he came to life. He had been very disappointed by Russian psychiatry; he disapproved very strongly of confinement and wanted mental patients to be treated without removal from their home environment; he attributed great importance to economic and social factors in the formations of the psychoses and dreamed of supplementing psychotherapy with civic education for the patients. "All political leaders should be psychiatrists as well" he said (6, p. 596).

### Social Psychiatry: Science and Politics

Frantz Fanon the social psychiatrist was far from being unambivalent, simple, and one-dimensional, as Seigel (15) contended. Like many social psychiatrists, Frantz Fanon grappled with the problem of whether to become an activist and, having decided in the affirmative, he became an eloquent revolutionary. His was an engaged life that was drawn into political action at the expense of scientific work or clinical practice.

The 20th century has demonstrated that

two types of truths (and many forms of untruths) are regnant in human affairs—the truths of *propositions* and the truths of *commitments*. Psychiatrists typically have justified their support of the status quo by proclaiming the hegemonic domination of propositional truths and the secondary importance, or irrelevance, of commitments. Uncommitted, a nihilist does what he is told to do. Witness how some French psychiatrists in Algeria administered electroshock to members of the FLN, and how some German psychiatrists carried out lethal "experiments" on the mentally ill and retarded Germans of the Nazi era. Frantz Fanon committed himself, took stands, and took sides, against exploitation and for murderous revolution.

Twentieth century psychiatry has witnessed its own movement away from "un-social medicine." The psychiatrist has found himself to be, however reluctantly, a revolutionary. Of the psychiatrist as "reluctant revolutionary," Seeley has written:

I think I know and understand the unease many psychiatrists feel as they move across the continuum . . . from containment, through mitigation, improvement or cure, to "secondary" or "primary prevention" to "positive mental health". I know the parallel unease that accompanies the transition from a limited relation to one patient, to such "units" as families, communities, institutions, . . . "international arenas" to "worlds," sane or insane (16, p. 33).

Although Simone de Beauvoir (6) remembered his saying, "Above all, I don't want to become a professional revolutionary," Frantz Fanon was a revolutionist quite openly, and with minimal reluctance. He did not appear to be under stringent imperative to disguise his politics as "Social Psychiatry," nor to restrict his politics to social psychiatry. Fanon's importance might lie in the fact that he remained "always a man who questions" but a man who can at the same time be an activist.

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