

## THE SPECTRE OF FRANTZ FANON

*20 July 2000 was the 75th anniversary of Frantz Fanon's birth. Richard Pithouse reflects, from Durban, South Africa, on the unusually heroic life of an unusually brilliant intellectual.*

When McDonalds' first Durban branch landed in Old Fort Road a local business columnist read the empty smile and iconic arches as an advance blessing from the Almighty Market. He excitedly proposed the building of a mini-Disneyland in Pine Street. Not one derisory letter appeared in the newspaper. But a few days later some large and bold graffiti appeared on the perimeter wall. It chose not to confront the dangers of cargo cults directly and instead instructed customers to "Read Frantz Fanon Now!" and posed the question "Would Che Guevara, Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon chow here?" Somebody had hurled a chunk of meaning so hard it had lodged in Babylon's Teflon face.

Across town in the altogether more soulful Winston Pub, which is the legendary heart of Durban's underground rock culture, the peeling green paint had long given up trying to hide the cracks in the plaster above the urinal. Somebody, no doubt fueled by Black Label and the urgent passions of the second and final gig of a teenage rock band, had carved, deep into the plaster, "Rage Against the Machine and Fugazi are good bands but Frantz Fanon and Che Guevara were good men so Wake The Fuck Up!". Over at the equally legendary Sunrise Cafe in Overport people dropping in for roti, which, in Durban, follows the jol (party) as inevitably as the sun rises over the Indian Ocean, were picking up copies of the mysterious underground magazine *Bunnychow*. It carried an explicitly Fanonian review of the latest Prophets of Da City album which was printed over a shadowy picture of Steven Biko.

But if anyone had braved the malls and looked to Durban's book shops to make the spectre of Fanon flesh they'd have chased a ghostly presence through poets like Jeremy Cronin, Lesego Rampolokeng and Kelwyn Sole; world historical activists like George Jackson, Che Guevara and Steve Biko and celebrated intellectuals like Edward Said, Mahmood Mamdani, Lewis Gordon, Homi Bhabba and Paulo Freire. They'd also have found that while the popular right wing historian Paul Johnson attacked Fanon as the father of terrorism the more populist, and thus less popular, Kelwyn Sole longingly asked his readers to imagine the impossible: "A humble intellectual/Cape Town without wind...Thabo Mbeki reading the work of Frantz Fanon." But our intrepid ghost hunter wouldn't have found any of Fanon's books. For that she'd have to dust off the library of an old BC activist or, if she had a credit card, connect to Amazon.com.

Either method would have rewarded her with four books each of which is illuminated by the arresting intelligence and incandescent spirit of a remarkable man. Together they diagnose our condition with penetrating accuracy, unfurl the banner of uncompromising revolt and develop a deeply sophisticated, extraordinarily passionate and profoundly radical social analysis. It would be clear why the writings of Frantz Fanon inspired our

best people, including Steve Biko, and shaped key moments in our struggle making us all to some degree, as the Lesego Rampolokeng puts it, the “spawn of Fanon.”

Of course Fanon is not the only progressive intellectual who has been able to speak to the world beyond the academy. Marx was an inspiring speaker and, more recently, Pablo Neruda and Vaclav Havel became national icons and Michele Foucault became an international hero of the gay struggle. And many intellectuals, from theorists like Antonio Gramsci to poets like Jeremy Cronin, have written, brilliantly, from a position of heroic engagement. Today the Parisian sociologist Pierre Bourdieu regularly addresses unions on the tyranny of the Market and radical hip-hop and rock bands like Rage Against the Machine, The Asian Dub Foundation and Fun~~da~~mental make a habit of publicly declaring their respect for Noam Chomsky. But Fanon's status as both an heroic Che Guevara style icon of armed resistance and a celebrated intellectual is unique.

In academic disciplines like critical race studies, literary theory, postcolonialism, development studies, psychology, political science and philosophy Fanon's status has never been higher. This is true from New York to Lagos but, with notable exceptions like David Goldberg, Mabogo More, Grant Farrel and Andrew Nash, Fanon has been strangely under theorised in South Africa. This would be unfortunate in any society confronting racialised inequality and neo-colonialism. The failure of the bulk of the South African academy to engage seriously with Fanon is even more startling in the light of the enormous influence which Fanon had on Biko's pivotal thought. But although Fanon is seldom directly engaged he's usually out there somewhere - even if just as a footnote or as an influence, acknowledged or not, on someone like Said, Biko, Foucault or Freire.

His biographers tell us that the flesh and blood man was born as the fifth of eight children into a prosperous Black family on the small Caribbean island of Martinique on July 20, 1925. Martinique was a French colony and his family saw themselves as French and identified themselves with the culture and language of France. Frantz proved to be a sensitive child with a restless intelligence and he was enrolled at the prestigious Lycée Schoecher where Aimé Césaire - the Communist leader, poet and founder of Negritude - taught language and literature. Fanon later became critical of Negritude but Césaire was a potent influence on the teenage Fanon.

The Nazis defeated France when Fanon was 15 and 10 000 French sailors loyal to the collaborationist Vichy Regime were stationed in Martinique. Suddenly Martinicans who had seen themselves as French realised that neither their class or education made them French in the eyes of the many racists amongst the sailors. Fanon already had the courage to give life to his principles and became notorious amongst the French after singlehandedly fighting off two French sailors who were beating up a Martinican who had robbed them of some money. Three years later, in 1943, the Free French Forces were assembling on the neighbouring island of Dominica and Fanon managed to row to Dominica and join them. Before he left a friend tried to dissuade him from risking his life for a 'white man's war' but Fanon famously replied that: “Each time liberty is in

question, we are concerned, be we white, black or yellow; and each time freedom is under siege, no matter where, I will engage myself completely.”

He was assigned to the 5th Battalion and, despite being outraged at the racism which he saw and experienced, he fought with extraordinary bravery. In the winter of 1945 he was wounded in battle and was awarded the *Croix de Guerre*. But, when the 5th Battalion finally reached France, Fanon was so disgusted by the racist response of the French people to the Black and Arab soldiers amongst their liberators that, in a letter to his parents, he wrote that “I doubt everything, even myself....Nothing here justified my sudden decision to make myself the defender of a farmer’s interests when he doesn’t give a damn.”

After the war Fanon returned to Martinique to finish high school. He was reluctant to discuss his war time experiences and seemed withdrawn, But in 1946 he threw himself, with typical vitality, into Aimé Césaire’s successful election campaign. The following year his father died and he decided to take up a veteran’s scholarship to study in France. He registered for a degree in psychiatric medicine in Lyon where he was one of 20 black students in a class of 400. He moved in Trotskyist circles and made time to read philosophy, edit a black student newspaper called *Tam-Tam* and write three plays. In 1952 he began his internship in a small local hospital and a year later, at the age of, 27 published his first book - the brilliant *Black Skin White Masks*.

Although Fanon was a rigorous scientist his work has an extraordinarily prophetic quality and his readers often refer to his *oeuvre* as ‘The Bible’ or ‘Our Bible’. It seems ironic that he began his first book, by telling his readers that: “I do not come with timeless truths. My consciousness is not illuminated with ultimate radiances. Nevertheless, in complete composure, I think that it would be good if certain things were said.” But the irony is only apparent because, as with great artists like Athol Fugard, William Kentridge and Bob Marley, it is the close examination of the particular that develops the degree of insight needed to generate ideas with universal resonance.

*Black Skin White Masks* is a phenomenological analysis of being Black in an anti-black world. In the autobiographical section of the book Fanon explained that he wanted to “come lithe and young into a world that was ours and to help to build it together....I wanted to be a man, nothing but a man.” But his ambitions were thwarted by the fact of his blackness in an antiblack world. “I am”, he realised, “being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am fixed.... I am laid bare. I feel, see in those white faces that it is not a new man who has come in, but a new kind of man, a new genus. Why, it’s a Negro!” Although he believed that “Man is a *yes* that vibrates to cosmic harmonies” he found himself “Sealed into....crushing objecthood.” And “Since the other hesitated to recognise me, there remained only one solution: to make myself known.....to assert myself as a BLACK MAN.”

*Newsweek* described *Black Skin, White Masks* as a “Strange, haunting mélange of analysis, revolutionary manifesto, metaphysics, prose poetry and literary criticism - and yet the nakedest of human cries.” It’s insights into the deceptions of racism remain potent

and the book continues to inspire action and stimulate thought around the world. It remains a canonical text in field of critical race studies.

Fanon then took up a position at the Alban-de-Lozere hospital where he trained under the progressive psychiatrist Francois Tosquelles who insisted that patients be understood in the context of family and community. After earning the rank of *chef de service*, which qualified him to be the director of a French psychiatric hospital, Fanon wrote to Senegalese president Léopold Senghor (who was a friend of Aimé Césaire) requesting a post in Senegal but Senghor didn't reply. So, in 1953, he married his French lover Josie Dublé, who shared his political commitment and intellectual passions, and took up a post as the head of the Blida-Joinville psychiatric hospital in Algeria.

On his first day at work he found more than 2000 patients crammed into a small racially segregated medieval style institution with a staff of only 6 doctors and a patient waiting list of 850. Patients were often straightjacketed and chained to their beds and Fanon's first act was to release the restrained patients. He then set about rooting the hospital in Algerian culture and changing it from a prison to a community. When the Algerian War of Liberation began in 1954 Fanon secretly provided medical supplies and training to the FLN (National Liberation Front). He also found that his official duties required him to treat both the Algerian victims of torture and their French torturers. He soon realised that colonial society was insane and that his patients' problems were a consequence of a social rather than a personal pathology. He couldn't in good faith continue to treat the symptoms of disease while ignoring its causes and so in 1956 he wrote a letter of resignation.

It was answered with an expulsion order and so Fanon, together with his family and some of his colleagues, left for Tunisia. He worked in mobile medical centers on the border, headed a psychiatric clinic where he made important reforms and lectured at the University of Tunis where he is still remembered for his brilliance and extraordinary charisma. He also edited the FLN newspaper *el Moudjahid*. A number of his editorials were published after his death in a book called *Towards the African Revolution*. He was also involved in dangerous reconnaissance work and in 1959 12 of his spinal vertebrae were shattered and the lower half of his body paralysed when his jeep hit a landmine. He was sent to Rome for treatment where he narrowly avoided two assassination attempts but substantially recovered.

Later that year he published *A Dying Colonialism*. It is a study of the Algerian Revolution which includes his hugely influential analysis of role of the veil and of radio in the Algerian struggle. In both cases he argued that culture was dynamic and could be transformed by struggles in which people stepped into history by individually and collectively assuming full responsibility for their destiny. *A Dying Colonialism* also included an important review of the colonial co-option of medicine and a chapter on the role of the European minority. This chapter, which Jean-Paul Sartre, published in *Les Temps Modernes* showed, through the use of case studies, that "Algeria's European minority is far from being the monolithic block that one imagines" and that some

Europeans had, even under severe torture, “behaved like authentic militants in the struggle for national independence.”

Fanon asked to be appointed as the FLN’s ambassador to Cuba but was instead, in 1960, appointed as Ambassador to Ghana. He survived another assassination attempt, this time in Liberia, before arriving in Ghana where he soon discovered that he had leukemia. He began treatment in Tunis and then moved to the Soviet Union where he had further treatment. His health improved enough for him to be able to return to Tunis early in 1961 where he threw himself into writing *The Wretched of the Earth*.

He took a short break from writing to travel to Rome where he met with Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir to discuss the introduction which Sartre had enthusiastically agreed to write for *The Wretched of the Earth*. Sartre and Fanon are reported to have spent 20 hours in a non-stop discussion. The book was completed in just 10 weeks and is written with an incandescent passion. It opens with an analysis of revolutionary violence. Fanon argues that colonialism is a system of systemic structural violence which eventually triggers a violent reaction. In his view the violent nature of that reaction is tragic but cathartic. Its catharsis lies in its ability to dissolve the inferiority complex of the colonised and to release the tension which has been inscribed in the body during a lifetime of oppression.

The second chapter deals with political spontaneity and is a critique of political parties and organisations. Fanon argues that African political parties have tended to model themselves on European structures, have a bias to the urban and are unable to speak to the rural peasantry. He suggests that in the colonial situation the urban proletariat is relatively privileged and that, as with the Mau Mau in Kenya, spontaneous rural uprisings are more likely than organised urban insurrections.

In *The Pitfalls of National Consciousness*, the celebrated third chapter, Fanon argues that the national bourgeois is under developed and alienated from the bulk of the population and will, in the name of nationalism, become the rapacious agent of western capital. He famously insists that “nationalism, that magnificent song that made the people rise up against their oppressors, stops short, falters and dies away on the day that independence is proclaimed. 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.” He also argues, in an exhilarating synthesis of soaring poetry, emotive polemic and devastatingly rigorous analysis, against the sacrifice of the rural to the voracious metropolitan ambitions of the urban; the leadership’s use of their cultural capital to convince their people that their vocation is “obey, to go on obeying and to be obedient till the end of time” and the degeneration of the once vibrant party into an organisation which serves “as a means of private advancement” for the bourgeoisie and merely delivers “to the people the instructions which issue from the summit”.

He writes with such an enabling and vital passion that readers hear their hearts beating faster and faster and feel goosebumps rising up from their taut flesh as they race, with

mounting excitement, through the book. And that excitement is grounded in a lot more than an intellectual recognition of wealth and value of Fanon's insights. It has its genesis in his implicit commitment to each human life as the sacred embodiment of a nameless but transcendent good. It's like a synthesis of Nietzschean vitalism and the egalitarianism hopes of Marxism. This commitment is so powerfully expressed that the mode of expression is, in itself, an ethical statement of the highest order and confirmation of his resolute insistence that it is criminally superficial to reduce political education to the making of long, pompous and technical speeches. Fanon urges that, on the contrary, "political education means opening their minds, awakening them, and allowing the birth of their intelligence; as Césaire said, it is 'to invent souls'. To educate the masses politically does not mean, cannot mean making a political speech. What it means is to try, relentlessly and passionately, to teach the masses that everything depends on them, that if we stagnate it is their responsibility, and that if we go forward it is due to them too...that there is no famous man who will take responsibility....that the magic hands are the hands of the people."

The fourth chapter deals with national culture and includes Fanon's nuanced attempt to think dialectically about the benefits and dangers of nationalism. He was aware that nationalism could help to heal damaged self esteem but he was equally aware that it could be used to legitimate new forms of oppression and that chauvinistic nationalism posed a great danger to progressive internationalism.

His conclusion, which has since been taken up by Edward Said, is that a genuine international consciousness can only be developed after working through a phase of restorative and grounding national consciousness. "National consciousness, which", he argued. "is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension."

The fifth chapter, *Colonial War and Mental Disorders*, is a powerful catalogue of case studies of colonialism's casualties. It is a valuable historical record for South African readers seeking to contemplate the depth and extent of the psychic damage wrought by apartheid

By the time Fanon completed *The Wretched of the Earth* his leukemia had worsened considerably. He finally took the advice of his Soviet Doctors and sought medical treatment in the USA. He arrived in Washington with his wife and son on 3 October 1961 and the CIA confined him to a hotel room where he was interrogated and denied access to medical treatment for 8 days. He was then admitted to a hospital where he finally received treatment and was able to look over the first publisher's proofs of *The Wretched of the Earth*. He died on 6 December 1961 with his wife and son at his side. He was 36.

His body was flown back to Tunisia and smuggled into Algeria where it was buried, in accordance with his wishes, at sunset in a shallow grave on a battlefield. Three months later Algeria achieved its independence and the Blida-Joinville Hospital was renamed the Frantz Fanon hospital. Algeria has, of course, descended into a state of permanent disaster rather than permanent revolution. But Fanon's life and work continues to inspire

from the prisons of America to the mountains of Mexico, the factory floors of South Africa and the Universities of the world.

Our ghost catcher would probably conclude that the graffiti and footnotes and poetic allusions she'd stumbled across were invoking the spirit of a man who is everywhere and nowhere. Everywhere because he has shaped us and predicted us and understood us but nowhere because he is too black and radical and foreign and urgent and we are too parochial, too comfortable in our gilded cages and too willing to invest our faith in The Party under The Leader under The Market.

The graffiti on the perimeter wall of Durban's first McDonalds was painted over in powder blue after a few days. Bunnychow never got past issue 7 and a cigarette advert was bolted over the graffiti in the Winston Pub. But once you've encountered Fanon's spirit you keep stumbling across it. It might be in one of Ashwin Desai's columns in the ever thinner local paper, in a tiny Philosophy class at one of the universities, in a trade unionist's impassioned attack on neo-liberalism or in a bleary eyed zol (marijuana) and sunrise fueled conversation at the end of a crumbling pier. It's always out there. Burning. Somewhere.

\*This story was first published in the Mail and Guardian ([www.mg.co.za](http://www.mg.co.za)) and then in Blu Magazine ([www.blumag.com](http://www.blumag.com))