Fanon's remarkable role in Africa’s movement towards independence is ably displayed by Leo Zeilig’s biography, *Frantz Fanon: The Militant Philosopher of Third World Revolution*. Fanon has been much written about; so the question is what would Zeilig add to the Fanon story, a veritable odyssey. Fanon has become such a prominent activist intellectual in the anti-colonial struggle that the following works, among others, should be noted: the biographies by David Caute (1970) and Irene Gendzier (1974), and the works of Renate Zahar (1969), Bulhan (1985), Sekyi-Out (1996), Alessandrini (1999), Lazarus (1999), Chekri (2000), Macey (2007), Ehlen (2001), Gibson (2011), Bird-Pollan (2014), Gordon (1995, 1996, 2015), and Mbembe (2016). In spite of the fact that Africa was the focus of his intellectual exertions and literally his battlefield as in the case of Algeria, his impact on Africa’s intellectual life has been rather muted. A likely explanation for that could be found in his prescient chapter in *The Wretched of the Earth*, ‘The Pitfalls of National Consciousness’. According to Fanon, at the dawn of African independence, a rapacious neocolonial comprador class would be fighting against the urban workers and peasants to step into the political vacuum created by the end of colonial rule to continue the exploitation of the masses. The end result would be that the ‘wretched of the earth’ remain wretched. On this basis, the works of Fanon have not become standard fare in the political science and history departments of Africa’s universities. Africa’s neocolonial comprador classes are not particularly interested in the development of Africa’s intellectual life. The same problematic is noted with regard to the works of Cheikh Anta Diop and Cheikh Anta Diop. Yet, the influence of Fanon has been so impressive...

**Frantz Fanon: Anti-colonial and Pan-African Revolutionary**

*Lansana Keita*

**Frantz Fanon – The Militant Philosopher of Third World Revolution**

by Leo Zeilig


led by Charles De Gaulle. Petainist rule was overcome while Fanon was in transit to France and he was sent back to Martinique. But the young idealistic Fanon was still fired up with the idea that the fight against Fascism was a worthy cause. From then onwards, Fanon began the intellectual trajectory that resulted in his struggle against French colonialism in Algeria and the production of revolutionary texts such as *Black Skin, White Masks, The Wretched of the Earth, Studies in a Dying Colonialism, and Toward an African Revolution*. Fanon was sent to North Africa as part of the Allies’ thrust against the German army. It was under such circumstances that his intuitive knowledge of race matured. First, he was drafted into a French army structure that followed certain principles of race. The racial hierarchy put the Black Skin, White Masks, The Wretched of the Earth, Studies in a Dying Colonialism, and Toward an African Revolution. Fanon was sent to North Africa as part of the Allies’ thrust against the German army. It was under such circumstances that his intuitive knowledge of race matured. First, he was drafted into a French army structure that followed certain principles of race. The racial hierarchy put the colonies in the intermediate position, with the lowest rung reserved for the French colonial subjects from Africa proper – especially West Africa and North Africa. At the same time, Fanon was able to note how ‘sociological race’ played its role in his military unit in Algeria and Morocco. As he put it: ‘the French do not like Jews, who do not like Arabs, who do not like Negroes [sic]’ (p. 26). It was under these circumstances that the intellectually precocious Fanon began to understand how the idea of race was played out phenomenologically. Fanon returned to Martinique after the war and obtained his baccalaureat, which meant that he would return to France for further studies. First, he began with dentistry in Paris, but eventually switched to medicine in Lyon. Two momentous events occurred after that in the year 1952. Fanon got married to Marie-Josèphe Duble, who became his intellectual partner; then he produced his *Black Skin, White Masks* – a veritable work on the phenomenology of race. Fanon was merely twenty seven years when this path-breaking work was produced – evident proof of his intellectual precocity.

Fanon was not just the medical doctor intellectual who read voraciously in all academic areas; he later branched off into the study of psychiatry. After graduation in 1951, Fanon began his medical career at Saint-Vlie hospital in the Jura which he began making copious notes on patients and their neuroses that he would later use in his books (p. 42). During this time Fanon became acquainted with the work of the not-yet-famous psychoanalyst, Lacan, and built up an intellectual relationship with Paul Valvet, director of the famous psychiatric hospital. So Anthony Zeilig informs us that ‘through Balvet, Fanon met Francois Torqueilles, who was now running St.Albans’ (p. 43). After Césaire, the anti-colonial poet of négritude, the older Fanon’s new role model was Francois Tosquettes. According to Zeilig, ‘Born in 1912 in Reus, Catalonia, Tosquettes had read Marx at an early age and supported Catalan nationalism in the 1930s. Trained in phenomenology and psychiatry at the Institut Père Mata in Barcelona, Tosquettes came into contact with refugees influenced by Sigmund Freud…. [and later] started to develop his own notions of “institutional psychotherapy”’ (p.43). It was this interaction with Tosquettes that influenced Fanon’s own views of patient-doctor interaction.

This approach to psychiatry was the model Fanon adopted when he was posted to Blida-Joinville, a small town not far from the Algerian capital of Algiers. Algeria was pure happenstance, but this move set the foundations for his remarkable revolutionary path. With the war having ended but with the evident weakening of France as a colonial power, the time was ripe for the colonials to fight for their own freedom. Fanon had the conviction that freeing France from German occupation also entailed freeing Algeria and colonial Africa from French colonialism. In this, he was in agreement with the French philosopher, J.P. Sartre, who wrote the preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*.

The end of World War II provided the backdrop for the continuation of the nascent anti-colonial movement in Algeria. Zeilig makes the following observation: ‘Though Algeria’s modern war of independence and national liberation is popularly seen as starting in 1954, the 1930s and 1940s were dominated by a number of...
different “constitutional” nationalist parties. A wave of working class militancy escalated throughout the war until 1945 (p. 50). Thus, Fanon was necessarily caught up in that anti-colonial struggle as it picked up pace after World War II. As a product of French colonialism, Fanon instinctively understood the basis and dynamics of the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria and other parts of Africa. Although the anti-colonial war in Algeria is popularly seen as the war of the FLN against the French in Algeria and other parts of Africa, the dynamics of the anti-colonial struggle as it picked up pace was necessarily caught up in that. Zeilig, ‘Members of Fanon’s staff were arrested and beaten, others joined in the FLN strike action or went to fight in the mountains’ (p. 98). Fanon continued his work, healing both revolutionary fighters and their assailants at Blida, but things eventually came to a head with widespread arrests being made. When he began receiving death threats and rumours that Blida was about to be raided, Fanon tendered his resignation. Zeilig informs us that ‘The ministre résident’s office formally expelled Fanon from Algerian territory in December 1957’ (p. 100). Fanon and his family quickly left Algeria, days before the hospital was raided.

Fanon then moved back to France, but given the urgency of the situation in Algeria, he and his family travelled to Tunisia. There he obtained work at the Hôpital de Manouba and continued his research and writings for the Algerian cause. He encountered a bit of Arab racism there but he shrugged it off and pushed on with his writings and psychiatric work. The indefatigable Fanon then took up work with another hospital, Hôpital Charles Nicolle. His activist work, as one of the editors of El Moudjahid, the revolutionary news outlet of the FLN, continued in Tunis. Fanon then took his ideas and his role in the Algerian revolution to the ANC-AFNC (National People’s Congress) Conference in Ghana in 1958. Fanon’s credentials as a full-fledged operative of the continental African anti-colonial struggle were enhanced with his central presence at the First Conference of Independent African States in Accra in 1958. Peaceful negotiations or anti-colonial war was the central debate of the day. At this conference Fanon found direct contact with the anti-colonial movements in the Portuguese territories such as Amílcar Cabral’s PAIGC (Guinea Bissau) and the MPLA and UPA of Angola. As an intellectual engaged, Fanon’s remarkable output now included highly significant and acclaimed works such as Peau Noire, Masques Blancs (Black Skin, White Masks), Les Désœuvrés de la Terre (The Wretched of the Earth), L’An V de la Révolution Algérienne (The Year V of the Algerian Revolution), and Pour la Révolution Africaine (For the African Revolution). By then, Fanon had met and conversed with important figures such as Patrice Lumumba and Kwame Nkrumah. But time was getting short for this meteor of activism and intellectual brilliance. Fanon was stricken with leukemia. He first sought treatment in the Soviet Union but eventually had to travel to the U.S. for further treatment. Fanon died in Bethesda, Maryland (U.S.A.), on December 6, 1961 – his last hours paradoxically monitored by a CIA officer, Ollie Iselin.

The above, in brief, represents the lived life of Fanon, the brilliant in actual movement of African peoples; the physical and intellectual resistance to colonialism. He was the first to overturn the subject-object phenomenological dialectic between an imposing Europe and an imposed – upon Africa. This was the meaning and significance of Peau Noire, Masques Blancs. The other classic work in this genre is Amilcar Cabral’s Les Désœuvrés de la Terre, which again focused on the subjective feelings and intuitions of Africa’s colonised subjects. The human response in reaction to dislocation and colonial oppression was often violence, as was eloquently portrayed in that text. Fanon, as a colonial subject of ‘France d’outre mer’, whose ancestors had been cargoed from Africa to the tiny island of Martinique for hard agricultural labour, had been transformed into the authentic voice for African liberation from colonial domination.

In the last chapter of his text titled ‘Legacies’, Zeilig presents what he views as the legacies of Fanon’s works and his life. The influence of Jean Paul Sartre, who wrote the Preface to The Wretched of the Earth, was outlined, but the most significant point mentioned by Zeilig and noted by others is that Fanon’s works is his prescient understanding of the psychology and dynamics of colonialism and its aftermath. Fanon’s legacies were not restricted just to Africa and France but also to North America, where the African-American population was fighting for its human and economic rights. Zeilig points this out with reference to the impact that Fanon’s writings had on the U.S. Black Panthers (p. 245).

The strong point of Zeilig’s biography is that he has offered the reader details about the life and careers of Fanon not generally known to those otherwise familiar with his ideas. Readers of Fanon have come to know him as a driven and committed activist and intellectual who slept little. For example, in a day-long meeting with Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, the discussion was finally put to an end by De Beauvoir who told Fanon ‘that Sartre needed his sleep, to which he characteristically replied, “I do not like people who limit themselves”. Fanon was a whirlwind of words and analysis’ (p. 228). Fanon packed into a short life of thirty-six years much more contributions to the human condition than other notable figures twice his age.

Fanon’s intellectual energy produced at the precocious age of twenty-seven the classic text Black Skin, White Masks, which could be seen as the first text in the colonial era on the phenomenology of race. How does an African feel internally when in actual interaction with Europeans and when in Europe? The issue is that while the colonial African, who has been exposed, as in Fanon’s case, to French culture, experiences no shock when visual contact is made with the French people in places like Martinique, in France, the colonial subject is quickly disabused of his/her false consciousness and is faced with ‘les Gaulois’. An African/black in motion on a Paris street is abruptly confronted with ‘Mama, see the Negro! I am frightened!’ (Black Skin, White Masks, hereafter BSUM, 112). But this appraisal of blacks was not unique to French society. As Fanon puts it: ‘Some ten years ago I was astonished to learn that the North Africans despised men of colour. It was absolutely impossible for me to make any contact with the local population. I left Africa and went back to France without having fathomed the reason for this hostility’ (BSWM, 103-103). In this singular text, Fanon soliloquises in anguished terms on the meaning of being black in an increasingly post-colonial world. His fall-back position in such a situation was always his humanistic stance that humans should be judged in evaluational terms a priori, as members of the human race. But a spurious history haunts the African as expressed by Fanon in this passage: ‘Face to face with the white man, the Negro has a past to legitimate; a vengeance to exact; face to face with the Negro, the contemporary white man feels the need to recall the times of “cannibalism” (BSWM, 225). Fanon’s universalist answer to this is that ‘The Negro, however sincere, is the slave of the past. Nonetheless, I am a man, and in this sense the Peloponnesian War is as much mine as the invention of the compass’ (BSWM, 225).

But in spite of Fanon’s idealistic approach to the human condition and human history, ‘it is going beyond the historical and is an exercise that I will initiate the cycle of my freedom. The disaster of the man of color lies in the fact that he was enslaved’ (BSWM, 231). It is this subordination to Europe, nourished from the seventeenth century onwards by a scientific racism, that presented
The goal was to transform the African quite seriously. A false consciousness in places like in biological terms, backward and was faced with the triple problem of in Fanon's psychiatric work both in, 151) as exemplified 'anxiety' as phobogenic object, a stimulus to his assumed physical superiority. The African as an evolutionary cultural inferiorisation of the African is on the basis of the biological and Martinique and St. Louis (Senegal), where the blackman was set on the path toward becoming a cultural evolution. France obviously took its mission civilisatrice quite seriously. The goal was to transform the African with all his ethnic trappings into a 'civilised black Frenchman'.

In this situation, where the African subaltern has to propose an antithesis to the dominant biological and cultural inferiority, Fanon had to grapple vigorously with Jacques Howlett, Michel Salomon, Michel Cournot, to name a few, and their confident views that the African/ black was all biology, the counterpoint being 'the Jew as calculating reason' – Europe's ego bounded on both sides by its African id and Jewish superego. In contrast to the responses by the Negritude writers, Césaire and Senghor, whose answer to the problematic of 'blackness' was to proclaim 'Hooray for those who have invented nothing. And blackness is sensuality while Europe represented reason', Fanon's retort was always to appeal to a universal humanity. He adopts a curiously ahistorical stance in this regard without noting that history is an important component in the development of human self-consciousness. The question is this: does the recognition of an African historical past in any way influence the consciousness of those living under conditions of oppression? Fanon writes: 'In no way should I dedicate myself to the revival of an unjustly unrecognised Negro civilization. I will not make myself a man of any past. I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of my present and my future' (BSWM, 226). Even though he would recognise an African intellectual past when brought to his attention, being 'very happy to know that a correspondence had flourished between some Negro philosopher and Plato. But I can absolutely not see how this fact would change anything in the lives of eight-year-old children who labour in the cane fields of Martinique or Guadeloupe' (BSWM, 230). Fanon could be in error here: it is on the basis of the biological and cultural inferiorisation of the African which the rise of specific racism that consciences were free to exploit the African for the benefits of a growing capitalism. Particular human identities were suppressed, to be replaced by the objectifying term 'negro'. Rehumanisation requires rectifying a human past as a means to revaluing the African qua human. It was this approach that was undertaken by Cheikh Anta Diop, and it has yielded some result.

Fanon argues that 'the disaster of the man of colour lies in the fact that he was enslaved'. This claim is, of course, problematic. Slavery was a universal phenomenon on all continents before the age of machines and technology. Ancient Greece and Rome were noted for their practice of slavery and, when Rome conquered most of Europe, the harvesting of slaves from the conquered territories was a normal practice. The tragedy of the African is that he/she is yet to recover from the psychological trauma of a specifically colonial and subaltern one. The subaltern colonial experience was not unique to the African continent. Yet, it must be noted that while Korea and Taiwan were harshly colonised by Japan, they have now fully recovered. Both countries are now economic powerhouses in terms of technological and industrial output.

Africa and its diaspora are now overcome with a quiet angst combined with a cultural anemia and atrophy. In this regard, BSWM is very much relevant for contemporary times. The superaltern-subaltern relationship still exists in subconscious racial terms. The existing 'black-white' mode of classification focusses on biology and not culture or geographical origin as the natural way of describing persons of African and European origin. With other groups such as East and South Asians this is not the case. Fanon wrote as much: 'What is important to us here is to show that with the Negro the cycle of the biological begins' (BSWM, 161). In this regard, Fanon's ideas and musings in BSWM are still relevant in the twenty-first century. The language that Europe imposed on Africa from the sixteenth century onward still traps the African principally at the level of the biological. The intellectual foundations for this are to be found in the various writings of writers such as Compte de Gobineau, Blumenbach, and Agassiz. The final assessment is that Fanon as psychiatrist was well equipped with the clinical tools to explore the concept of race not only at the material but also at the psychiatric level.

Fanon's skills as clinical analyst served him in good stead as he observed the psychological impact of colonialism, specifically on the Algerian psyche. Fanon’s text A Dying Colonialism (ADC) testifies to this. French colonialism effectively challenged the patriarchal structure of the Algerian family, leading to psychological stress on the part of the colonised. Fanon’s many case studies testify to this. The chapter 'Algeria Unveiled' explores the structure of Algeria’s patriarchal Muslim society, according to which the adult female plays a specific role first as daughter and then as wife. Fanon’s clinical analyses revealed the complexities of this situation. In this regard, colonialism can often be viewed as a form of 'creative destruction'. The following passage more or less sums up the dynamics of anti-colonialism: 'The veil was worn because tradition demanded a rigid separation of the sexes, but also because the occupier [was?] bent on unveling Algeria. In a second phase, the mutation occurred in connection with the Revolution and under special circumstances. The veil was abandoned in the course of revolutionary action' (ADC, 63).

It is Fanon’s final work, The Wretched of the Earth (WE), that establishes him, however, as arguably the major intellectual and activist for Africa’s anti-colonial struggle. The text deals essentially with the phenomenology of colonial domination. At some point in time, as Fanon observed, there will be rising violence. In Fanon’s language, the struggle is always that of the ‘native confronting the settler’. But within the anti-colonial struggle itself there is the internal problematic of the urban versus the rural. Fanon writes: ‘The overwhelming majority of nationalist parties show a deep distrust toward the people of rural areas. The fact is that as a body these people appear to be bogged down in a fruitless inertia’ (WE, 109). Yet the peasants have an important role to play given that they are often the most exploited of the colonised people (WE, 131).

A key argument of WE is expressed in the chapter titled ‘The Pitfalls of National Consciousness’, in which, in soothing fashion, Fanon intuits the aftermath of the anti-colonial struggle. National consciousness, rather than being the expression of the liberation of the people. Their role becomes a ‘crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been’ (WE, 148). For the new political ruling groups, ‘nationalization quite simply means the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are the legacy of the colonial period’ (WE, 152). This new bourgeoisie is of the parasitical comprador type whose ‘innermost conviction seems to be to keep on running and to be part of the racket’ (WE, 150). Fanon’s prescient analysis points to the genesis of the political and economic problems now plaguing Africa. Bourgeois nationalism then seeks to protect its class interests by forging a neocolonial pact with the erstwhile coloniser. This is the genesis of what is commonly known as ‘neocolonialism’. In its scramble to garner the trinkets, baubles, and luxury items of Euro-Asian capitalism, ethnic and faith-religious factors – already exploited by colonialism – are brought into the neocolonial equation. Under such circumstances, a form of thinking or thinking for development. Africa is still mired in underdevelopment, trapped as it is in the negative aspects of Ricardian comparative advantage. The negative aspects of such a state of affairs have been amply explored by Erik Reinert (2007) in his text How Rich Nations Got Rich and Why Poor Nations Stay Poor. In an atmosphere of globalisation, the Ricardian comparative advantage mantra translates into the cheap agricultural goods produced by Africa’s workers and peasants being exported and exchanged for the finished technologically produced goods for the urban classes that could afford them. The perennial question ever since France’s independence has been how to break through Africa’s present political and economic impasse. The details of such a situation are clearly expressed in the UNDP’s annual Human Development Index metrics, where most nations of Africa occupy the tier of the least developed countries.

The root cause of the present stasis of underdevelopment lies with Fanon’s post-colonial bourgeoisie, which in cynical fashion has excised from Africa’s memory bank the purveyors of the ideas that set in motion the anti-colonial struggle. These individuals paid the ultimate sacrifice for the anti-colonial cause. Mostly forgotten are the names of Lumumba, Moumie, Mondlane, Cabral, and others. There are also neocolonial centripetal forces that are always on the alert to extirpate attempts to break free from the present impasse. The fates of the late Thomas Sankara and Muammar Gaddafi testify to this. Yet it is authors like Leo Zeilig who, more than fifty years after Fanon’s death, continue to recognise the significance of the singularity of his activist and intellectual life. Zeilig’s biography of Fanon is more than worth the read.

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