

The Legacy of Frantz Fanon

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March 13, 2015 by [Hamza Hamouchene](#)
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Frantz Fanon died a few months before Algeria's independence in July 1962. He did not live to see his adoptive country becoming free from French colonial domination, something he believed had become inevitable. This radical intellectual and revolutionary devoted himself, body and soul to the Algerian National liberation and was a prism, through which many revolutionaries abroad understood Algeria and one of the reasons the country became synonymous with Third World revolution.

With the weight of its recent past and in particular its long struggle for independence that served as a model for several liberation fronts across the globe and given its assertive diplomacy and audacious foreign policy in the 60s and 70s, the Algerian capital was to become a Mecca for all revolutionaries. As Amilcar Cabral announced at a press conference at the margins of the first Pan-African Festival held in Algiers on 1969: "Pick a pen and take note: the Muslims make the pilgrimage to Mecca, the Christians to the Vatican and the national liberation movements to Algiers!" Fanon would have been surely proud of that moment of Algeria's and Africa's history. The festival was impregnated with a revolutionary fervour and with his ideas around a combative culture that is fuelled by people's daily struggles. The radical atmosphere of a few days in July was captured in an important and powerful film by William Klein: [The Pan-African Festival of Algiers, 1969](#), which attests that this Pan-African gathering was not only a slogan or a generous utopia but also a genuine meeting of African cultures in unison in their denunciations of colonialism and fight for freedom.

Political leaders like António Agostinho Neto and Cabral saw culture at the heart of their concerns because they associated it with liberation which they theorised as a form of political action. They strongly echo Fanon's words in [The Wretched of the Earth](#): "A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions, that is to say actions which are less and less attached to the ever-present reality of the people....It is around the people's struggles that African-Negro culture takes on substance and not around songs, poems or folklore." [i]

It is worth bearing this in mind when we think about the role and the conception of culture today. Is it simply a culture that entertains people and diverts them from the real issues? Or is it a culture that speaks to the people and advances their resistance and struggles? Is it an

independent and free culture that fosters dissent and criticism or is it a folkloric one that comes under the suffocating patronage of some authoritarian elites?

Fanon had high hopes and strongly believed in revolutionary Algeria and his illuminating book “*Studies in a Dying Colonialism*” (or as it is known in French *L’An Cinq de la Révolution Algérienne*) attests to that and shows how liberation does not come as a gift. It is seized by the masses with their own hands and by seizing it they themselves are transformed. He strongly argued that for the masses, the most elevated form of culture, that is to say, of progress, is to resist imperialist domination and penetration. For Fanon, revolution is a transformative process that will create ‘new souls’. [ii] For this reason Fanon closes his 1959 book with the words: ‘The revolution in depth, the true one, precisely because it changes man and renews society, has reached an advanced stage. This oxygen which creates and shapes a new humanity – this, too, is the Algerian revolution.’ [iii]

Fanon’s concern with what the masses do and say and think and his belief that it is the masses, and not leaders nor systems, who make and determine history, is at the centre stage in his books. It is crucial to analyse Fanon’s testimony because it illustrates how, in the midst of the worst disasters, the masses find the means of reorganising themselves and continuing their existence when they have a common objective. In that respect, Fanon’s descriptions of the conduct of the masses is of great importance as they show how the masses go on living and how they go forward. [iv]

This focus and vivid attachment to the wretched of the earth, their lives and their struggle is put in opposition to an instinctive aversion to a national bourgeoisie that will betray the masses, halt liberation and set-up a national system of tyranny and exploitation, reminiscent of the colonial counterpart. Fanon rightly observed how nationalist consciousness can very easily lead to ‘frozen rigidity’, merely replacing the departed white masters with coloured equivalents.

Understanding Africa: Fanon today

More than five decades after his death, the question seems to be: why Fanon is relevant now? Rather than, is he relevant at all? It would be instructive to explore how this revolutionary would think and act in the face of contemporary issues in Africa and the world.

Fanon’s work, written five decades ago still bears a prophetic power as an accurate description of what happened in Algeria and beyond. Reading Fanon’s words and especially ‘The Pitfalls of National Consciousness’ his famous chapter in *The Wretched of the Earth* (based on his reflections on his West African experiences as well as his concerns about the Algerian revolution), [v] one cannot help being absorbed and shaken by their truth and foresight on the bankruptcy and sterility of national bourgeoisies in Africa and the Middle East today; bourgeoisies that tended to replace the colonial force with a new class-based system replicating the old colonial structures of exploitation and oppression. Today we can

see states across the formerly colonised world that have ‘bred pathologies of power’ as Eqbal Ahmad has called them, giving rise to national security states, to dictatorships, oligarchies and one-party systems. [vi]

What has become of Algeria today with oil money playing an enormously important role in pacifying the population and paying for a bloated and ubiquitous security force corresponds to what Fanon feared. His vision and politics were and are not to the taste of the ruling class and that’s why he is marginalised today and reduced to just another anti-colonial figure, stripped of his incandescent attack on the stupidity and on the intellectual and spiritual poverty of the national bourgeoisies.

As Edward Said argued, the true prophetic genius of *The Wretched of the Earth* is when Fanon senses the divide between the nationalist bourgeoisie in Algeria and the FLN’s liberationist tendencies. He was the first major theorist of anti-imperialism to realise that orthodox nationalism followed the same track hewn out by imperialism, which while it appeared to concede authority to the nationalist bourgeoisie was really extending its hegemony.[vii] Fanon put it to us bluntly: ‘History teaches clearly that the battle against colonialism does not run straight away along the lines of nationalism.’[viii] He then warns us that we must take a rapid step from national consciousness to political and social consciousness if we really wish our countries to avoid regression and uncertainties.

In this state of affairs the national bourgeoisie dispense with popular legitimacy and turns its back more and more on the interior and the realities of uneven development and is only interested in exporting the enormous profits it derives from the exploitation of people to foreign countries. Today’s events confirm this assertion as we can see a scandalous and endemic corruption and ‘legalised’ robbery in Algeria, Nigeria, Egypt, Ben Ali’s Tunisia and South Africa, only to mention a few.

In Algeria for example, an anti-national, sterile and unproductive bourgeoisie is getting the upper-hand in running state affairs and in directing its economic choices. This comprador elite is the biggest threat to the sovereignty of the nation as it is selling off the economy to foreign capitals and multinationals and cooperating with imperialism in its ‘war on terror’, another pretext for expanding the domination and scrambling for resources.[ix] It is a bourgeoisie that renounced the autonomous development project initiated in the 1960s and 1970s, and as Fanon eloquently put it is ‘incapable of great ideas and inventiveness and does not even succeed in extracting spectacular concessions from the West, such as investments which would be of value for the country’s economy.’[x] In the contrary, it now offers one concession after another for blind privatisations and projects that will undermine the country’s sovereignty and will endanger its population and environment – the exploitation of shale gas for example.[xi] Today, Algeria – but also Tunisia, Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana, Gabon, Angola and South Africa among others – follows the dictates of the new instruments of imperialism such as the IMF, the World Bank and negotiates entry into the World Trade Organisation. Other African countries are still using the CFA franc, a currency inherited from

the times of colonialism and still under the control of the French Treasury. Fanon would have been revolted at this *bêtise* and sheer mindlessness. How can we go on being submissive to imperialism bowing to every folly to satisfy foreign capital?

Fanon had predicted this ominous situation and the shocking behaviour of the national bourgeoisie when he noted that its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation but rather consists of 'being the transmission line between the nation and capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the masque of neo-colonialism.'^[xii] This is where we can appreciate the lasting value of employing Fanon's critical insights when he describes for us the contemporary postcolonial reality, a reality shaped by a national bourgeoisie 'unabashedly...anti-national,' opting he adds, for an abhorrent path of a conventional bourgeoisie, 'a bourgeoisie which is stupidly, contemptibly and cynically bourgeois.'^[xiii]

That is exactly what happened in Algeria and other countries in Africa. These regimes are content with the role as the Western capitals' business agent and are only preoccupied with filling their pockets as rapidly as possible, ignoring the deplorable stagnation into which their countries sink further and deeper. Fanon would have been shocked by the ongoing international division of labour where we Africans 'still export raw materials and continue 'being Europe's small farmers who specialise in unfinished products.'^[xiv]

Fanon's critique of tourism, which he regarded as a quintessential post-colonial industry, must be revisited and pondered over. He condemns the fact that nationalist elites have become 'the organisers of parties' for their Western counterparts in the midst of overwhelming poverty for their populations. Bereft of ideas and cut off the people, these elites he argues, will in practice set up their countries as 'the brothel of Europe.'^[xv] This is not just a Caribbean experience; it has become the experience of many countries in Africa such as post-apartheid South Africa, Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco.

In these poor, under-developed countries, where the rule is that the greatest wealth is surrounded by the greatest poverty, the army and the police constitute the pillars of the regime; an army and a police force (another rule which must not be forgotten) which are advised by foreign experts. The strength of the police and the power of the army are proportionate to the stagnation in which the rest of the nation is sunk. By dint of yearly loans, concessions are snatched up by foreigners; scandals are numerous, ministers grow rich, their wives doll themselves up, the members of parliament feather their nests and there is not a soul down to the simple policeman or the customs officer who does not join in the great procession of corruption.
^[xvi]

This raging passage from *The Wretched* is a fairly accurate portrayal of the situation in many African countries where repression and suppression of freedoms are the rule – helped of course by foreign expertise – and where greedy elites institutionalise corruption and serve foreign interests.

Fanon was one of only a few radical intellectuals to point out the dangers of a ‘carefully nurtured’ nativism, to borrow Edward Said’s words, on a socio-political movement like decolonisation.[xvii] From nationalism, we pass to ultra-nationalism, then to chauvinism and finally to racism and tribalism. This is seen in several exclusionary and dogmatic ideologies like Arabism, Senghor’s Négritude, and the appeals to pure or authentic Islam, which had disastrous consequences on the populations. Again take the example of Algeria, where cultural diversity was ignored for a narrower culturalist conception of Algerian identity, when the Berber dimension of the Algerian cultural heritage was marginalised and reduced to folkloric manifestations, when the elite engaged in a sclerotic arabisation policy, when it developed a conservative interpretation of religion and a reactionary vision of the role of women in society by adopting Islamist-appeasing social measures such as the notorious and retrograde Family Code of 1984.

Edward Said noted that more effort seemed to be spent in bolstering the idea that to be Syrian, Iraqi, Egyptian, or Saudi is a sufficient end, rather than in thinking critically, even audaciously about the national program itself.[xviii] Identity politics assumes the primary place, and ‘African unity takes off the mask and crumbles into regionalism inside the hollow shell of nationalism itself.’[xix] Fanon argued for going beyond the first steps of nativist assertive identity towards true liberation that involves a transformation of social consciousness beyond national consciousness.[xx]

Fanon’s vision of the future Algeria, which he shared with his mentor Abane Ramdane, the architect of the revolution, was a secular democratic society with the primacy of citizenship over identities (Arab, Amazigh, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, European, White, Black, etc): ‘in the new society that is being built,’ Fanon wrote in *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, ‘there are only Algerians. From the outset, therefore, every individual living in Algeria is an Algerian... We want an Algeria open to all, in which every kind of genius can grow.’[xxi] He did not forget the role of women in the new society when he said that every effort has to be made to mobilise men and women as quickly as possible and admonished against ‘the danger of perpetuating the feudal tradition which holds sacred the superiority of the masculine element over the feminine.’ [xxii] Fanon demonstrated in an essay he wrote in his 1959 book entitled ‘*Algeria Unveiled*’ how women were essential elements in the Algerian revolution and how the necessities of combat gave rise to new attitudes and new modes; ‘the virtually taboo character assumed by the veil in the colonial situation disappeared almost entirely in the course of the liberating struggle.’ [xxiii]

Alternatives: A second Fanonian moment?

Alas, such a generous vision of a pluralist society is yet to be achieved and this is the second Fanonian moment of decolonisation, a moment that breaks away with the hierarchies, divisions and regionalisms constituted by imperialism by embracing a universal humanism (that will include men and women), and by building regional and international solidarities.

The sad contemporary reality that Fanon described and warned against five decades ago gives little doubt that were he alive today, Fanon would be hugely disappointed at the result of his efforts and those of other revolutionaries. He turned out to be right about the rapacity and divisiveness of national bourgeoisies and the limits of conventional nationalism but he did not offer us a prescription for making the transition after decolonisation to a new liberating political order. Perhaps, there is no such thing as a detailed plan or solution. Perhaps he viewed it as a protracted process that will be informed by praxis and above all by confidence in the masses and their revolutionary potential in figuring out the liberating alternative.

However, Fanon alerts us that the scandalous enrichment of this profiteering caste will be accompanied by ‘a decisive awakening on the part of the people and a growing awareness that promised stormy days to come.’^[xxiv] So we can see Fanon’s rationality of revolt and rebellion, suddenly made absolutely clear by the Arab uprisings in 2011. What has started in Tunisia and then Egypt’s Tahrir Square has become a new global revolt, spreading to Spain and the Indignados movement, to Athens against the vicious austerity measures, to the urban revolt in the UK, to the massive student mobilisation to end education for profit in Chile, to the Occupy movement against the 1%, to the revolt in Turkey, Brazil and so on. The popular masses in all these countries rebelled against the violence of the contemporary world offering them only growing pauperisation, marginalisation and the enrichment of the few at the expense and damnation of the majority.

Countries like Egypt and Tunisia were long praised for the ‘wonderful’ achievements of their economies with high economic growths that do not reflect at all the abject poverty and the deep inequalities entrenched in those countries. The masses erupted into the political scene, discovered their political will and power and beginning again to make history. As the Egyptians said of January 25th, the start of their revolution, ‘When we stopped being afraid, we knew we would win. We will not again allow ourselves to be scared of a government. This is the revolution in our country, the revolution in our minds.’^[xxv] Egyptians and Tunisians did not only revolt to demand democracy and freedom but they rebelled for bread and dignity, against the oppressive socio-economic conditions under which they lived for decades. They rose up to challenge the Manichean geographies of oppressor and oppressed (so well described by Fanon in *The Wretched*), geographies imposed on them by the globalised capitalist-imperialist system.

What can Fanon tell us about what happened in Egypt since 2011 with the military coup and the undergoing counter-revolution? Fanon would probably say: ‘The bourgeoisie should not be allowed to find the conditions necessary for its existence and its growth. In other words, the combined effort of the masses led by a party and of intellectuals who are highly conscious and armed with revolutionary principles ought to bar the way to this useless and harmful middle class.’^[xxvi] Liberals, Islamists or military Generals, what’s the difference? All of them belong to a sterile bourgeoisie aligned with the demand of global neoliberal capitalism.

Fanon would also repeat to us an important observation he made on some African revolutions (including the Algerian one), which is their unifying character sidelining any thinking of a socio-political ideology on how to radically transform society. This is a great weakness that we witnessed yet again with the Egyptian revolution. ‘Nationalism is not a political doctrine, nor a programme’, says Fanon.[[xxvii](#)] He insists on the necessity of a revolutionary political party that can take the demands of the masses forward, a political party that will educate the people politically, that will be ‘a tool in the hands of the people’ and that will be the energetic spokesman and the ‘incorruptible defender of the masses.’ For Fanon, reaching such a conception of a party necessitates first of all ridding ourselves of the bourgeois notion of elitism and ‘the contemptuous attitude that the masses are incapable of governing themselves.’[[xxviii](#)]

For Fanon, the “we” was always a creative “we”, a “we” of political action and praxis, thinking and reasoning. [[xxix](#)] For him, the nation does not exist except in a socio-political and economic program ‘worked out by revolutionary leaders and taken up with full understanding and enthusiasm by the masses.’[[xxx](#)] Unfortunately, what we see today is the antithesis of what Fanon strongly argued for. We see the stupidity of the anti-democratic bourgeoisies embodied in their tribal and family dictatorships, banning the people, often with crude force from participating in their country’s development and fostering a climate of immense hostility between rulers and ruled. Fanon, in his conclusion of *The Wretched*, argues that we have to work out new concepts through an ongoing political education that gets enriched through mass struggle. Political education for him is not merely about political speeches but rather about ‘opening the minds’ of the people, ‘awakening them, and allowing the birth of their intelligence.’[[xxxi](#)]

This is perhaps one of the greatest legacies of Fanon. His radical and generous vision is so refreshing and rooted in the people’s daily struggles that open up spaces for new ideas and imaginings. For him, everything depends on the masses, hence his idea of radical intellectuals engaged in and with people’s movements and capable of coming up with new concepts in a non-technical and non-professional language. Just as for Fanon, culture has to become a fighting culture, education has to become about total liberation too. He says, ‘If nationalism is not made explicit, if it is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words into humanism, it leads up a blind alley.’ [[xxxii](#)] And that’s what we need to bear in mind when we talk about education in schools and universities. Decolonial education in the Fanonian sense is an education that helps create a social consciousness and a social individual.

For Fanon, the militant or the intellectual must not take shortcuts in the name of getting things done as this is inhuman and sterile. It is all about coming and thinking together, which is the foundation of the liberated society. And this is not only abstraction as he gives us concrete examples from the Algerian revolution, writing of how the creation of production/consumption committees among the peasants and FLN gave rise to theoretical questions about the accumulation of capital: ‘In those regions where we have been able to

carry out successfully these interesting experiments, where we have watched man being created by revolutionary beginnings', because people began to realise that one works more with one's brain and one's heart than with one's muscles and sweat. [xxxiii] He also tells us about another experience in *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* in an essay on the radio, 'the voice of Algeria.' [xxxiv] He describes a meeting in a room where people are listening to the radio with the militant (teacher) in their midst. This form of the classroom he wrote about is a democratic space where the teacher is an informed discussant, not a director and where the purpose of political education is self-empowerment.

An intellectual or a militant cannot be truly productive in their mission of serving the people without being committed to radical change, without giving up the position of privilege (careerism) and without challenging the divisions that prevail under capitalism: leader vs. the masses, mental vs. manual labour, urban vs. rural, centre vs. periphery and so on. For Fanon, the centre (capital city, official culture, appointed leader) must be deconsecrated and demystified. He argues for a new system of mobile relationships that must replace the hierarchies inherited from imperialism. [xxxv] In order to achieve liberation, the consciousness of self, a never-ending process of discovery, empathy, encouragement and communication with the other must be unleashed. That is one of the fundamental lessons that we must heed when we build grass root social movements that are diverse, non-hierarchical and intersectional.

Fanon was not a Marxist but he strongly believed that capitalism with imperialism and its divisions enslave people. Moreover, his precocious diagnosis of the incapability of the nationalist elites in fulfilling their historical mission demonstrates the continuing relevance of Fanon's thought today. In spite of his own failure -his early death at the age of 36 might be to blame here- to put forward a detailed ideology of how to go beyond imperialism and orthodox nationalism and achieve liberation and universalism, he surely managed to provide us with crucial tools to work it out for ourselves: his illuminating conception of education always influenced by practice and also transformative, striving to liberate all mankind from imperialism. This is the living legacy of a revolutionary and a great thinker.

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Notes.

[i] *The Wretched of The Earth*, Frantz Fanon, Penguin, 1967, p188-189.

[ii] The phrase 'new souls' was borrowed from Aimé Césaire.

[iii] *A Dying Colonialism*, Frantz Fanon, Grove Press, 1967, p181.

[iv] A deeper analysis is provided in "A Dying Colonialism".

[v] The Pitfalls of National Consciousness, Chapter in *The Wretched of the Earth*, p119-165

[vi] The Neo-Fascist State: Notes on the Pathology of Power in the Third World, Eqbal Ahmad, Arab Studies Quarterly 3, No.2 (Spring 1981), p170-180.

[vii] Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism, Vintage, 1994, p328.

[viii] The Wretched of The Earth, Fanon, p119.

[ix] Is Algeria an Anti-Imperialist State, Hamza Hamouchene, Jadaliyya, October 2013.

[x] The Wretched of The Earth, Fanon, p141.

[xi] Algeria, an Immense Bazaar: The Politics and Economic Consequences of Infitah, Hamza Hamouchene, Jadaliyya, January 2013.

[xii] The Wretched of The Earth, Fanon, p122.

[xiii] Ibid, p121.

[xiv] Ibid, p122.

[xv] Ibid, p123.

[xvi] Ibid, p138.

[xvii] Culture and Imperialism, Edward Said, p371.

[xviii] Ibid, p361-362.

[xix] The Wretched of The Earth, Fanon, p128.

[xx] Ibid, p165.

[xxi] A Dying Colonialism, p32 and p152.

[xxii] The Wretched of The Earth, p163.

[xxiii] A Dying Colonialism, Frantz Fanon, 1967, p61.

[xxiv] The Wretched of The Earth, p134.

[xxv] A quote by Ahmad Mahmoud in an article by the Guardian, "Mubarak is still here, but there's been a revolution in our minds, say protesters", Chris McGreal, 5th Feb 2011.

[xxvi] The Wretched of The Earth, Fanon, p140.

[xxvii] Ibid, p163.

[xxviii] Ibid, p151.

[xxix] 50 Years Later: Fanon's Legacy, Nigel C Gibson, Keynote address at the Caribbean Symposium Series "50 Years Later: Frantz Fanon's Legacy to the Caribbean and the Bahamas, December 2011.

[xxx] The Wretched of The Earth, Fanon, p164.

[xxxi] Ibid, p159.

[xxxii] Ibid, p165.

[xxxiii] The Wretched Of The Earth, Fanon, p154.

[xxxiv] A Dying Colonialism, Fanon, p69-97

[xxxv] Culture and Imperialism, Edward Said, p330.