

On the 90th Anniversary of Frantz Fanon: Understanding the Relations of Power Beyond the *Colonial*

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Today Frantz Fanon (1925–1961) has been awarded recognition by scholars from the sphere of post-colonial studies for the originality of his thinking, his vision of the future, and the discursive courage of his perspective on colonization. In his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, whose history and exchange of ideas were linked with perhaps the greatest French intellectual of the day, Jean-Paul Sartre, made it more visible than *Black Skin, White Masks*, his first book written when he was 25 years old. Fanon's brilliant ability to analyze the colonized world, through the colonized man's point of view and his foresight, made him one of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century. The aim of this paper is to explore the historical significance and the theoretical and political strength of Fanon's thought today and the seminal paths of his work in post-colonial studies.

Keywords: power relations, postcolonial studies legacy, contemporary perspectives

Introduction

On December 6, 1961,¹ Franz Fanon died in Maryland, Washington.² He had learned the year before in Tunis that he was suffering from leukemia and would have less than a year to live. Even so, he set himself to work so that he would be able to finish the book he was busy writing, *The Wretched of the Earth*, which he wrote between April and June 1961 in “a feverish spurt” to use the words of Homi Bhabha³ and he lived long enough to see it published. He died a few days later at the age of 36, seven months before Algeria's Independence was proclaimed (July 5, 1962). For eight long years, Algeria, his adoptive country where he arrived in 1953⁴ (and was to be expelled from in 1957), had fought a war of liberation that had cut down hundreds of thousands of human lives.

Who is Frantz Fanon and why is he so celebrated today, over 50 years after his death?

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¹ The date of Fanon's death is one of the “quandaries” appearing in his numerous biographies: Three dates have been given: December 5, December 6, and December 8. However, there seems to be general agreement (owing to the predominance of the date) that his death occurred on December 6, 1961. This is the date that appears in one of the most complete and concise biographical notes about Franz Fanon recently published by Giovanni Pirellia and Rachel E. Love, who consulted with the Fanon Family, his wife, and his brother Joby, several colleagues (from his high school, university, military life, professional life, and so on), as regards the various stages in his life. See <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2014.993680>.

² Fanon was hospitalized at the National Institutes of Health, in Bethesda, Maryland, against his wishes according to some of his biographers because it did not please him at all to have to resort to that “country of lynchings”. Ironically, Fanon, who had checked himself in as Ibrahim Fanon, was evacuated by airplane made available to him by the United States Embassy in Tunis.

³ “In a feverish spurt”. Homi Bhabha, “Foreword: Framing Fanon”. Henceforth all references to this book will appear next to the citation in the abbreviation WE together with the page number.

⁴ Frantz Fanon arrived in Algeria as a psychiatrist and was given a job at the Blida Hospital which, today, is called “Hôpital Psychiatrique Frantz Fanon” in tribute to this great figure in recent Algerian history.

Frantz Fanon: The Paths of a Rebellious Intellectual

O my body, make me always a man who questions!

(Last words in Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*)

Frantz Omar Fanon was born on June 20, 1925 on the island of Martinique into a numerous middle-class family whose eight children were lucky enough to attend high school. Although Fanon was much younger than his compatriot Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), it was while he was at high school that as a student, Fanon got to know Césaire and became friendly with the ideologue of *négritude* and a poet, playwright, and essayist. Césaire also pursued a political career as a member of parliament at the French National Assembly for the constituency of Martinique and was the Mayor of Fort-de-France (he was to withdraw from public life in 2001). Fanon admired this intellectual champion of African roots bespeaking Antillean identity. Césaire was already a public figure on the island above all when, in 1934, he founded *L'étudiant noir* in Paris and the magazine *Tropiques* after his return home. Despite his admiration for his former teacher (he even helped in Césaire's election campaign that won the latter a seat in the French Parliament), Fanon would later disagree with the author of *Discourse on Colonialism* (that Fanon had confessed to appreciating to such an extent that he chose to quote from it in the epigraph to his first book *Black Skin, White Masks*) when years later, Césaire endorsed the policy to make Martinique a *département d'outre-mer*—an overseas department of France (likewise applied to the other islands in the “French Caribbean” and to Reunion island off the east coast of Africa). Césaire himself was the new law's rapporteur in 1946. The differences between them were to become more marked when Césaire campaigned for the “yes” vote in the referendum favoring *départementalization* that was organized by General de Gaulle in 1958. Fanon also disagreed with the assumptions made by *négritude* which he considered to be a “mirage”; right from the start, he was to stubbornly question the two metaphysics, white and black, perceiving that they were often very destructive⁵ and he criticized what he thought were the pains that his black contemporaries went to, to prove to the white world, cost what may, the existence of a black civilization⁶ (BSWM, 1986, 2008, p. 22). Further on, he was to say:

In fact, negritude appears as the minor term of a dialectical progression: The theoretical and practical assertion of the supremacy of the white man is its thesis; the position of negritude as an antithetical value is the moment of negativity.⁷

What we have here is a subject close to Fanon's heart—although not from the point of view of the African intellectuals in the British colonies, summed up in Wole Soyinka's metaphor of *tigritude* that makes a perverse play on *négritude*. For Fanon, *négritude* was the result of interiorizing the system of domination because it worked as an “emotional (...) antithesis of that insult which the white man had leveled at the rest of humanity” (WE, 2004, p. 150).⁸ Furthermore:

This negritude, hurled against the contempt of the white man, has alone proved capable in some sectors of lifting taboos and maledictions. Because the Kenyan and Guinean intellectuals were above all confronted with a generalized ostracism and the syncretic contempt of the colonizer, their reaction was one of self-regard and celebration. Following the unconditional affirmation of European culture came the unconditional affirmation of African culture. Generally speaking

⁵ Frantz Fanon. (1986, 2008). *Black Skin, White Masks* (p. 4). Henceforth all references to this book will appear next to the citation in the abbreviation BSWM together with the page number.

⁶ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 22.

⁷ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 101.

⁸ Frantz Fanon. (2004). *The Wretched of the Earth* (p. 150).

the bards of negritude would contrast old Europe with young Africa, dull reason versus poetry, and stifling logic versus exuberant Nature; on the one side stood rigidity, ceremony, protocol and skepticism, and on the other, naiveté, petulance, freedom and, indeed, luxuriance. But also irresponsibility.⁹

Fanon had grown up in such a stimulating intellectual and political environment (apart from Césaire, at the time, Martinique was the stage hosting cultural and political activities performed by intellectuals such as René Ménénil, Georges Gratiant, Thélus Léro, or Léopold Bissol), that at 17 years of age, when Martinique was already under the German yoke, he managed to get to the island of Dominique which was then a British colony, and join the Allied Forces fighting against Nazi Germany. Fanon was sent to the North of Africa (Morocco and Algeria) and to France (on various fronts). This was the time when Algerian nationalism was just beginning to convince itself about the merits of launching an unlikely dialogue with the colonial authorities with a view to independence despite the “promise” of its emancipation from the metropolis in the event that the Algerians helped in the war effort to free France occupied by Nazi Germany.¹⁰ This mission in Africa, in which the young soldier witnessed the other facet of colonial racism that differed from the kind of discrimination he had experienced in Martinique, the country of his birth, was to leave an indelible mark on Frantz Fanon’s journey through life. After all, he had just come through a doubly difficult experience, colonialism and Nazism, and his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) emerged out of this painful experience:

As a schoolboy, I had many occasions to spend whole hours talking about the supposed customs of the savage Senegalese. In what was said there was a lack of awareness that was at the very least paradoxical. Because the Antillean does not think of himself as a black man; he thinks of himself as an Antillean. The Negro lives in Africa. Subjectively, intellectually, the Antillean conducts himself like a white man. But he is a Negro. That he will learn once he goes to Europe; and when he hears Negroes mentioned he will recognize that the word includes himself as well as the Senegalese. What are we to conclude on this matter?¹¹

His encounter with the cold reality of metropolitan France was to weave the fabric of his experience of discrimination. Indeed, after the war and because he had fought in it, in 1946 Fanon was awarded a scholarship and he left for France where he enrolled in medicine specializing in dentistry, only to change to psychiatry. He finished his degree in 1951 in Lyon, with a thesis about “Mental disorders and psychiatric syndromes in hereditary Spinocerebellar Ataxia: Case study of a patient suffering from Friedrich’s ataxia with delirium of possession”.¹² This was the second thesis he submitted as the first one had been refused owing to the fierce criticism the young doctor had made of positivist psychiatry, suggesting, rather, that institutional psychotherapy be undertaken involving the community—a procedure favored by Fanon’s teacher, the Spanish psychiatrist François Tosquelles, who had supervised Fanon’s first published articles on psychiatry. The topic showed that from early on, Fanon was interested in the mental traumas and disturbances that he had seen in North Africa and this had driven him to produce numerous papers about psychiatry that he published in specialized magazines between 1951 and 1959 in France, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco.¹³

⁹ Idem, *ibidem*, pp. 150, 151.

¹⁰ See for example, Arthur Jose Poerner. (1966). *Argélia: o caminho da independência*.

¹¹ Frantz Fanon. (2004). *Black Skin, White Masks* (p. 114).

¹² A free translation of the original French title: “Troubles mentaux et syndromes psychiatriques dans l’hérédodégénérescence spino-cérébelleuse: un cas de malade de Friedrich avec délire de possession”.

¹³ Claudine Razanajao & Jacques Postel. (2007). La vie et l’œuvre psychiatrique de Frantz Fanon. *Sud/Nord*, 22, 147-174.

Fanon's "Legacies" to Post-colonial Studies

Therefore, although the past history of the expression "the wretched of the earth" obviously comes from the first few lines of the anthem *L'Internationale* ("*Debout, les damnés de la terre/Debout, les forçats de la faim*"¹⁴), I believe that Frantz Fanon's choice of title (and not the choice of the publishers as happened in his other books) was in fact taken from a line in the poem "Sales nègres" in the book *Bois d'ébène* (1945) by Jacques Roumain (1907–1944), a Haitian poet and founder of the Haiti Communist Party who, together with Nicolás Guillén, became one of the references of the Caribbean Négrism aesthetic ideology, one of the cornerstones of negritude.¹⁵

(...)
 Et nous voici debout
 tous *les damnés de la terre*
 tous les justiciers
 marchant à l'assaut de vos casernes
 et de vos banques
 comme une forêt de torches funèbres
 pour en finir
 une
 fois
 pour
 toutes
 avec ce monde
 de nègres
 de niggers
 de sales nègres.¹⁶

On the other hand, apart from this clear tribute, it is not easy to sidestep the biblical connotation of the phrase (despite Frantz Fanon's open agnosticism). The biblical aura accentuates the metaphor that conveys the on-going state of daily exploitation, in the body and in the spirit, in the flesh and in the soul, of oppression and repression (above all because the words in this book reveal the build-up of much experience gleaned during the 1950s in an Algeria engaged in vicious loggerheads). They reflect the splintering effects of this condition where the outcome lies not only in the low self-esteem of the black-African colonized subject owing to prejudice and the racial and ethno-cultural discrimination typical of the colonial predicament and to the subjection of political and social systems to situations involving confrontation, but also in the traumas caused by war, the "reactive psychoses" and the "secondary psychotic disorders" that come up in the case studies occupying the last chapter in the book. Taken within this context, *The Wretched of the Earth* is a radical explanation about the outcomes

¹⁴ "Arise, ye prisoners of starvation/Arise, wretched of the earth!"—this American translation of the International is by the Chicago Charles Hope Kerr (1923) in *I.W.W. Songs: To Fan the Flames of Discontent* (34th ed., p. 3). The translation is based on Eugène Pottier's "Internationale" (1871) in "Chants Révolutionnaires" (1887). American version available at <http://www.angelfire.com/nj3/RonMBaseman/songbk.htm>.

¹⁵ Fanon had already paid tribute to Roumain with the title of the magazine *Tam-Tam*, published in 1949: "Trop tard/jusqu'au cœur des jungles infernales/retentira précipité le terrible bégaie—ment/télégraphique des tam-tams répétant infatigables/répétant/que les nègres/n'acceptent plus/d'être vos niggers/vos sales nègres". Jacques Roumain, "Sales nègres", *Bois d'ébène*. See *Ebony Wood* (1972). *Bois-d'ébène. Poems*. The French text with a translation by Sidney Shapiro.

¹⁶ Jacques Roumain, *Bois-d'ébène*. My emphasis. The English, translated by J. Fungaroli & R. Sauer in *When the Tom-Tom Beats: Selected Prose and Poetry by Jacques Roumain*, gives the following version: And here we are arisen/*All the wretched of the earth*/all the upholders of justice/marching to attack your barracks/your banks/like a forest of funeral torches/to be done/once/and/for/all/with this world/of negroes/niggers/filthy negroes.

witnessed in the process internalizing the tyranny of colonial violence (and a glimpse of what was to come afterwards in the post-colonial period), the alienation and its ruses in the authoritative world that changes and subverts the community and its subjects. And in this sense, Frantz Fanon may be regarded as one of the disciples of the generation of African nationalists if not one of the first theoreticians of what was later to called “post-colonial studies”. Indeed, where the roll of post-colonial studies is concerned, this not only means breaking with the essentialist notions of identity, one of the central premises around which cultural studies hinge (with the help of famous writers such as Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Kwame A. Appiah, Walter Dignolo, and Néstor García Canclini among others), but also breaking with an epistemology that puts forward a (re)reading of colonialism from the viewpoint of paradigms wherein experiences are based on racialized and culturalized alterity in contemporary societies in the social and political power-relations game—a field in which Fanon is really a pioneer, esteeming as he does, the perspectives of subjectivity and culture on a par with the economic, political, and historical dimensions in studying colonial violence and unraveling its innards—“The body of history does not determine a single one of my actions”,¹⁷ Fanon said in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Another of Fanon’s “legacies” to post-colonial studies would be precisely this intersection of epistemologies when studying the subject of colonialism. In Lyon, Fanon did not only study medicine; he also studied literature, philosophy, history, and sociology. And it is this transversal thread running through knowledge that is equally visible in his work, and more so in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon himself seems to have been quite aware of his transdisciplinary approach, which was not at all common those days, when in Chapter V about “Colonial war and mental disorders”, he states:

We shall deal here with the problem of mental disorders born out of the national war of liberation waged by the Algerian people. Perhaps the reader will find these notes on psychiatry out of place or untimely in a book like this. There is absolutely nothing we can do about that.¹⁸

Fanon was better known as an Algerian revolutionary than an Antillean intellectual who produced (a) theory, but he had—like his writings—a very turbulent life. For example, as regards his writings, before they were accepted as seminal studies about contemporary societies whether from the perspective of post-colonial cultural studies or from the point of view of sociological, anthropological, political or political-science subjects, they were confiscated in France, censored in the USA and also in Portugal (where the publisher Ulisseia’s Portuguese translation, *Os Condenados da Terra*, was censored and confiscated in 1967 “for the good of the nation”). Likewise, any quotation of Fanon’s work, made by a teacher or citizen¹⁹ who was engaged in any emancipation struggle, was a passport to being labeled a radical, a euphemism for being called a racist—a trait which in those days, as well as today, was designed to fit into a pastoral view of colonialism from both a right wing and well as a left wing stance, thrusting the author of the quote into a Manichaeian position that characterized the world during the Cold War and had repercussions on the ideological choices (socialism versus capitalism) of the countries in the so-called Third World.

¹⁷ Frantz Fanon. (1986, 2008). *Black Skin, White Masks* (p. 180).

¹⁸ Frantz Fanon. (2004). *The Wretched of the Earth* (p. 181).

¹⁹ Lewis R. Gordon states, that on the contrary, in South America, Fanon’s thinking influenced the education of many intellectuals, starting with Paulo Freire. See the Preface in the Brazilian translation, *Pele negra, máscaras brancas* (p. 11), Salvador: Editora da Universidade Federal da Bahia. It was also not unknown that the Caribbean Philosophical Society awarded the Frantz Fanon Prize for Exceptional Work on Caribbean Thought (Prémio Frantz Fanon por Obras Excepcionais do Pensamento Caribenho) for studies undertaken by the South American academic community.

I discovered Frantz Fanon relatively late in my studies on Africa at the urging of Mário Pinto de Andrade. And what surprised me in my discovery was the sense of “distrust” that transpired when many people spoke about Fanon without ever having really read him. Indeed, Frantz Fanon imploded the Manichaeic epistemology which he was accused of using, to state that, “the Manichaeism that first governed colonial society, is kept intact during the period of decolonization”²⁰—a consideration that well suits post-colonial formulations about the power relations in the sphere of culture, class, ethnic groups, gender, sexual orientation, and other categories that play on the chessboard of inner power relations in the “decolonized” society. At this time (during the late 1980s, early 1990s), in the Portuguese-speaking world therefore—a world where the theory of Luso-Tropicalism molded mentalities and the paternalist view of colonialism in both its obvious and insidious forms prevailed in historical studies or the perceptions of the present—Fanon was dismissed as being a radical (i.e., a racist). Just as the *négritude* movement was dismissed—similar to what happened to the Portuguese version of *négritude*—not even the catharsis of scientific discourse had begun. Commentators and opinion-makers, including those of African origin who had access to the mass media in Portugal (and even in organizations allegedly directed at the African communities) that fitted into the idea of an “intercultural colonialism”, regarded Frantz Fanon as a racist who appealed to hatred between the races.

I agree with those who consider this “perception” of Fanon’s work to be the outcome of the famous Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* written by Jean-Paul Sartre (someone with whom Black-African intellectuals were used to discussing), in much the same way as his Preface, “Black Orpheus” written for Léopold Senghor’s book of poetry, *Anthologie de la poésie nègre et malgache*, 1948, had gained the status of an essay long before and had been circulated as a separate publication. Indeed, I am convinced that many people have only read the Preface and have summed up Fanon’s book on the basis of the appeal Sartre found in the Martinican intellectual’s words:

At this new stage, colonial aggression is internalized by the colonized as a form of terror. By that I mean not only the fear they feel when faced with our limitless means of repression, but also the fear that their own fury inspires in them. They are trapped between our guns which are pointing at them, and those frightening instincts, those murderous impulses that emerge from the bottom of their hearts and that they don’t even always recognize. For it is not first of all their violence, it is ours on the rebound, that grows and tears them apart; and the first reaction by these oppressed people is to repress this shameful anger that is morally condemned by them and us, but that is the only refuge left for their humanity. Read Fanon: you will see that in a time of helplessness, murderous rampage is the collective unconscious of the colonized.²¹

In 1961, Sartre clearly wrote not for Fanon’s reading public, but for his own targeted reading public, the colonial agents (Sartre narrows down the reach of his target public to exclude the group of readers he usually addresses, the French left liberals). This entire paragraph as well as the ones that follow it, may be read as an existentialist interpretation of Fanon’s book, presenting itself as an apology of the violence that Frantz Fanon allegedly defends, as if it were merely a question of violence, whereby it arrives at the point at which all African cultural manifestations are taken to be signs of revolt (the dances, religious ceremonies, and rituals that perform uses and customs). From Sartre’s stance, Fanon ends up by reifying or *thingifying* the colonized black African as a subject of history—colonial and also, by the way, pre-European history—based on violence. Sartre states:

²⁰ Frantz Fanon. (2004). *The Wretched of the Earth* (p. 14).

²¹ Jean-Paul Sartre. *Preface to the Wretched of the Earth* (p. lii).

...the colonized protect themselves from colonial alienation by going one step better than religious alienation, with the ultimate end result of having accumulated two alienations, each of which reinforces the other. In certain psychoses, therefore, tired of being insulted day in and day out, the hallucinating individual suddenly gets it into his head to hear an angel's voice complimenting him...²²

The “choice” of a particular reading public of Jean-Paul Sartre’s Preface—where Fanon himself was left speechless when he received the book in hospital²³—was important owing to the environment in which it was published: In 1961, the war in Algeria had reached a peak in terms of atrocities (Fanon speaks of genocide in 1961²⁴ and indeed, many historians classify the atrocities committed by the French Foreign Legion and by the *pieds-noirs* as such). What Sartre is doing is unmasking the process of exploiting the colonial system from the “inside” and the colonizers’ “necessary” exertions so as to make the system work. The unease he was able to provoke by his inquiries is predictable, even among the leftwing which Sartre addresses when he sums up:

...when you domesticate a member of our species, you lower his productivity, and however little you give him, a barnyard being ends up costing more than he’s worth. For this reason the colonist is forced to stop in breaking him in halfway. The result: neither man nor beast, but the “native”.²⁵

David Macey, one of Frantz Fanon’s biographers²⁶ and author of one of the first studies to be published on Fanon’s work, considered him to be one of the forerunners of what would be understood 20 years later, as “post-colonial studies”. Macey states that Fanon, was much more than an “apostle of violence” and the “patron saint” of the Black Panthers, as Panther Stokely Carmichael called him. Indeed, it is not too presumptuous to think that this status was expounded in Jean-Paul Sartre’s Preface.

It is true that the departure point of Fanon’s reflections on violence is the founding praxis of a colonial society and violence is present in all the material and symbolic expressions in colonial relations. This is why, according to Fanon,

For the colonized, this violence represents the absolute praxis. (...) Violence can thus be understood as the perfect mediation. The colonized man liberates himself in and through violence. This praxis enlightens the militant because it shows him the means and the end.²⁷

In his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, and as an outcome of the oppressor’s political, economic, social, and cultural violence which results in a massive hoard of marginalized folk who hate the other (but that also issues out of their “fear of the other”), Frantz Fanon’s diagnoses the uncontrolled reaction of the oppressed: violence generated by regressions to identity and ethnic origins. This is one of facts representing the present-day value of Frantz Fanon’s work if we recall that such situations are still happening today. They are a result of behaviors that are rightfully understood as an identity-seeking regression because this is the outcome of “*les identités meurtrières*”—murdered identities (Amin Maalouf) which may also manifest itself, according to Fanon, in the “homicidal melancholia” elaborated by Professor Porot.²⁸

²² Jean-Paul Sartre, op. cit., p. liii.

²³ Alice Cherki. (2000). *Frantz Fanon: Portrait*.

²⁴ “Here it is the war, the colonial war, that very often takes on the aspect of a genuine genocide, this war which radically disrupts and shatters the world, which is in fact the triggering situation” (Frantz Fanon. (2004). *The Wretched of the Earth* (pp. 183-184)).

²⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre. *Preface to the Wretched of the Earth* (p. 1).

²⁶ David Macey is the author of *Frantz Fanon: A Life* (London: Granta Books, 2000) and also, *Frantz Fanon: A Biography* (New York, USA: Picador, 2001).

²⁷ Frantz Fanon. (2004). *The Wretched of the Earth* (p. 44).

²⁸ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 224.

Taken as a whole, *The Wretched of the Earth* analyses the antagonisms arising in dominated/domineering relationships set against the backdrop of the Cold War. Mindful of the fact that the terminology of political science has rejected the expression “Third World”—which was, as is known, used (and has yet to exhaust itself) in the Maoist theory of three worlds, whereby it has lost its validity in both political-economic and geopolitical terms—I have chosen to use an intentionally less judgmental expression, the countries in the South, or simply, the South. And while today’s world fails to show it, the following passage from the Conclusion does:

Comrades, have we nothing better to do than create a third Europe? The West saw itself on a spiritual adventure. (...) Today we are witnessing a stasis of Europe. Comrades, let us flee this stagnation where dialectics has gradually turned into a logic of the status quo.²⁹

It is not that is impossible to invert the place of the “wretched” as is shown only too well by Neelam Srivastava’s provocative question “Are the Europeans now the damned of the Earth?” in an article that studied the reception Fanon received in Italy.³⁰ What the question raised is precisely the quality of universal transversal time that runs through Fanon’s reflections about power, such as the way in which the expression “the wretched of the earth” was inspired, as we have already mentioned. Fanon’s work gained such widespread projection that the philosopher Achille Mbembe from the Cameroons considered in his Preface to the complete works of Fanon in 2011, that a “Fanon Library” has now come into existence, a vibrant, dynamic body of criticism inspired on Fanon’s writings that covers almost all the human and social sciences. Indeed, “une véritable ‘bibliothèque Fanon’ est née et a, en retour, permis la constitution d’un champ d’études foisonnant, rhizomatique et, aujourd’hui, de portée planétaire”.³¹ This celebratory view of Fanon’s work may not be unanimous if we take into account the somewhat pessimistic response to it by Paul Gilroy who asks: “what does black nationalism have to say about the predicament of the world right now? Not very much”.³² Nevertheless, one could counter this pessimism with Fanon’s own testament and his invitation to relativism:

Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it. (...) For us who are determined to break the back of colonialism, our historic mission is to authorize every revolt, every desperate act, and every attack aborted or drowned in blood.³³

In consisting of five chapters that continue to broach the predicaments raised in his earlier publications (particularly in *Black Skin, White Masks*), *The Wretched of the Earth* seems, in fact, to be a testament above all if we take into account the time at which it was written. Cultural alienation and its traumas, the internalization of domination (today we speak of subalternity) and its shattering effects on the national culture (whose existence Fanon refused to accept in colonial times, as he considered that colonialism completely paralyzed any national culture), the relationship between national culture and the liberation struggles, the nationalist ideologies and their errors, the (minimum and maximum) programs of the nationalist movements and their failures, and the monolithic *modus operandi* of the post-colonial powers and their similarities with the colonial

²⁹ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 237.

³⁰ Neelam Srivastava. (2014). Frantz Fanon in Italy. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 17(3), 309-328. See <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2014.991419>.

³¹ Achille Mbembe. (2011). L’universalité de Frantz Fanon. Frantz Fanon (Œuvres, Paris: La Découverte. (My translation: “A veritable Fanon Library has been born and in turn, has allowed for a field of studies to flower, rhizomatically, where it has planetary coverage today”).

³² Tommie Shelby. (2008). “Cosmopolitanism, Blackness, and Utopia”—A conversation with Paul Gilroy. *Transition*, 98, 116-135 (p. 120).

³³ Frantz Fanon. (2004). *The Wretched of the Earth* (pp. 145-146).

power, the role of the bourgeoisie and the ‘new’ elites, the ideologies of the African nationalists (which Fanon considered to have been imported), the ambiguities of “colonized intellectuals”, the frustrations felt by the former colonized when confronted by the new country—these are some of the matters raised in *The Wretched of the Earth*: a multidimensional, multi and trans-disciplinary study of violence as the inherent reality of the colonial predicament that is present in all the material and symbolic representation of the society; where even after independence, violence has been the treatment interminably meted out as an inevitability because “the defensive positions born of this violent confrontation between the colonized and the colonial constitute a structure which then reveals the colonized personality”.³⁴ Anyone who has first read *Black Skin, White Masks* will tend to think that *The Wretched of the Earth* is a summary that studies, to use Mbembe’s words, the extent to which the “souffrances psychiques causées par le racisme et la présence vive de la folie dans le système colonial. En effet, en situation coloniale, le travail du racisme vise, en premier lieu, à abolir toute séparation entre le moi intérieur et le regard extérieur”.³⁵

Fanon’s African Colonial Experience

At the root of *The Wretched of the Earth* lies the colonial experience of violence, above all in Algeria fighting for its independence—and this is one of the criticisms that the Angolan author, Mário Pinto de Andrade points out in Fanon’s thinking when he states that “a guerra da Argélia passou a representar o ideal revolucionário que cristalizou a esperança dos colonizados”, elevating, according to his way of thinking, a particular case, for example, the case of the peasantry “ao estatuto de universalidade aplicável aos países colonizados”.³⁶ Albert Memmi, the Tunisian writer whom Fanon got to know when he lived in Tunis, was to comment on this “theorizing” on the Algerian experience in his book *La vie impossible de Frantz Fanon* (1973):

In his short life, Frantz Fanon experienced at least three serious failures. Born in a French department, he believed himself French and White. When he went to study in the capital he made the painful discovery that in the mother country he was West Indian and Black. Infuriated, he decided that he would be neither French nor West Indian, but Algerian: Were not the North Africans, like himself, the dupes and the victims of the same mother country?³⁷

But this was not exactly the case because when he left his Martinique heading towards the metropolis after he had fought for the liberation of France during the Second World War, Fanon had already developed, if not an acute awareness, then a very critical stance about the condition of being subordinated (which had also been nurtured by reading the Caribbean intellectuals); his African experience—when he was already in the metropolis—was to turn into a “volcanic fury” (Sartre, WE, p. ii). It is true that for Fanon, “colonized man

³⁴ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 182.

³⁵ Achille Mbembe, *op. cit.* (My translation: “mental suffering [is] caused by racism and by the colonial system’s living presence of madness. Indeed, in a colonial system, the work of racism first and foremost, foresees the abolition of the entire separation between the inner I and the outer gaze”).

³⁶ Mário Pinto de Andrade. “Fanon et l’Afrique Combattante. Témoignage d’un militant angolais”. Original paper given by Mário Pinto de Andrade at the Internal Frantz Fanon Memorial. Dated April 1982 at Fort-de-France, Martinique. Mário Soares Foundation. Retrieved March 23, 2015 from <http://casacomum.net/cc/visualizador?pasta=04330.008.016#!7>. (My translation: “The Algerian war started to represent the revolutionary ideal that crystalized the colonized people’s hope (...) to a universal standing applicable to the colonized countries”).

³⁷ Albert Memmi. *The Impossible Life of Frantz Fanon*. Translated by T. Cassirer and G. Michael Twomey. *The Massachusetts Review*, 14.1, winter 1973, p. 10. The article was published two years earlier as: “La vie impossible de Frantz Fanon”, *Esprit*, September 9, 1971.

liberates himself in and through violence”.³⁸ However, according to Fanon, this is due to the fact that man lives in an “atmosphere of violence”, in “violence in action” comprising “saber-rattling exercises [to] the smell of gunpowder” (WE, p. 32)—and resulting in a tension where, whatever the case, the colonized have to let off steam now and then by periodically engaging in bloodthirsty retaliations against the colonizer and against their brothers: “one of the ways the colonized subject releases his muscular tension is through the very real collective self-destruction of these internecine feuds”.³⁹ Without referring to them by name, already in 1961, Fanon referred to a series of colonial “legacies” which African countries are having to deal with at the moment: They range from the consequences of the monolithic nature of African ideologies adopted by the governing elites as against tribalism to lethal activity arising from French-African relations (it could be said that Fanon was decades ahead of his time when he foresaw the outcomes of what was going on in the former Belgian Congo after Lumumba’s assassination, the murderous so-called tribal civil wars such as the genocide in Ruanda):

The violence of the colonized, as we have said, unifies the people. By its very structure colonialism is separatists and regionalist. Colonialism is not merely content to note the existence of tribes, it reinforces and differentiates them. The colonial system nurtures the chieftainships and revives the old *marabout* confraternities. Violence in its practice is totalizing and national. As a result, it harbors in its depths the elimination of regionalism and tribalism. The national parties therefore show no pity towards the *kaid*s and the traditional chiefs. The elimination of the *kaid*s and the chiefs is a prerequisite to the unification of the people.⁴⁰

But by using another perspective, Fanon also examines the process leading to subjective liquidation whether in political, economic, or cultural terms. It is a process that is sped-up owing to increasing inequality, exclusion, and social fragmentation that cause the reification of those relegated to the fringes in North-South relations as well as within the North and the South themselves.

The interesting point in Frantz Fanon is his analysis of power relations at the level of colonial relations (and here, he does not include any of the relations that are the object of cultural and post-colonial studies, or of studies involving class, gender, or sexual orientation). His analysis outdoes the “classical” approaches that mostly deal with materialist (political, economic, or social), existentialist and culturalist issues. Instead he introduces other kinds of complex knowledge (history, philosophy, and psychiatry) in order to construct an epistemology that scrutinizes other components in the human being’s make up (his language, body, sex, being) in his subjective experience, and that results in trauma in the colonized subject’s psychiatric framework. Fanon’s transdisciplinary usage might not even be original if we take into account the reflections made by such phenomenologists as Edmund Husserl or Emmanuel Lévinas, or even the work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir (about being or existing). However, in order to carry out a study on the phenomenon of racism, Fanon brings together these different kinds of knowledge and intermeshes them with the knowledge he has gained in psychiatry. In Fanon’s opinion, colonialism is much more than merely a specific system based on the foreign exploitation of the human resources located in a particular place that provides local man power. Rather, and above all, it is “a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity”.⁴¹

Likewise, Fanon’s reflections are not “canonic”; his analysis of the social antagonisms is made at a time in which the predominant ideology of the nationalist movements, supported by the left wing in Europe, leans

³⁸ Frantz Fanon. (2004). *The Wretched of the Earth* (p. 44).

³⁹ Idem, *ibidem*, pp. 17-18.

⁴⁰ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 51.

⁴¹ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 182.

towards Marxism that espoused the theory of the proletariat rising up and becoming the driving force that brings about social change. Fanon considered that “in the capitalist countries, the proletariat has nothing to lose and possibly everything to gain. In the colonized countries, the proletariat has everything to lose”.⁴² Instead, Fanon believed that the peasantry was the driving force of the struggle against colonial capitalism, in a certain way tending to adopt a more conciliatory attitude towards the working class and the peasantry than Friedrich Engels had even spoken about after Karl Marx’s death. He believes that “the peasant who stays put [on his land] is a staunch defender of tradition, and in a colonial society represents the element of discipline whose social structure remains community-minded”.⁴³ And because of this, Fanon asserts that:

The peasantry is systematically left out of most of the nationalist parties’ propaganda. But it is obvious that in colonial countries only the peasantry is revolutionary. It has nothing to lose and everything to gain. The underprivileged and starving peasant is the exploited who very soon discovers that only violence pays. For him, there is no compromise, no possibility of concession. Colonization or decolonization: It is simply a power struggle.⁴⁴

The reflection that Mário Pinto de Andrade made as regards this question is interesting. He stated that Fanon had failed to understand the particularities of the liberation movements in sub-Saharan Africa, as he was influenced by the “Algerian model”. However, further on, Pinto de Andrade admitted “uma progressão no pensamento político de Fanon em torno da proposta do modelo argelino e da relação dialéctica que ele estabeleceu entre a luta pela liberdade e independência nacional, e a luta contra o colonialismo em África”.⁴⁵ Pinto Andrade therefore criticized what he considered to be Fanon’s “hastiness” when the latter disparaged what the assimilated intellectuals were doing:

Durante todo esse “ano da África” [“Fevereiro de 1960, na ocasião da conferência panafricana realizada em Túnis”], debatemos com Fanon a validade da marcha empreendida pelo MPLA na mobilização das camadas sociais. A nossa argumentação esbarrava num muro de convicções bem arraigadas no único sujeito histórico revolucionário, aos seus olhos--o campesinato. Eis porque Fanon acabou por se voltar para a UPA, legitimando-a.⁴⁶

This was because for Fanon, the nationalist political movements—where the notion was “imported from the metropolis” (WE, p. 74)—never managed to implant their organization in the countryside, thereby confirming the setbacks in the “theoretical analysis of the nationalist parties”.⁴⁷ At a time when the ideology of the African nationalist movements aroused the antagonism of both the petty bourgeoisie (that is the bracket of colonized subjects enjoying a bourgeois status) and the proletariat, Frantz Fanon reassessed the identity of this struggle. In confining it to within the colonial capitalist sphere, he shifted the perspective focusing on the European context and moved it to a colonial context; he pointed out their particularities as social models entailing socialism and capitalism (at the time, they were considered as mutually exclusive) and asserted that “they were defined by men from different continents and different periods of

⁴² Idem, *ibidem*, p. 64.

⁴³ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 67.

⁴⁴ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 23.

⁴⁵ Mário Pinto Andrade, *op. cit.* (My translation: “Fanon’s political thinking had progressed as regards proposing the Algerian model and the dialectic relationship he had established between the struggle for freedom and national independence, and the struggle against colonialism in Africa”).

⁴⁶ Idem, *ibidem*. (My translation: “During the whole of the ‘Year of Africa’ [‘February 1960, when the Pan-African Conference was held in Tunis’], we discussed with Fanon, whether the measures carried out by the MPLA to gain the support of the various social strata were valid. Our argument ran up against a wall of well-grounded convictions that in his opinion were based on the single historical revolutionary subject: the peasantry. This was why Fanon ended up by turning to UPA, and justifying it”).

⁴⁷ Frantz Fanon. (2004). *The Wretched of the Earth* (pp. 64-66).

time”.⁴⁸ This shows that Fanon did not labor over a Manichaeic epistemology contrary to what he often said he had done. Therefore, in upholding the original identity of this group as mentioned in “The International”, “The wretched of the earth” are the disinherited, the exploited, and the plundered, despite the fact that for Fanon, the paradigm lays in the peoples colonized by Europe.

Nevertheless, Fanon is aware of the harmful performance of the “colonial elite” in the liberation process: their authoritarianism, totalitarianism, personality cults, nepotism, despotism, and corruption. From the “darkness of colonialism” to the “sun of independence”, to use Ahmadou Kourouma’s words in his novel *The Suns of Independences* (1968), Fanon’s analyses were prophetic—or rather, the term “forecasts” is better suited as in 1961 most of the African countries were still living under the colonial yoke. In the first chapter in the book, “On Violence”, which looks at violence in the international arena, Fanon already speaks about the colonized people’s impatience and their frustration which extends into post-independence; he singles out the “colonized bourgeoisie which attains power utilizes the aggressiveness of its class to grab the jobs previously held by foreigners”.⁴⁹ Thus a new so-called Third-World elite is reproduced holding the same kind of power relations over the former colonized people in a twofold direction: not only because “the Westernized elements’ feelings toward the peasant masses recall those found among the proletariat in industrialized nations”,⁵⁰ but also because, as he goes on to say in the following chapters, “the unpreparedness of the elite, the lack of practical ties between them and the masses, their apathy and, yes, their cowardice at the crucial moment in the struggle, are the cause of tragic trials and tribulations”.⁵¹ Fanon anticipates (the verb connotes the future...) criticism leveled at the “new” class which will rise up to become the governing power and which he considers anti-national, “dismally, inanely and cynically bourgeois” and that “limits its claims to the takeover of businesses and firms previously held by the colonists. The national bourgeoisie replaces the former European settlers as doctors, lawyers, tradesmen, agents, dealers and shipping agents”.⁵²

His criticism of the nationalist movements is projected into the future owing to what they were not doing (in 1961) and which, in the end, they have failed to do (today); it is directed at the post-colonial powers because “the single party is the modern form of the bourgeois dictatorship—stripped of mask, makeup, and scruples, cynical in every aspect... The bourgeois dictatorship of the underdeveloped countries draws its strength from the existence of such a leader”.⁵³

Apart from “the disturbances in national consciousness” that this class provokes, the bourgeoisie is responsible for the weakness—for the failure Fanon would say—of the political organizations that appear after independence:

The characteristic, virtually endemic weakness of the underdeveloped countries’ national consciousness is not only the consequence of the colonized subject’s mutilation by the colonial regime. It can also be attributed to the apathy of the national bourgeoisie, its mediocrity, and its deeply cosmopolitan mentality.⁵⁴

On the other hand, in speaking about the metamorphosis that the “colonized intellectual” goes through, one might even think that already at that time, Fanon had perceived how necessary it was to have an epistemological decolonization when he mentioned “the colonized intellectuals’ shared interest in stepping

⁴⁸ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 55.

⁴⁹ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 103.

⁵⁰ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 66.

⁵¹ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 97.

⁵² Idem, *ibidem*, pp. 99-100.

⁵³ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 111.

⁵⁴ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 98.

back and taking a hard look at the Western culture in which they risk becoming ensnared”.⁵⁵ It counters what Quijano calls “the colonial nature of power”⁵⁶ and stands against “devaluating history prior to colonization” which yesterday, as today, takes on a dialectic meaning (Joseph Ki-Zerbo expressed the same idea many years later in an iconic interview when he stated that African scientists and intellectuals would have to stop behaving like “colonial subjects”⁵⁷). Concerning the same question, Fanon recalls that “Colonialism’s condemnation is continental in scale. Colonialism’s claim that the pre-colonial period was akin to a darkness of the human soul refers to the entire continent of Africa”.⁵⁸ It is worth remembering this when we still hear people today say that “colonialism did not only have negative aspects”, which is another way of saying that “you cannot judge history”—as if it is possible to study history without judging it! And when—to raise Jean-Paul Sartre’s query—Europe in all its “national intersubjectiveness” is puzzled about what Fanon wants, the philosopher answers that he wants nothing to do with Europe and advises: “Let us leave this Europe”.⁵⁹ Fanon’s target public is the oppressed African, and more in particular, the Algerian. Fanon transforms Europe into the object of his discourse—it seems to be the subversion that leads Sartre to insist on his question:

What then has happened? Quite simply this: We were the subjects of history and now we are the objects. The power struggle has been reversed, decolonization is in progress; all our mercenaries can try and do is delay its completion.⁶⁰

It is a very optimistic stance as regards neutralizing eurocentrism although, without a doubt, this is the vital gesture that makes Frantz Fanon a pioneer in the role of decolonizing knowledge that leads to epistemological investment.

Note, however, that at the time, not even Fanon managed to avoid certain Eurocentric traps even if we are mindful of the period in which he was writing (the 1950s). Such traps involve both terminology, such as his use of “colored peoples”, and ideological expressions such as “decolonization” to refer to the process of winning independence (although Fanon himself did note—even if not openly, but rather in almost gloomy considerations—that decolonization should not be equated with winning freedom). Indeed, throughout the book, Fanon consistently speaks about *decolonization*—when he should in many places, refer to *independence*. Therefore, these two terms which are used to refer to the same process show the different places in which the utterances are made. The historian Isabel Castro Henriques sums up the dilemma in the following way:

The hegemonic nature of colonization and of colonialism enforced a Eurocentric notion of decolonization (at the start of the 1960s), ignoring the role of the oppressed peoples in the process of freeing themselves and lowering the importance of independence in this same movement, where some independences were obtained peacefully while others, such as in the Portuguese case, was achieved after years of war, violence, fighting and destruction.⁶¹ (My translation)

⁵⁵ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 148.

⁵⁶ Quijano, Anibal. (1997). The Colonial Nature of Power and Latin America’s Cultural Experience. In R. Bruceño-León and H. R. Sonntag (Eds.), *Social Knowledge, Heritage, Challenges, Perspectives: Sociology in South America* (pp. 27-38). Venezuela: Proceedings on the ISA Regional Conference for Latin America.

⁵⁷ Joseph Ki-Zerbo. (2006). *Para quando a África?* (Interviewed by René Holenstein) (p. 15).

⁵⁸ Frantz Fanon. (2004). *The Wretched of the Earth* (p. 150).

⁵⁹ Jean Paul Sarte. *Preface to the Wretched of the Earth* (p. xliv).

⁶⁰ Idem, *ibidem*, p. lx.

⁶¹ Isabel Castro Henriques. (2014). Colónia, colonização, colonial e colonialismo. In *Dicionário Crítico das ciências sociais dos países da fala oficial portuguesa* (p. 56). (Original texto: “A natureza hegemónica da colonização e do colonialismo impôs a noção europocêntrica de descolonização (princípio dos anos 60), ignorando o papel dos povos oprimidos no processo da sua libertação e reduzindo no mesmo movimento a importância das independências, umas obtidas pacificamente, outras, como no caso português, conseguidas após anos de guerra, de violências, de combates, de destruições”).

Conclusion

Frantz Fanon reminds me what I had once rather aggressively stated one day as regards Francisco José Tenreiro (who had died at 42 years of age in 1963)⁶² that there are two kinds of prolific writers: those who go down in history and those whose only place belongs in a footnote; and there are those who publish few books but whose work constitutes a challenging field of study. Such is the case of Frantz Fanon who only published three books in his lifetime—*Black Skin, White Masks* (French original in 1952), *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* (written in 1959), which was shortened in later editions to *A Dying Colonialism*,⁶³ and *The Wretched of the Earth* (French original published in 1961). A fourth book was published posthumously *Pour la révolution africaine* (1964), edited by his widow Josie Fanon (Marie-Joséphine Duble Fanon), who collected together Fanon's disperse writings. However, even before this last book was published, Frantz Fanon was already an intellectual giant taking his place in the pantheon of the most venerated thinkers in the French-speaking world (although, it is true that this only happened after his work had been translated into English in the mid-1960s). He was awarded recognition for the originality of his thinking, his vision of the future and for the discursive courage of *The Wretched of the Earth*, whose history and exchange with perhaps the greatest French intellectual of the day, Jean-Paul Sartre, made the book more visible than *Black Skin, White Masks*, his first book written when he was 25 years old. This first publication was years ahead of another remarkable book about the traumas of cultural alienation: Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957, 1965),⁶⁴ which also had a preface by Jean-Paul Sartre. Fanon's brilliant ability to analyze the whole (the colonized world) by looking at one section (Algeria, where in keeping with his last wish his ever-inquiring body was buried) and his foresight made him one of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century.

O my body, make me always a man who questions!

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⁶² Inocência Mata. (2011). Francisco José Tenreiro: entre as liminaridades identitárias e a ideologia insular. In Inocência Mata (org.), *Francisco José Tenreiro: as múltiplas faces de um intelectual* (pp. 305-323). Lisboa: Edições Colibri.

⁶³ The title of the 1965 English translation of *L'an V de la révolution* (1959) which was later republished under the title *Sociologie d'une révolution: L'an V de la révolution algérienne*, is quite auspicious for its intentions.

⁶⁴ Albert Memmi, translated into English by Howard Greenfield for Orion Press, New York, 1965. The original in French is: *Portrait du colonisé, précédé du portrait du colonisateur*. Editions Buchet/Chastel: Corrêa, 1957.

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