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Frantz Fanon 1925–1961

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One of eight children, Frantz Fanon was born on 20 July 1925 in Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique, then a French colony and a remnant of the first French Empire that was largely lost to Britain in the eighteenth century. Like the rest of the black and mulatto population, the Fanons were descended from the slaves who were imported from West Africa to work the sugar plantations.

Fanon's parents were members of a stable and well-defined social group. Casimir Fanon was a minor customs official and, in keeping with a fairly typical pattern, his wife Éléanore kept a shop. One of Casimir's brothers worked for the local equivalent of the Forestry Commission; the other was a schoolteacher. The family's social status was thus closely bound up with the State's role as a large employer in an agriculturally-based economy with almost no industry. Its members were educated and upwardly mobile; five of the children went to France for higher education. By the standards of the white creoles or békés descended from the original plantation-owners, the family was not wealthy, but the Fanon's were prosperous enough to employ domestic help and to pay for piano lessons for Frantz's sisters. Martiniquean society was largely matri-focal and Éléanore was the dominant figure in this closely-knit and clannish family. Fanon rarely spoke of his childhood and left no written account of his upbringing. His surviving relatives and contemporaries describe him as a somewhat turbulent and unruly child.

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1 This article is based upon on-going research for a biography of Frantz Fanon. It draws upon published sources, including Peter Geismar, Fanon: The Revolutionary as Prophet (New York: Grove Press, 1971) and Irene Gendzier, Frantz Fanon: A Critical Study (New York: Pantheon, 1973), upon the dossiers and archives held by the Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine and the Centre Culturel Algérien in Paris, but primarily upon interviews with Jacques Azoulay, Robert Berthelier, Alice Cheri, Fanny Colonna, Jean-Marie Domenach, Olivier Fanon, Nicole Guillet, André Mandouze, Marcel Manville, Mireille Mendès France (née Fanon) and Jacques Postel.
given, like his brothers, to minor acts of delinquency and much more enthusiastic about football than his academic studies.

After the fall of France in 1940, power in Martinique was concentrated in the hands of Admiral Robert, Commander of the West Atlantic Fleet and High Commissioner for the West Indian colonies since August 1939. Although the mayors of Martinique were ready to rally to De Gaulle’s call for resistance, Robert’s sympathies were with the collaborationist Vichy Government. The island was therefore blockaded by the Allies until 1943. Food shortages, inflation and a housing crisis were the inevitable results of the presence of the thousands of troops and sailors trapped on the island. The expression en temps Robert (‘in Robert time’) is still a synonym for ‘hard times’. The navy in particular soon came to be viewed as a racist occupation force, especially when expeditions to requisition food in the countryside turned violent. In Fort-de-France, scuffles broke out between French sailors and the local population. According to some accounts, one of those involved was a very young Fanon. The békés’ open support for Robert’s authoritarian government did lead to a degree of polarization along ethnic lines, but not to open racial conflict; for many black Martiniqueans, De Gaulle was a new incarnation of Toussaint l’Ouverture, the legendary leader of the Haitian Revolution.

Young ‘dissidents’ were soon making the dangerous voyage to the British island of Dominica, where they could join the Free French forces. At his third attempt, Fanon succeeded in reaching Dominica, but was too late to enlist, his plans having been overtaken by events. In June 1943, the Robert regime was overthrown and a pro-Gaullist government was installed in Martinique. Returning to Fort-de-France, the eighteen-year old Fanon joined the newly created Fifth Infantry Battalion, which consisted of 1,200 black volunteers; it is said that no white Martiniquean served with it. In late 1943, Fanon and his comrades sailed for basic military training in North Africa. Fanon’s first experience of the Algeria with which he was to identify so closely was a bitter one. The training camps were segregated but, as a citizen of an ‘old colony’, Fanon was in the anomalous position of serving with a black and Arab unit, but being regarded as a honorary white.

Fanon was part of the invasion force that landed near Toulon in August 1944 and then pushed north along the Napoleonic Road through the Alps and into Alsace. In November he was wounded while reloading a mortar, mentioned in dispatches and decorated with the Croix de Guerre for his bravery under fire. Ironically, he was decorated by General Raoul Salan, who was to become Commander in Chief of France’s forces during the Algerian war, a fanatical defender of French Algeria and a leader of the anti-De Gaulle putsch of 1961. The fragmentary correspondence that has survived indicates that Fanon was now convinced that he was going to die, and that this was not his war. On leaving Martinique, he had been convinced that he was going to fight for the universal values of freedom and democracy. He now recalled
the words of the teacher in Fort-de-France who had told him that a war between white Europeans was no concern of black Martiniqueans. Fanon was not the only member of the Ninth Colonial Infantry Division to realize that colonized blacks and Algerians were liberating their French colonizers.

After his demobilization, Fanon returned to Martinique to complete his interrupted secondary education. His future was by no means certain. Martinique had no higher education facilities, and offered few opportunities for graduates. The island’s exports included its educated young people, some of whom traditionally entered the colonial administration in France’s African possessions. The bitterness with which Fanon describes those who took that option in his first book is an eloquent testimony to his growing awareness of being a black Frenchman from Martinique. The legislation adopted in August 1945 provided him with a escape; student grants were now available for war veterans, and Fanon left for France.

Fanon’s original plan was to study dentistry in Paris, but he in fact enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine in Lyon, apparently in the mistaken belief that a degree in medicine would take less time. In his fifth year, he opted to study psychiatry rather than general medicine. The psychiatry taught at Lyon in the late 1904s was not inspiring. It was traditional, very organicist and neurologically-oriented, and the faculty was ruled by a professor whose sole interest was in neuro-surgery. Psychoanalysis and social psychology were almost unknown quantities. Psychiatry itself was neither a glamorous specialism nor a well-paid one. It is obvious from his first writings that studying medicine was not Fanon’s only preoccupation. He attended philosophy lectures by Merleau-Ponty, read Sartre, wrote plays (all of which appear to have been lost), gave talks on surrealism and poetry to student societies, and edited a little magazine entitled Tam-tam, but no copies of that short-lived publication have survived.

Despite his many extra-curricular activities, Fanon successfully completed his degree in 1951, but not without one problem. Fanon had wanted to submit Peau noire, masques blancs, which he had rapidly dictacted to the white Frenchwoman who was to become his wife, as his dissertation, but it was angrily rejected as quite unsuitable by his conservative professor of medicine. In a rare gesture of compromise, Fanon therefore submitted a classical but rather dull thesis on Friedrich’s disease.

The text rejected by Professor Dechaumes was published – to no great critical acclaim – in 1952. Peau noire, masques blancs is a distillation of a personal history and of a host of eclectic influences ranging from Sartre to Adler, Hegel and Lacan. It reflects Fanon’s daily experience of racism in France, of seeing the Banania advertisement which used a stereotypical picture of a grinning black soldier to sell a breakfast food, and of being patronized on the good French he had learned at a French school. Like any other Martiniquan child, Fanon was taught at school that his ancestors were Gauls with blonde hair and blue eyes. For Fanon, the internalization of white
cultural stereotypes is the key to understanding the negrophobia of so many of Martinique's black inhabitants. He describes the black dream of becoming white as an obsessional neurosis, but adds that it is socially induced, as is the inferiority complex that was such an obstacle to the emergence of any positive self-image until poets like Aimé Césaire began to proclaim their negritude with proud defiance in the late 1930s and the 1940s. Yet, for Fanon, the ideology of negritude cannot offer a solution because it celebrates an essential identity and does not analyse the situation that creates it. Adapting Sartre's theses on the origins of anti-Semitism, Fanon asserts that it is the colonial racist who creates the inferior black. He further argues that both races must be liberated from the effects of colonialism: blacks are slaves to their inferiority, but whites are slaves to their superiority.

*Peau noire, masques blancs* and the related article on the 'North-African Syndrome' are also products of Fanon's hostile encounter with the work of the so-called Algiers school of psychiatry and of his early clinical experience of working with the immigrants (mainly Algerian) attracted to Lyon by the chemical and textile industries. The work of Antoine Porot and the Algiers school is an expression of France's attempts to understand her colonial subjects and the apparently mysterious symptoms they presented by constructing a cross-cultural psychiatry. It draws upon a variety of discourses, ranging from climatic theories of epidemiology to theories of psycho-social evolution that present the white race as the incarnation of a higher civilization, and to Lévy-Bruhl's theses on the existence of a primitive mentality. It is also heavily influenced by a traditional hostility to Islam, viewed as a pathogenic agent rather than as one of the great monotheistic religions. Lack of intellectual curiosity, suggestibility and a reliance on magical modes of thought are held to be characteristically North-African features. Islam is said to induce fatalism and chronic laziness, whilst wild mood swings between sullen indifference and manic euphoria lead to explosions of criminal impulsiveness and, in the sexual domain, outbursts of homicidal jealousy. The work of the Algiers school was enormously influential and enjoyed a surprising longevity. Manuals of clinical psychiatry continued to include articles on the psychopathology of North Africans until the 1970s. They contained no articles on the psychopathology of the white Europeans who presumably represented both a norm and a higher stage of evolution. Fanon's prime argument is that the work of the school simply ignores the realities of colonialism. Like the inferiority complex of the Martiniquan, the 'North African syndrome' is a neurotic structure created by the formation within the ego of knots of conflicts influenced both by the

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social environment and by the highly personal way in which the individual responds to social influences.

In clinical terms, Fanon’s most formative experience was the brief period he spent at the Saint-Alban clinic in the mountainous Lozère region in 1952 while he was preparing for the Médicat des hôpitaux psychiatriques, which would qualify him to hold a post very roughly equivalent to a consultancy. Saint-Alban is a legendary institution. It was a centre for the wartime Resistance, but it also has a remarkable medical history. Tens of thousands of psychiatric prisoners died of starvation and neglect during the Occupation, but no one died at Saint-Alban. That they did not is a tribute to its staff, and their ability to secure food supplies by arranging for groups of patients to work on local farms. Most psychiatric hospitals were still the carceral institutions provided for by the law of 1838, but there were no walls at Saint-Alban. In terms of Fanon’s development, the most significant figure there was François Tosquelles (1912–1994), an ebullient Catalan refugee from Franco’s Spain who, sadly, still awaits his biographer. It was Tosquelles who taught Fanon to listen to his patients and to run meetings. It was Tosquelles who taught him to incorporate at least some elements of psychoanalysis into his work; unlike his mentor, Fanon was never in analysis. The institutional therapy pioneered at Saint-Alban used a combination of techniques, drawing on both psychoanalytic and phenomenological traditions, but also using drugs and electro-shock treatments. The hospital itself was designed to be what the British tradition calls a therapeutic community.

Fanon’s completion of his medical studies was followed by a further period of uncertainty. A post was available in Martinique, but Fanon’s application was unsuccessful. After taking a temporary post in Pontorson on the Normandy coast, Fanon was appointed to a consultancy in Blida, a town fifty kilometres to the south of Algiers. A year after his arrival there, the Algerian war broke out when the clandestine Front de Libération National launched co-ordinated terrorist attacks across a territory which, according to French law, was as much a part of France as Brittany.

The three years Fanon spent in Blida were hyperactive. He held an important position in a well-equipped but overcrowded hospital, gave papers at professional conferences in France and pursued the research activity expected of any ambitious psychiatrist. He was also now emerging as a major figure in black politics, speaking on racism and culture at the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists (Paris 1956), and on liberation struggles and national cultures at the Second Congress (Rome 1959). His main concern was, however, with the Algerian struggle for independence, and he soon

3 See the obituary tributes published in, L’Information psychiatrique, x (1994) and l’Évolution psychiatrique, xl (3) (1995).
established contacts with the FLN. Wounded guerrillas were treated in secret in the hospital; certain of Fanon’s colleagues joined the fighters in the mountains. His case-load changed as he now had to deal with both the victims and the perpetrators of the torture that had become an integral feature of the French army’s pacification methods. By late 1956, Fanon’s situation was intolerable and he resigned his post by writing to the Resident-Minister. Psychiatry was, he wrote, a medical technique designed to alleviate man’s alienation from his environment; French policy in Algeria ensured that the Arab population was totally alienated and living in a state of total depersonalization. In February 1957, Fanon was officially granted a year’s leave of absence for personal reasons. He had in fact been ordered to leave the Algeria with which he now identified so closely that he described himself as neither Martiniquean nor French, but Algerian.

Fanon had gone to Algeria in the hope that the therapeutic methods perfected at Saint-Alban could be employed in Blida. The experiment was a partial success in the racially segregated hospital. European woman patients diagnosed as border-line cases responded well to a regime that included occupational therapy, meetings and open discussion. Male Algerian patients did not, and displayed a particular aversion to basket-making. Fanon and his younger colleagues had encountered the cultural limitations of their progressive methods and therefore began to explore other possibilities. A Moorish café, that essential feature of male social life in North Africa, was successfully opened in the hospital. Traditional story-tellers were brought in to organize social gatherings. Fanon also began to explore how culture-bound Thematic Apperception Tests could be adapted to a Muslim environment, and to investigate traditional attitudes towards mental illness. He began to undertake field work in the mountains of Kabylia, but those trips may also have served as a cover for meetings with FLN units. At least two theses on traditional cathartic therapies were begun by junior colleagues working under Fanon’s supervision; neither author survived the war.

After his expulsion from Algeria, Fanon travelled clandestinely to Tunis, the Algerian revolution’s capital in exile. He continued his psychiatric work there, went on with his research, and organized the country’s first day-hospital service. Perhaps inevitably, his political activity was now taking up more and more of his time. Fanon was writing unsigned articles for the FLN press and was becoming a major propagandist. He did not become a senior figure in the FLN leadership, not least because he was neither an Arab nor a Muslim: Algerian nationalism has always been defined as Arabo-Islamic. Fanon was more useful as a roving ambassador for the Information Ministry of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Algeria, and attended meetings and conference in many of the newly independent countries of black Africa in that capacity.

Fanon’s last and most famous book, Les Damnés de la terre (1961), is a savage apologia for the use of revolutionary violence when all alternatives
have been exhausted, as they had been in Algeria. The wretched of the earth – the landless peasants of the countryside and the dispossessed of the urban shanty towns – are seen as the only force that can permit the emergence of a new man and a new humanism. Their violence is a cleansing violence. Fanon’s final vision is an apocalyptic one, but it is one that is firmly rooted in the realities of the most violent of the wars of decolonization.

Les Damnés de la terre was written in a desperate race against time and death. In December 1960, the GPRA’s new ambassador to Ghana was diagnosed as suffering from leukemia and was flown to Moscow for treatment. His family remained in Tunis. Fanon’s Russian doctors were unable to do anything for him and, surprisingly, recommended treatment in the United States. On 10 October 1961, a Dr Omar Ibrahmin Fanon was admitted to the Clinical Center of the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. On 6 December, Fanon died alone, days after seeing the first copies of Les Damnés de la terre. On the day that the news of his death reached Paris, his book was seized by the police on the grounds that it was seditious. Fanon was buried in Algeria, which became an independent state in July 1962.

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