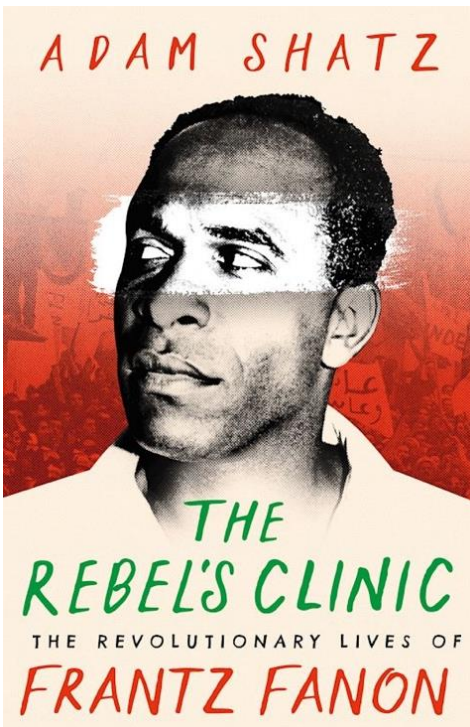


THE REBEL'S CLINIC: THE REVOLUTIONARY LIVES OF FRANTZ FANON

STEPHEN MCCLOSKEY

Shatz, Adam (2024) *The Rebel's Clinic: The Revolutionary Lives of Frantz Fanon*, London: Head of Zeus.



This welcome new biography of Frantz Fanon revisits his life and work, and considers his enduring influence as a clinician, revolutionary, and perceptive analyst of the psychological impact of colonisation and racism on both the coloniser and colonised. His biographer, Adam Shatz, argues that 'Few writers have captured so vividly the lived experience of racism and colonial domination, the fury it creates in the minds of the oppressed - or the sense of alienation and powerlessness that it engenders' (2024: 8). In his preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that 'the Third World finds *itself* and speaks to *itself*

through his voice' (emphasis in original) (Sartre, 1963: 10). Fanon's books have added currency today in supporting analysis of Israel's settler-colonialism of

Palestine. While he did not address Israel's occupation of Palestine directly, Fanon wrote with great insight on the lived experience and violence of colonisation, both physical and mental. The Palestinian psychiatrist, Samah Jabr (2021), said about Fanon that his 'prophetic insights are a source of inspiration to Palestinians', citing his 'quest for justice in the face of oppressive control of one population by another' and 'his understanding that this subjugation is not only political, economic or military, it is also profoundly and inherently psychological'. It is remarkable that Fanon continues to enjoy such recognition and influence having lived a truncated life that was taken by leukemia in 1961 when he was only 36.

And, yet the title of this biography refers to the 'revolutionary lives' of Fanon which reflects a prodigious working life and prolific output as an author, clinician and journalist. He was also a decorated soldier in the Second World War, a clinical psychiatrist who practiced in France and Africa, a supporter of the Algerian independence movement, and a roving ambassador for the Front de libération nationale (FLN) in Africa, which brought him into contact with leading figures in the anti-colonial struggle at the time. We can add to these lives, a profound interest in philosophy, literature and politics which drew him to Sartre and his partner, Simone de Beauvoir, the distinguished philosopher, feminist and social theorist, both of whom he met toward the end of his life.

There is also in Fanon, a very obvious influence on Paulo Freire and development education which makes his work of great importance and relevance to the readers of *Policy and Practice* (Freire, 2000: 62). Freire quoted Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, 1963) in his own seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2000). For Freire, the oppressed 'cannot perceive clearly the "order" which serves the interests of the oppressors whose image they have internalized' (Ibid.: 62). This submergence is evident in the fatalism of the oppressed who regard their suffering as the 'will of God' rather than rooted in exploitative social and economic oppression that attends colonisation. (Ibid.: 61-62). Other manifestations of alienation identified by Freire, include 'a type of horizontal violence, striking out at their own comrades for the pettiest reasons' and, particularly among the bourgeoisie, 'an irresistible attraction towards the oppressors and their way of life' (Ibid.: 62). These are ideas drawn from *The*

Wretched of the Earth, which Freire attached to his radical pedagogy that regards critical thinking as a pre-condition to unveiling reality and supporting action toward transformation of that reality (Ibid.: 54).

Between the métropole and the periphery

Fanon's anti-colonial analysis not only emerged from his clinical practice but his lived experience in both France, the métropole, and its colonial satellites. He was born in the French colony of Martinique and was acutely aware of the brutality of colonisation as well as its mental subjugation. He was also exposed to the racial hierarchies in the French army during the war as West Indians like himself were considered honorary *toubabs*, Europeans, not Africans (Ibid.: 34). Although he received a Croix de Guerre for his military service Black colonial soldiers, who made up most of the French army, were excluded from the 'triumphal march into the capital' (Ibid.: 36). After the war, he studied medicine in Lyon, before specialising in psychiatry, and took his first steps into psychology and mental illness while working with North African labourers. He attended lectures by the French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who advanced the idea that we experience the world through our bodies. This aligned with Fanon's awareness of the physical oppression suffered by the colonised in Martinique. He also believed that Black people lacked physical anonymity which Merleau-Ponty considered an essential element of human freedom.

Fanon was beginning to situate racism in the context of colonialism which he considered 'a system of pathological relations masquerading as normality' (Ibid.: 58). Racism, according to Fanon, 'was not merely the incidental expression of a pathology; it *was* a pathology, born of slavery and colonization' (Ibid.: 72). For example, Fanon observed that his colleagues spoke to North Africans in an infantilising French called *Le petit nègre* and chapter one of his first book *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon, 1986: 18) debates the cultural assimilation of the colonised into the 'culture of the mother country'. It follows, therefore that 'The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards' (Ibid.). Shatz argues that in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon 'took apart the French myth of color blindness ... in the language of psychiatry' (2024: 86-87). The 'white mask',

argues Shatz, is the ‘prism - or prison - through which West Indians see, and misrecognize themselves’ (Ibid.: 87).

In 1952, Fanon married Josie (Marie-Josèph) Dublé who was of Romani-Corsican descent with a strong trade union background and a passionate supporter of left-wing politics. The dominant intellectual influence on Fanon was Aimé Césaire, who was born on a plantation in northern Martinique and became one of the founders of the Négritude movement, later representing Martinique in the French National Assembly. He wrote *Discourse on Colonialism* (Césaire, 2000), one of the key anti-colonial texts in the post-war period. Négritude was concerned with ‘emancipation of Black humanity not only from political and economic domination but also from the tyranny of assimilation to white values’ (Shatz, 2024: 19). The founders of Négritude shared, according to Césaire ‘a stubborn refusal to alienate ourselves, to lose our attachment to our countries, our peoples, our languages’ (quoted in Shatz, 2024: 40).

Psychiatry as politics

Despite his experiences of racism in France, Fanon spent a year and a half at Saint-Alban-sur-Limagnole asylum in southern France learning new methods in ‘institutional psychiatry’ (Ibid.: 105) where he worked under the mentorship of the Catalan psychiatrist François Tosquelles who regarded psychiatry as ‘an extension of politics’ (Ibid.: 112). In 1953, Fanon became interim head of a hospice in Pontorson in northwest France before accepting the post of director of Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital in Algeria. This was not a consciously revolutionary move as he was a colonial subject and the Algerian war of independence did not start until the following year, but his tenure at Blida was to catapult him into anti-colonial struggle. One of the innovations he introduced at Blida - drawing upon Tosquelles’ institutional psychotherapy - were forms of ‘sociality’, including a traditional Moorish café for Muslim males and an ‘Oriental salon’ for Muslim females. These methods gave patients a ‘growing sense of selfhood and dignity’ (Ibid.: 133) and for Fanon reinforced the idea that ‘the incidence of mental illness among his Muslim patients directly related to their experiences of dehumanization under colonialism’ (Ibid.: 132).

Fanon began providing medical treatment and psychological support for wounded resistance fighters in the armed wing of the Algerian independence movement, the ALN (Armée de libération nationale) at Blida which earned him the trust of combatants and a means of communication with the leadership. However, he could not assume a decision-making role in the independence movement as he was neither a Muslim nor Algerian, and could not speak Arabic which meant a dependence on translators. Although he offered to join the military struggle, the role assigned to Fanon by the FLN was as a roving ambassador 'to represent the movement: to give expression to its goals, especially for foreigners' (Ibid.: 183-4). At the end of 1956, Fanon had to leave Algeria for Paris as the Blida clinic's role in assisting resistance fighters was discovered and he as director was vulnerable to arrest and execution. Fanon relocated to Tunis and adapted to the revolutionary regimen of 'secrecy, silence and denial' with great discipline (Ibid.: 201). At the same time, he continued practicing psychiatry at the Centre neuropsychiatrique de jour (CNPJ), Africa's first psychiatric day clinic, where he 'advocated a more dynamic, confrontation approach to care, in which patients were forced to reckon with the "violence of the conflict, the toxicity of reality"' (Ibid.: 204).

The clinic did not seek the institutional confinement of patients but rather treated them on a day care basis that allowed them to return home in the evening, rather like a job, and maintain contact with their families. He also treated anti-colonial rebels and gained an insight into their psychological symptoms caused by exposure to conflict including depression, fatigue, anxiety and hallucinations. In 1959, Fanon published *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* (*L'An V de la révolution algérienne*) in which he condemned coercive attempts at 'assimilation' and the lifting of the veil (Ibid.: 225). While the 'defense of Islam had been an important rallying cry in anti-colonial struggles in Muslim-majority countries' (Ibid.: 225-26) Fanon saw Islamic identity as a 'stop along the way, not an ultimate destination' (Ibid.: 226). Shatz interestingly describes describes *L'An V* as 'modernization theory for radicals, presenting revolution as a kind of shock therapy for a traditional society' (Ibid.: 234) and one of the pleasures of his biography is the fresh appraisal of Fanon's books in historical and contemporary terms.

The mimicry of colonial rule

The position taken by leading members in the Négritude movement toward the metropole disappointed Fanon who attacked it for what Shatz describes as its ‘race essentialism and political cowardice’ (Ibid.: 243). Léopold Sédar Senghor, who would become president of Senegal supported French President de Gaulle’s 1958 referendum on a constitution for the Fifth Republic that would offer neo-colonial status to 13 sub-Saharan African colonies. And when France introduced special powers in 1954 to give the military a free hand in fighting the FLN, including increasing the French forces in Algeria to 500,000, the measures were supported by Fanon’s mentor, Aimé Césaire, who would later resign from the Communist Party and regret his vote. By contrast, Fanon found friendship with Patrice Lumumba, prime minister of independent Congo, who represented a ‘repudiation of the tribalism that Western leaders had promoted under colonialism, and now exploited to keep the continent divided, and under their control’ (Ibid.: 247). He was also drawn to Jean-Paul Sartre’s ‘Critique of Dialectical Reason’ and its analysis of scarcity as ‘the defining condition of political struggle’ (Ibid.: 300). Sartre’s discourse on dominant issues in the global South, including colonialism, racism, violence and scarcity had a significant impact on Fanon and his final book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) described by Shatz as a text that:

“brought together piercing analytic insights and militant theatrics, apocalyptic warnings and wildly utopian projections, a passionate faith in violence as a means to achieve freedom, and a lucid awareness of the dangers that violence posed to mental health and psychiatrist’s painstaking task of disalienation” (Ibid.: 316).

Much was made about the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* called ‘Concerning Violence’ and its assertion that ‘decolonization is always a violent phenomenon’ (Fanon, 1963: 35). But Shatz argues that ‘The violence of the colonized was a *counter*-violence, embraced after other, more peaceful forms of opposition had proved impotent’ (Shatz, 2024: 9-10). Fanon was scathing in his depiction of the ‘nauseating mimicry’ of colonial rule in post-independent states (1963: 311) in which the bourgeoisie sought to quickly fill the roles left by the settler bourgeoisie. The leader of the national party becomes an autocratic

interlocutor between the former colonial power and the colonised people using the trappings of 'independence' to maintain a neo-colonial regime. Fanon anticipates 'Third World' autocrats such as Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe or the Democratic Republic of Congo's President Mobutu.

Shatz is critical of the book's 'broad-brush depiction of a monolithic Third World' (2024: 317) but *The Wretched of the Earth* remains an essential analysis of settler-colonialism and decolonisation. A reader today will be drawn immediately to its relevance to Israel's colonisation of Palestine. For example, Fanon tells us that 'when the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms he constantly refers to the bestiary' (Fanon, 1963: 42). Who can read that sentence and not think of former Israeli Defence Minister, Yoav Gallant's description of Palestinians on 9 October 2023 as 'human animals' while implementing a 'complete siege of Gaza'? (ICJ, 2023 :142). Shatz summarises *The Wretched of the Earth* as a warning about 'the obstacles to post-colonial freedom: corruption, autocratic rule, the lingering injury of colonial violence, and the persistence of underdevelopment and hunger - a "bloodless genocide" that consigns "a billion and a half men" to oblivion' (2024: 336).

Legacy

The final chapter of *The Rebel's Clinic* is a fascinating dive into Fanon's legacy and the continuing influence he exerts on culture, politics, decolonisation, disalienation and clinical psychiatry, particularly in the global South. He died shortly after the publication of *The Wretched of the Earth* and didn't get to witness its impact on Cuban revolutionaries, the African National Congress in South Africa and Palestinian resistance. When Sartre sided with Israel in the 1967 occupation of Palestine, Josie, Fanon's widow, demanded that Sartre's preface be removed from *The Wretched of the Earth* (Ibid.: 361). The Palestinian academic, activist and critic Edward Said drew upon Fanon's optimism to believe that the 'oppressed could put forward counternarratives, take their destiny into their own hands, and contest systems of domination' (Ibid.: 368). In the United States, the Black Panthers drew upon Fanon's writings on medicine to 'set up free health clinics in poor urban communities and assigned readings by Fanon to the doctors who partnered with them' (Ibid.: 365). Ironically, Fanon became a casualty of decolonisation in Algeria given his 'lack of interest in Islam, Algerian

traditions and the history of Arab nationalism' (Ibid.: 375). Fanon would have mourned the emergence of radical Islam in Algeria and the ten-year civil war from 1992-2002 that claimed 100,000 lives (Ibid.: 376).

From a clinical perspective, the Centro Frantz Fanon in Turin treats migrants and refugees who are 'victims of trafficking or torture' (383). The entrance warns staff that 'representations and stereotypes become masks, imagos, that can fix and trap us, and others; that representations efface people, objects, practices and experiences' (Ibid.: 384). Fanon would have undoubtedly welcomed Israeli and Palestinian psychiatrists collaborating and drawing upon his work to support the inseparable struggles for justice and mental health (Ibid.: 382). The Israeli psychiatrist, Ruchama Marton and her Palestinian colleague Samah Jabr, have condemned Israeli psychiatry's complicity with the Israeli army and 'its racist assumptions about the Arab mind' (Ibid.: 382). Mentally ill Palestinians in Israeli military courts are diagnosed as 'impostors and manipulators' and so denied the 'right to madness' (Ibid.).

Although Fanon's 'project for the postcolonial world lies in ruins' given the West's continued, more insidious control of the global South through the 'coercions of the market' (Ibid.: 387), his 'critique of power and international relations retains much of its force' (Ibid.: 388). This new appraisal of Fanon's life and work has been published at a time of resurgent racism, economic polarisation, acute class inequality, a climate emergency and mass migration, war in Europe and deepening destabilisation in the Middle-East. Fanon would have quickly identified the root causes of these problems and the necessity for political education of the people as a means toward 'opening their minds, awakening them, and allowing the birth of their intelligence' (1963: 197). For development educators, with the remit of creating critical understanding of global problems as a preface for action and social change, Fanon remains an essential touchstone for our work. This excellent biography could support a greater alignment of Fanon's work within development education practice as it introduces and situates his work in today's world with clarity and insight.

References

Césaire, A (2000) [1955] *Discourse on Colonialism*, New York: Monthly Review Press.

ICJ (International Court of Justice) (2023) Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel), 29 December 2023, available: <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20231228-app-01-00-en.pdf> (accessed 7 January 2025).

Fanon, F (1986) [1952] *Black Skin, White Masks*, London: Pluto Press.

Fanon, F (1989) [1959] *Studies in A Dying Colonialism*, London: Earthscan.

Fanon, F (1963) [1961] *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, available: https://monoskop.org/images/6/6b/Fanon_Frantz_The_Wretched_of_the_Earth_1963.pdf (accessed 4 January 2025).

Freire, P (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, London and New York: Continuum.

Jabr, S (2021) 'Fanon, the struggle for justice and mental health', Daraja Press Podcast, 17 August, available: <https://darajapress.com/fanon-the-struggle-for-justice-and-mental-health-august-24-200pm-edt?srsltid=AfmBOoqCQN30p2m2cvRpWiOWdiirixww3ich1Zx543UwPU5TnGkp7ymn> (accessed 3 January 2025).

Sartre, J-P (1963) [1961] 'Preface', *The Wretched of the Earth*, London: Penguin Books.

Stephen McCloskey is Director of the Centre for Global Education and editor of *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review*. He is author of *Global Learning and International Development in the Age of Neoliberalism* (2022, Routledge).