

Peter Hudis

FRANTZ FANON

Philosopher of the barricades

165pp. Pluto Press. Paperback, £12.99

(US \$20).

978 0 7453 3625 1

For a man who wrote on a wide range of the questions we are grappling with today, the Martinique-born philosopher Frantz Fanon (1925–61) often attracts one-sided critical consideration. His final work *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961; *The Wretched of the Earth*), a passionate survey of the path to decolonization, dominates postcolonial studies with its polemical essay, "Concerning Violence". Taking on a life of its own beyond its context of the Algerian war of independence (1954–62), this opening chapter became inspirational reading for various independence movements across Africa and the Middle East.

Peter Hudis has approached the man behind the text – psychiatrist, philosopher, revolutionary, humanist – with balance and clarity in his new book. Although still chronological in structure, Hudis's re-historicizing impulse gives us more than a traditional biography. The author's intellectually rigorous but accessible critical framework reads Fanon's life and thought both through his own experiences – those of French colonial racism, fighting in the Second World War, his psychiatric work in Lyon, and his involvement with Algeria's FLN – as well as through moments where his intellectual influences, Sartre, Hegel, psychoanalysis and Marx, came into productive tension with his own understanding of the psycho-dynamics of racism.

Fanon's firm belief in the lack of an ontology of blackness forms the basis of his view of racism as a social reality, shaped by specific socio-economic determinants. Blackness is not taken as essence but rather one product of a historic, colonial mode of seeing; yet Fanon acknowledges that the psychic internalization of race is a lived reality for black people. Therefore racial disalienation requires both psychological and social work of several stages – from the owning and celebration of black consciousness, as in the *Négritude* and Black Power movements, to eventually transcending race as a determinant of identity. Both the psychiatrist and the political theorist in Fanon believed in the liberating potency of working through, on a psychic-individual as well as a cultural-social level, the historical construction of race and its association with identity/self-worth, rather than insisting on a politically useful but ultimately still alienating "essential" black identity. Indeed, in his later writing on decolonization, Fanon finds this akin to a national independence that leaves neocolonial infrastructures unchanged.

Hudis chooses his key moments of focus throughout, both for their insights into today's racial and socio-political struggles as well as for their contribution to Fanon's own intellectual formation. Thanks to this engaged and accessible reading, we are able to grasp the continuing relevance of Fanon's thought as well as the life that shaped the man.

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