

# Frantz Fanon: 1925 – 1961

Frantz Fanon is widely considered to be the most important philosopher of the African struggle for liberation.

He was born on the Caribbean island of Martinique in 1925. Martinique was a French colony where the indigenous people had been destroyed and slaves from Africa, and later, indentured workers from India, had been brought to the island by the French to grow sugar to give energy to workers in European factories.

The Second World War broke out in 1939 and in 1943 Fanon, then 17 years old, joined the Free French Forces to fight the extreme racism and authoritarianism of the Nazis. He won the French army's highest award for bravery but was very disappointed at the racism that black soldiers experienced in the French army.

After the war he went to France and studied to be a doctor specialising in psychiatry. At the age of 27, while he was still a student, he wrote a book called *Black Skin, White Masks*. This book is about the lived experience of racism in the colony of Martinique and in France. It argues that every human being is in motion towards the world and has the freedom to make their own decisions about who they want to be in the world but that racism denies people this freedom and turns us into objects. Fanon argues that because racism is unable to recognise the intelligence of black people it is not possible to reason with racism and so action needs to be taken to change the world and to rid it of racism. *Black Skin, White Masks* is often considered to be the most important book ever written about and against racism.

In 1953 Fanon, now a qualified psychiatrist, moved to Algeria, also a French colony, to run a psychiatric hospital. When he arrived there he found some patients chained to the walls. He immediately changed the hospital from something like a prison to a place where people were treated with dignity and could heal. The Algerian war of National Liberation began in November 1954. Fanon secretly supported the rebels and in 1956 he resigned his job and went into exile with the Algerian revolutionaries in Tunisia. He worked as a journalist and as a doctor for the revolutionary movement and was the editor of their newspaper.

In 1959 he published a book called *A Dying Colonialism*. The book is about the Algerian struggle against colonialism and it focuses on how a people in struggle are changed by the experience. Fanon argues that struggle is a collective movement of people out of the places to which oppression has confined them. This can be movement from one place to another but it can also be the kind of movement where people change the social roles that an oppressive system has given to them. He stresses that every person thinks and that this becomes apparent in a mass struggle. He focuses especially on how women take a stronger position in the family and in the nation.

In the same year Fanon became the official ambassador for the Algerian national liberation movement to the newly independent states in West Africa. He met with the new governments in West Africa and was shocked that these governments were often taking over systems of oppression rather than getting rid of them and building societies that took the humanity of every person seriously.

In 1961 Fanon, very ill with cancer, wrote his last book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. The book deals with colonialism, the struggles against colonialism, the betrayal of those struggles and the return to new mass struggles. Fanon describes the colonial system as one in which human beings are divided into different races and then allocated different spaces in society. He argues that a real decolonisation will have to break down the way in which different spaces are reserved for different people.

Fanon stresses that ordinary people, like shack dwellers and peasants, are often in the forefront of the struggles against colonialism. He also argues that in the beginning of these struggles people tend to have a very simplistic idea of who are their comrades and who are their enemies. But during the struggle it becomes clear that political commitment is a matter of choice rather than birth.

Fanon is also very clear that when colonialism sees that it will lose, it tries to make a deal with the leaders of the anti-colonial movement. That deal is for the system of oppression to remain in place but for new people, the leaders of the anti-colonial system, to take over its management.

Fanon argues that during the struggle the party is a place for debate and discussion and is committed to collective emancipation. But after independence is achieved, the party becomes a means to control the people. He says that the leaders of the party keep reminding the people of the struggle days to try and keep their loyalty, but they are in fact the new oppressors. They always try to make the people look backwards rather than forwards to try and hide this reality. Sometimes they try to claim that the old colonialists are threatening the new country to try and keep the people loyal to them. But the reality is that the new elite are in partnership with the old colonialists.

Fanon says that when people start to realise that they have been betrayed, some become desperate and poor people start to attack each other. He warns of the risk of xenophobia, ethnic tensions and men turning on women.

But Fanon says that the people are not stupid and they slowly start to realise that they have been betrayed and that they are being lied to. There is a return to struggle. There has to be a second struggle to make sure that every person is recognised as a human being. This time the social questions - land, housing, work for all and so on - have to be put at the centre of the struggle from the beginning.

Fanon died in December 1961. His body was smuggled across the border and buried on a battlefield in Algeria. In the fifty years since his death his vision of a society in which the humanity of every person is recognised and is made to count equally has inspired struggles all over Africa and around the world. Fanon's insistence that every one thinks and that the oppressed can, do and will liberate themselves, continues to inspire radicals who have confidence in the people and who reject a politics in which a self-appointed group of experts think that they should lead the struggles of the people.