

Fanon Today: The Revolt and Reason of the Wretched of the Earth

Edited by Nigel C Gibson (Daraja Press, 2021)

Fanon Today: The Revolt and Reason of the Wretched of the Earth will appear in the fall of 2021¹ marking the 60th anniversary of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and also his death in December 1961. It will be the third volume I have edited on Fanon. The first, *Rethinking Fanon: The Continuing Dialogue* was published at the highpoint of postcolonial studies in 1999. ... The second volume, *Living Fanon*, published in 2011, widened the scope and was genuinely internationalist. *Fanon Today: The Revolt and Reason of the Wretched of the Earth* represents something quite new in Fanon "scholarship." Conscious of the 60 years that divides our period from Fanon's I want to investigate the tensions and contradictions that Fanon explores between mass movements and intellectuals in his period and our own. The structure of the volume will also be framed by such question as, how do intellectuals working within social movements write about specific social movements and how might they be informed by and articulate Fanon's work; how might movements directly and organically integrate Fanon's (or Fanonian) insights into their perspectives, their educational work, their strategy, tactics, and theory; and how is this process written about and discussed in and with these movements? ...

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In his presentation at The Congress of Black Writers and Artists conference in Rome, included in his chapter "On National Culture" in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon claimed that "each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it." If these words are one expression of the Fanonian measure, then the ideas this book offers revolve around the importance of Fanon thought to the various peoples and cultures being subjugated by capitalist colonization. Can Fanon help them in their quest to be free from subjugation? ...

Fanon was one of the first theorists of the anticolonial revolution to warn that the counter-revolution was not simply caused by external forces. And he found that one of the greatest weaknesses of anticolonial movements was their failure to consider, let alone create, a genuinely decolonized society, was because of the lack of an explicit revolutionary-humanist ideology. Such an ideology had to be, he argued, dialectically connected with the experience of the "wretched of the earth," the dehumanized and uncounted masses. The tragedy of the anticolonial struggles, Fanon continues, is framed by the macro-political outlooks of the anticolonial movement leaders, and by the intellectuals who fetishize political power, seeing access to the colonial apparatus (and the state) as their prize. Fanon's insights, such as these, have proved essential to the understanding of the failure of countless anticolonial struggles. From our present retrogressive reality, this book demands that we recast our vision and ask: What might this generation of intellectual revolutionaries and social movements ask of Fanon, and what might have Fanon asked of them?

1 Daraja Press, associated with Leftword books in India and CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa) in Africa, has agreed to publish the work. Since one object of this work is to have it read by activists and intellectuals who are engaging with Fanon, I have chosen Daraja rather than an academic or commercial press since they provide their books for free through their website. Leftword books can also issue the work in a cheap paperback in India and through its connections with "The Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research" can have the work distributed in South Africa and Brazil. In addition there is a possibility that Daraja can publish individual essays in a series of pamphlets.

If we wish to move forward, everything, Fanon writes in *The Wretched*, needs to be thought out again, and new beginnings should be fashioned in line with those caught up in local struggles. This return to the *people* is by no means transparent, Fanon warns, because demoralization has been buried deep by years of colonization. He insists that “the sense of time must no longer be that of the moment or the next harvest but rather that of *the rest of the world*.” Fanon’s sharp critique of the wreckage wrought by European colonialism in the name of humanity does not tempt him to reject ideas of humanism as the master’s tools; rather, his quest, a “new humanism,” is evoked throughout his work and makes especially relevant arguments for radical activists who are committed to promoting social change, dignity and equality.

This collection will further some of the latest thinking on Fanon by asking questions from another standpoint—as Fanon called it, the “rationality of revolt.” Fanon reminds us in *The Wretched of the Earth* that the anticolonial intellectuals, enamoured with state politics and state power as the object of politics, often deny these movements any traction. At best, popular revolts are viewed as supporters for political plans, so, as Fanon puts it, any criticisms become quickly silenced. What often unites critics and local and state governments, is the idea that the poor cannot speak for themselves; indeed, when they speak out they must be speaking for other interests and forces. The nationalist intellectuals, Fanon argues, are incapable of rationalizing popular praxis because of their “incapacity to attribute it any reason.” This idea is essential to Fanon’s critique in *The Wretched of the Earth*, as he emphasizes a dialectical relationship between thought and activity. This is the essence of what I have called “Fanonian practices.” In *Fanonian Practices in South Africa: From Steve Biko to Abahlali baseMjondolo* I argued that just as revolutionary thought and the development of new concepts in conversation with Fanon, such as Black Consciousness in South Africa, can give radical action its direction, mass movements, often from outside of the realm of the political can give direction to radical theoreticians. The engagements with Fanon in *Fanon Today: The Revolt and Reason of the Wretched of the Earth* begins from these spaces. By shifting the geography of reason to the revolt of the discounted and marginalized, this collection will ask the question: How can Fanon help think through and understand the myriad global crises we confront?

Part I: “Fanonian Interpretations From Below”

The eleven essays in the first section of *Fanon Today*, “Fanonian Interpretations From Below” engage with Fanon through discussions of revolutions, revolts and repressions on a national scale. “Reading Syria through Fanon,” by Razan Ghazzawi, is one important example of Fanon’s work being used to explore the feelings and experiences of alienation among Syrian Palestinians from below mediated through Fanon. Such approaches, the author contends, help readers understand the uprisings and counter-revolutions that have been occurring in the region since the “Arab Spring” of 2011. This chapter is immediately put into conversation with R.A. Judy’s piece, “Fanon and the Tunisian Revolution” which begins from a different perspective, focusing on contemporary discussions of Fanon among North African activist intellectuals. Through a Fanonian analysis and dialogue with activists, Hamza Hamouchene continues the discussion of the Arab Spring wondering whether the current (2019) Algerian uprisings may be “a second Fanonian moment.” In contrast, in “Fanon in Kabul,” Hjalmar Jorge Joffre-Eichhorn discusses the recent interest in Fanon in Afghanistan, which is marked by new translations of Fanon’s work. Continued interest in Fanon and engagement with activists is discussed in the following two chapters with Wangui Kimari focusing on Kenya in her chapter, “Raging against the entitlement of empire: grassroots social justice activists in Kenya” and Léa Tosold analyzing the Mundurucu peoples’ remarkable resistance to the construction of hydroelectric dams in Tapajós, the last major free flowing river in Amazonia in Brazil. From Durban, South Africa, members of the shack dweller movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo, discuss what they call “living learning and learning with Fanon in the shacks,” focusing on the power of Fanon’s work that might not have been fully understood at the time.

Sixty years after the publication of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Abahlali baseMjondolo militants argue now they have come to view Fanon and his viewpoints as a new revelation.

The next series of four chapters comes from engagements with Fanon in neocolonial spaces in Europe. Afro-Portuguese activist, Flávio Zenun Almada, describes his own experience of Fanonian enlightenment writings in Lisbon in “Struggling for the Right to Live with Dignity: Reading Fanon in Lisbon.” The France-based, anti-authoritarian, Pan-African, Black political collective *Collectif Cases Rebelles*’ reflect on Fanon’s phrase, the “Zone of Occult Instability,” as they question the role of art and culture in struggles reflecting their own positionality as transnational people, and as they seek to connect to, as Fanon urges, “this zone of occult instability where the people dwell ... where everything is called into question.” The living struggle for national culture and language is further investigated by Feargal Mac Ionnrachtaigh’s Fanonian interpretation of the Irish Language revival in the North. Mac Ionnrachtaigh’s essay, “Ón Bhun Aníos (From the Bottom Up),” charts the development of national consciousness, and the struggle for it to act as a potent political force in its expression within the Irish language. The last chapter of this section, by Annette Rimmer, uncovers similar potent political forces in “Voice of the revolution: radio and women’s empowerment.” Using Fanon’s chapter, “This is the Voice of Algeria” from *A Dying Colonialism*, Rimmer explores the struggle to develop a genuine grassroots and local community radio in the North of England.

Part II: Decolonizing Madness and the Struggle for the Human

In his letter of resignation as a psychiatrist at Blida-Joinville Hospital in Algeria, Fanon argued that it was impossible to practice mental health in an insane society; that is, to do psychiatric work in a society that systemically dehumanizes its people. In the middle section of *Fanon Today: The Revolt and Reason of the Wretched of the Earth*, “Decolonizing Madness and the Struggle for the Human,” we uncover both the practical and theoretical usefulness of Fanon’s psychiatric work for those working in and thinking about mental health in dehumanized situations. A psychiatrist by training, Fanon did not give up on his concerns for the traumatic and devastating psychological effects of colonialism, racism and war on mental health after he resigned from Blida-Joinville. To those subjugated to such inhumanity, the work to address the demoralization buried deep within their cultural subconscious still remains, and some of Fanon’s reflections on what can be done to remedy these effects can be heard throughout *The Wretched of the Earth*.

This section starts with two perspectives from Palestine. In “The Spirit of Transformation: Emancipating the Damaged Society,” Irene Calis suggests that the decisive factor of emancipatory transformation rests not only in the radical change in people’s consciousness, but also in the compromised state of ‘the human’ in which that future society will bear fruit. ... In “Fanon and Palestine: the struggle for justice as the core of mental health,” psychiatrists Samah Jabr and Elizabeth Berger discuss how emerging theory and practice in Palestine—in regard to the country’s life under colonialism—reflect Fanon’s ideas on breaking free from the chains of colonization. Following Fanon, they consider the nature of recovery as an aspect of social renewal and transformation. In “A human being, overdetermined: Fanon, deep racism, and the quest for ‘health’”, Miraj Desai argues that being overdetermined is essentially the same thing as becoming racialized. This process of becoming-a-caricature, he argues, can have devastating consequences for “mental health,” and for life within social and institutional structures. In “Ghosts of future: Traditional medicine in Mozambican postcolonial society and migrants’ narratives as fields of epistemic revolt and political resistance” Roberto Beneduce considers the value of resistance found in local healing strategies, and the vocabulary of suffering adopted by refugees and migrants struggling for life and the conundrums of traumatic memory as a specific form of *melancholic* revolt. The section ends with David Pavón-Cuellar’s chapter, “The still wretched of the earth. For a critique of imaginary decolonization,” which investigates the causes of enduring pathologies.

Taking Fanon seriously, he argues, forces us to denounce how the independence of former colonies has merely concealed colonial violence, making it surreptitious, thus contributing to the continuation of colonialism by other means.

Part III The Revolutionary Implications and Actuality of Fanon's Thought

Part three focuses on the global relevancy and revolutionary implications of Fanon's thought and begins with Yasser Munif's chapter, "The Syrian Revolt Between Fanon's New Humanism and the Politics of Anti-Solidarity." Munif analyzes the politics of anti-solidarity, which a large segment of the international left produced to suppress the Syrian revolt and examines the left's lack of understanding of the revolt, and its inability to formulate an adequate platform to support grassroots struggles in Syria.

This section includes two chapters by intellectual activists who connect Fanon with emergent Brazilian politics: Rosemere Ferreira da Silva discusses the impact of Frantz Fanon's ideas on the formation of black consciousness and militancy in Brazil, and Deivison Mendes Faustino finds the "actuality of Fanonian thought" in three major Brazilian thinkers: Caio Prado Jr., Florestan Fernandes and José Chasin. This idea of travelling theory is developed in Alejandro De Oto's chapter which begins with Fanon's references to Latin America in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Linking the main concerns of this era and with the ways in which Fanon is read today he argues for a commitment for his writing to become an active part of contemporary social theory and philosophy.

From the US, Toussaint Losier discusses "the actuality of Fanonian thought" inside the carceral system through the work of Illinois prisoner Yaki (James Sayles). In the early 2000s Yaki began circulating the first of several pamphlets, "The 'Setting Afoot' of a New People," which made unique contributions to the study of Fanon while in the context of being inside one of America's most notorious prisons. Contemporary intellectual discussions around Fanon's work are engaged by Iranian former political prisoner (now on bail though not formerly charged), Yashar Darolshafa. Darolshafa critically discusses Ali Shariati—often labeled "the Frantz Fanon of Iran's Islamic Revolution"—arguing that many of the defenders of Fanon in Iran are the same colonized intellectuals whom Fanon criticizes.

In his chapter, South African social theorist Michael Neocosmos focuses on the question of national consciousness in "The People-as-Nation and the Nation-State: on the Dialectic of National Consciousness yesterday and today," and Ghanaian political philosopher, Ato Sekyi-Out, emphasizes the need not only to develop new vocabularies of struggle when, as Gramsci put it, the old appears to be dying and the new cannot be born. The concluding chapter, by Lou Turner "Rage and Reason: Specters of Fanon in African American Radicalism," demonstrates why black radical America became the first "home" of Frantz Fanon. Further, he begs the question that is implied throughout the volume: How might a new generation, out of the relatively obscurity of its times, see deeper into the mission that those times have bestowed upon it?