

ICWP CRITIQUE OF THE WRITINGS OF FRANTZ FANON

A Series of Articles from *Red Flag* Newspaper

Frantz Fanon and the Illusions Of “National Liberation”

Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) was a writer, psychiatrist and political activist. He defended revolutionary violence, advocated “national liberation” of colonies and wrote powerful descriptions of the lives of people suffering racist oppression. His writings had a significant influence in the mass anti-racist and anti-imperialist movements of the 1960s.

Advocates of Pan-Africanist politics or of “post-colonial” thinking appeal to his works today, without taking into account the complete historical failure of politics like Fanon’s. This article is the first of a series that will summarize and criticize Fanon’s often contradictory political ideas about racism, nationalism and capitalism from a communist point of view.

Biography

Fanon was born into a middle-class family in Martinique, a French colony in the Caribbean, dominated then and now by a small group of white landowners. In 1943 he left Martinique and fought with the Free French against Nazi Germany. After the war he studied psychiatry in France, and wrote a book attacking anti-black racism called *Black Skins, White Masks*.

In 1953 Fanon took a French government job as head of the psychiatric ward in a hospital in Blida, Algeria. In 1954 an uprising against French colonial rule began, led by the FLN (National Liberation Front), which was suppressed with great brutality by the French army. Fanon and some of his staff sympathized with the rebels. As the intensity of the fighting increased, Fanon was put in the impossible position of treating Algerian patients who had been tortured by the French cops at the same time as he treated the cops who tortured them and wanted relief from the misery of being a torturer.

By 1956 Fanon, who could no longer stay in Algeria, moved to Tunisia. There he worked as a writer and editor for the FLN newspaper *El Moujahid*,

and wrote articles and books published in France. In 1959 he was appointed ambassador to Ghana by the provisional government of Algeria, where he was diagnosed with leukemia. While fighting the disease he wrote his most influential book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, published in France just before his death. He died in Washington D. C. in 1961.

Liberation of “Man”

Fanon saw the goal of anti-colonial rebellions as advancing toward the liberation of “man,” humanity in the abstract, of no particular class. He did, however, count some classes as allies in this struggle and others as obstacles or enemies.

The Working Class

Fanon thought that the European working class received “social advantages and wage increases” as a result of colonialism. He hoped, however, for support from European workers for anti-colonial struggles as part of the “general process of man’s liberation,” despite their economic interests. [TAR, 145]

Fanon did not see the working class of the colonies as a positive force in the struggle against colonialism. Instead, he wrote that “in colonial territories the proletariat is the kernel of the colonized people most pampered by the colonial regime.” They are “relatively privileged” and have “everything to lose.” [WE, 64] He did not expect them to support the “general process of man’s liberation,” as he expected European workers to do. Instead of the working class, Fanon saw the revolutionary classes in the colonies as the peasantry and the “lumpenproletariat.”

“Lumpenproletariat”

Marx used this term to refer to pimps, thieves, swindlers, and other petty crooks. Fanon’s lumpenproletariat, however, combines the crooks with the masses of unemployed workers living in shan-

tytowns on the fringes of colonial cities. The “pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed, and the petty criminals,” he wrote, will devote “themselves to the liberation struggle.” [WE, 81-2]. This is both unscientific and insulting to workers. There is a world of difference in political thinking and power between workers who can’t find work and the petty exploiters who prey on them.

The Peasantry

Fanon’s picture of the peasants (a term which includes rich peasants and rural workers) was an idealized one, ignoring class divisions, although the main support for the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria came from poor peasants and rural workers. He saw peasants as spontaneously revolutionary, committed to violent uprisings, and also disciplined and unselfish. Fanon also realized that spontaneity had its limits, and claimed that peasant revolt “needs control and guidance” by a leadership that provided organiza-

tion and ideology, which came from “militants” who had run away from the corrupt politics of the towns to the countryside. [WE, 86, 95-6]

The experience of the communist movements in Russia and China had already shown that peasants and rural workers can be a powerful revolutionary force, but they need leadership not just from the cities but from the working class and working class ideas, that is, Marxism. But Fanon was vague about what the ideas of the revolution should be, other than “national independence.” He did not live to see the complete failure of national liberation movements to liberate the masses anywhere, from Algeria to Vietnam, despite the heroism and sacrifice by millions.

References: WE: Wretched of the Earth, R. Philcox, trans., New York, 2004; TAR: Toward the African Revolution, H. Chevalier, trans., New York, 1967.

Frantz Fanon and the Illusions Of “National Liberation,” Part II

In our previous column, we saw some of Fanon’s wrong analysis of classes in colonized countries. He lumped unemployed workers together with pimps and thieves in his “lumpenproletariat” and he lumped rich farmers together with poor farmers and rural workers in his “peasantry.”

These errors are not just carelessness on Fanon’s part, but central to his politics. Fanon maintained that the “first and foremost” division in colonial society was race, not class. He wrote that Marx’s analysis had to be “stretched” to apply to the colonies because there “you are rich because you are white and you are white because you are rich.” [WE, 5] This denial that there are class differences that matter among both the colonists and the colonized population is flatly false, however. It was false in particular about Algeria, and he knew it.

As a rule, the *colons* (European settlers) in Algeria had higher income and better treatment by the government than the Arab and Berber population of the colony, but few of these *colons* were actually rich. Wealthy business and landowners (called *grands colons*) were a small minority. As usual for the French colonies, managers, doctors and engineers recruited directly from France (like Fanon himself) were not rich but had a higher

standard of living than Europeans recruited locally for jobs like drivers, mechanics, cooks, security guards, etc. These white workers were not much better off than the colonized population of the cities.

Fanon did acknowledge that many *colons* helped the anti-colonial struggle, including some who were tortured or killed by the French authorities. He even noted that it was the small settlers (*petits colons*) who often supported the revolt in the countryside, but he does not explain this by their social class. His nationalist take is that they simply “identified themselves with the Algerian cause.” [DC, 158, 153]

Fanon’s position was that class divisions were far less important than the racial division brutally imposed by the colonizing power. Thus he saw “national” unity, not class unity, as the basis of successful revolt against colonialism. This idea of the relative unimportance of class is, however, contradicted by Fanon’s own analysis of the “national bourgeoisie,” a topic he discussed at length and with some insight.

Fanon called the capitalists who take power at the end of a colonial regime the “national bourgeoisie.” He saw them as hoping to step into the colonizers’ shoes, but economically weak and apa-

thetic. Without industrialists or financiers, they are not “geared to production, invention, creation or work.” [WE, 98]

Fanon claimed there is an “imperative duty” of an “authentic national bourgeoisie of an underdeveloped country to repudiate its bourgeois status and as an instrument of capital and become entirely subservient to the revolutionary capital that the people represent.” The bourgeoisie should “betray” the typical course of its class, learn from the people, and make its knowledge and resources available to them. Fanon is well aware, however, that the bourgeoisie “often” takes the “anti-national” course of a “conventional bourgeoisie.” [WE, 98-9]

In fact, capitalists never behave the way Fanon demands, and he gives a fairly accurate account of what they do in former colonies. The national bourgeoisie takes over all the better-paying positions previously held by Europeans. It becomes a middleman, camouflaging the rule of big capitalists, who still pull the strings. It sells national resources and deposits the profits in foreign banks. It promotes hostility to foreigners, tribalism, regionalism, religious conflict and racism, despite its “vibrant calls for African unity.” [WE, 104]

Fanon concluded that the masses “should bar the way to this useless and harmful bourgeoisie” and

skip any bourgeois phase of development. [WE, 119-20] So in the case of the national bourgeoisie, even Fanon sees class as the decisive social reality, but only because the class interest of capitalists makes them bad nationalists. Instead he looks to socialism, which he thinks rules out a “society where a privileged few hold the reins of political and economic power.” [WE, 56] The experience of the five decades since Fanon’s death shows clearly that socialism does no such thing, in developed countries or undeveloped ones. Socialism is capitalism in disguise, ruled by a privileged few, who eventually take the mask off and show their capitalism openly. Only a classless society, the mobilization of the masses for communism, can prevent a “privileged few” from bringing misery to the masses. But Fanon does not advocate communism. Two main things hold him back from it: his expectation that capitalism of developed countries will actually help economic development of former colonies, and his insistence on “national consciousness.” Future columns will discuss both of these issues.

References: WE: Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, R. Philcox, trans., New York, 2004; DC: Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, H. Chevalier, translator, New York, 1965

Class Consciousness versus “National” Consciousness

Fanon did not see class struggle as the dominant fact determining how society works and changes. He saw colonialism as the domination of one nation over another, Algeria against France, not as the brutal rule of capitalism over the masses of the regions it had conquered. He saw the uprising against colonial rule as a national movement of “the people,” not the working class. Fanon tried to distinguish between nationalism and “national consciousness.” Nationalism, he said, “aroused the masses against the oppressor but disintegrates in the aftermath of independence,” as the national bourgeoisie takes over and becomes the new oppressors. He described “national consciousness” as a set of political ideas, supposed to be developed in stages, that goes beyond mere nationalism. In his contradictory descriptions of it, Fanon tried to rescue something good about nationalism from the oppression that it had maintained in Africa.

Stages of “National Consciousness”

The earliest stage of “national consciousness,” said Fanon, was the aim to kill or drive out every European. As the anti-colonial war progressed, some European settlers supported the war, and some blacks and Arabs opposed it, so “national consciousness” could get beyond a “racial and racist dimension.” Next tribalism and regionalism were supposed to be overcome, and nationalism must be replaced by a “social and economic consciousness,” about whose content Fanon is very vague. According to Fanon, any kind of internationalism requires “national consciousness,” which he claims to be the “highest form of culture.” (All quotations from Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, R. Philcox, trans., New York, 2004)

There is an amazing unreality about this whole scheme. Fanon pretends that “national consciousness” only unifies, overcoming tribalism and regionalism. But this is not true. Any kind of nationalism also divides the masses. Developing “national consciousness” means giving over-riding

importance to particular features of a group of people who have a common history or language, features that supposedly distinguish them from other groups. Both now and in Fanon's time, however, the masses of these groups are oppressed by the same capitalist system. The masses of Mali and Bolivia, Pakistan and France, or of any other countries, not only have a common enemy, but they are more similar than different in their capabilities for fighting back and supporting each other.

Nationalism does not promote internationalism. Instead it raises barriers between workers of different countries and races. It also aims to unite the masses with their rulers. This is why bosses love nationalism. In each country they cook up some supposedly unique and flattering characteristics of their nation that they give speeches about and teach kids in school.

Working Class Consciousness and Internationalism

Fanon saw "national consciousness" as something that a nationalist political movement needed to struggle for, not something spontaneous. Communists understand that we need to fight for working-class consciousness. The fact that workers have the same interests the world over does not mean that they always understand this. It is up to us to use our press and political actions to bring

out the nature of global capitalism and the struggles of the masses against the system in every country. This is why ICWP exposes state murder, racism and oppression and the masses' fight back against these things. ICWP has organized and taken part in many protests of racist police murders in the US. We have protested the government murders of 43 students in Guerrero, Mexico and the deaths of 1100 Bangladeshi garment workers, killed by the bosses' greed. We have publicized, in a pamphlet and **Red Flag**, the heroic struggle of striking miners shot down by police in South Africa. Our leaflet supporting workers protesting the World Cup was distributed in Brazil. These efforts will continue and expand.

Mobilizing the masses for communism means combining struggles that take place in many countries, learning from and coordinating with workers everywhere. Constructing communism includes doing away with the bosses' national boundaries and working closely to see that workers' needs are fully met everywhere, even if their local production is not yet enough.

"National liberation" movements were tried, decades ago. It is obvious now that the struggles and sacrifices of millions who took part in them accomplished nothing for the masses. We have learned our lesson: working-class internationalism is vital for the communist future of the working class.

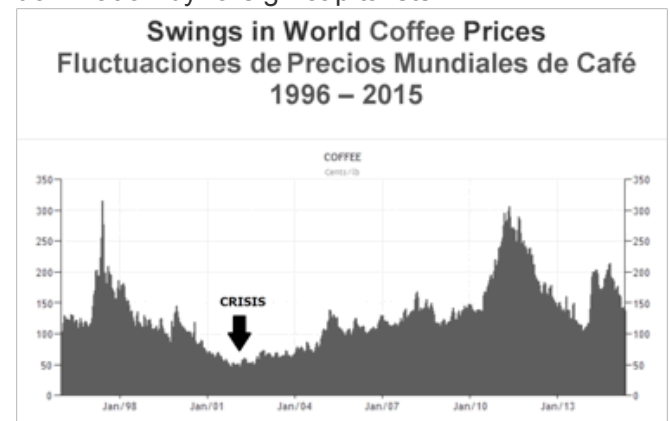
Fanon and Capitalism

We saw in past columns that Fanon rejected the rule of a "national bourgeoisie" in former colonies. Quite correctly, he saw them as operating as junior partners of imperialism, incapable of developing the productive forces in poor countries in a way that would benefit the masses. Fanon, insisted, however, that newly independent countries must stay in the world capitalist market. The "young independent nation is obliged to keep the economic channels established by the colonial regime. ... the basis of its exports remains basically unchanged." [WE, p.56]

Prisoners of the Market

An unavoidable consequence of Fanon's idea is that the "young independent nation" he imagines won't be independent at all! Instead, it must be dominated by world capitalism and subject to its economic laws. These include domination by the banks and by market crises. For example, the fall

in the prices in the 1980s of commodities that African countries exported made it impossible for many governments to pay back their loans. The International Monetary Fund bailed many of them out, but imposed conditions that increased their domination by foreign capitalists.



The coffee crisis in the late 1990s and early 2000s was a dramatic example of the effect of the world market. The overproduction of coffee caused a drop in coffee prices by nearly half, producing mass misery—starvation, debts, mass migration—in countries where coffee is produced on small farms. This happened in many places in Africa and Latin America, including Cameroon, Central African Republic, Ivory Coast, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, and Mexico (Chiapas). (See graph)

Help From Imperialism?

Fanon thought a “national bourgeoisie” could only do harm, but his view of European capitalists was quite different. He saw them as exploiters, but as energetic, creative and productive, and called on them to help their former colonies.

Fanon said that the colonialists owed it to their former colonies to make up for their centuries of robbery, so they should invest and lend on favorable terms. This was not just a moral obligation, he claimed, but something in the real interests of the imperialist powers. If they did not invest, he said, the European capitalists would lack outlets for their manufactured goods. Circulation of capital would lessen, and economic stagnation would result. [WE, p.60]

If the former colonies joined together and refused to buy from the developed countries, Fanon predicted that factories would close and the European working class would revolt. He called on the European monopolies to “realize that their true interests lie in ... massively aiding without too many conditions, the underdeveloped countries.” [WE, p.61]

It is true that capitalists of wealthy countries would not be pleased if former colonies stopped doing business with them. Imperialists need places to sell their products and especially to invest in un-

derdeveloped countries, where the rate of profit is higher because wages are lower. What they don't need to do and don't actually do is to invest or lend in order to benefit the masses.

For decades the main foreign investments in Africa have been in extraction of minerals and oil. Lending by foreign banks and institutions has been subject to crippling conditions, like severe limitations on what governments are allowed to spend on public health. This investment has done nothing for the welfare of the masses, who suffer from malnutrition and lack of medical services in many countries that have a lot of oil or minerals. Fanon imagined that imperialists need to benefit the masses of former colonies or suffer economic stagnation. On his own account, however, the new countries have no choice but to use the same old “economic channels,” staying in the world market and continuing to produce similar products. Thus the former colonists' only worry is that their former colonies might do business with some other imperial power. The facts bear this out. The old imperialists still dominate many former colonies, although they are now challenged by new imperial powers like India and especially China.

Fanon mistakenly imagined that the end of colonialism would mean that a comparatively harmonious world capitalist system would result. He wrote that the “Third World” of former colonies expects Europe to help “rehabilitate man and ensure his triumph everywhere.” [WE, p. 61]

Fanon's evaluation of the possibilities of capitalism was fundamentally wrong. Understanding the reasons why it was wrong allows us to draw the fundamental conclusion, that capitalism always means misery for the masses, and communism is the only future for the working class.

References: WE = *Wretched of the Earth*, New York, 2004.

Fanon and Sexism

Previous columns have showed Frantz Fanon's mistaken ideas about a number of things, especially his illusions about capitalism and nationalism. At best, Fanon's writings about equality of men and women are wrong about what it takes to end sexism. At worst his comments are viciously sexist and reactionary.

A number of passages in Fanon's first book, *Black Skin, White Masks* [BS], contain outright hostility

toward women and repeat outrageous sexist stereotypes. These include the vicious idea that women secretly desire rape. Most of these passages are far too disgusting to quote here, but we give one example: “Just as there are faces that just ask to be slapped, couldn't we speak of women who just ask to be raped?” [BS, p. 134]

Fanon treats black men who try to gain acceptance in European society by mastering Euro-

pean culture (as he did himself) quite sympathetically, but severely criticizes women of color who had gained status by marrying white men.

These open attacks on women disappear in his later writings, and in his last book, Fanon said that women should “have the same place as men, not in the articles of the Constitution but in everyday life, in factories, in schools and in assemblies.” [*Wretched of the Earth*, p. 142]. The key question is how he thought this could be achieved.

In his 1959 book, *A Dying Colonialism* [DC], Fanon described the first 5 years of the Algerian war for independence. His ideas in the book about the restrictions imposed on women in traditional Algerian society are quite contradictory. He praised young Algerian women fighters who had discarded the *haik* (a veil that covers the entire body). He also defended expecting women to wear the *haik* as an expression of defiance against French domination.

The French colonial administration had tried to make Algerian women their allies against the nationalist movement. Demonstrations in which women publicly removed their *haiks* were covertly organized by the French administration in May 1958. Fanon responded to European criticisms of the *haik* as an attempt to undermine Algerian culture and as an expression of European rape fantasies [DC, pp. 42, 45]. Some of Fanon’s comments on unveiled women have their own air of fantasy, however. [See DC, pp. 58-9]

Fanon’s most serious error about sexism was not his own attitude, but his belief that participation by women in the Algerian nationalist movement could eliminate sexism:

“The unveiled Algerian woman, who assumed an increasingly important place in revolutionary action, developed her personality, developed the exalted realm of responsibility. The freedom of the Algerian people from then on became identified with women’s liberation, with her entry into history.... This woman ... was ... bursting the bounds

of the narrow world in which she lived without responsibility, and was at the same time participating in the destruction of colonialism and the birth of a new woman.” [DC, p. 107]

A significant number of women did take part in the armed struggle in Algeria. About 11,000 were registered as veterans after the war, but the actual number is probably much higher. It is true that women’s involvement in mass struggles can help weaken the grip of anti-woman ideology. In Algeria, however, they were fighting for the wrong thing, the illusion of “national” liberation. The positive effects of that movement on women were in fact limited to a fairly small number of women and were largely reversed by the new nationalist government.

Fanon paid little attention to the material, economic basis of sexism. That basis is the wage system, which can never produce equality for the mass of women and men workers, and must be destroyed to end sexism, something “national” liberation does not do.

The fight for gender equality is a key part of mobilizing the masses for communism. Communism can’t be created by a few leaders, but the masses themselves must decide and then do what they have decided. This is impossible without the full participation of women in all areas of social life. Eliminating the wage system is necessary for gender equality, but so is a determined ideological battle against sexist ideas. Fanon seems to have thought that sexism can be ended by women’s involvement in anti-colonial wars alone. It is ridiculous to think that the battle of ideas is not necessary, and specifically that the fight against religious justifications of sexism, whether from Islam (dominant in Algeria) or other religions, can be avoided.

Only the mobilization of the masses for communism, led by women and men workers, can end sexism. Fanon’s ideas do not help do this.

Fanon and the Psychology of Racism

Fanon considered race, not class, to be the most important social category. His most systematic writing about race is in his books *Black Skin, White Masks* and *Wretched of the Earth*.

Fanon saw racism as the result of colonialism. He held “European civilization and its agents” responsible for it. This overlooks racism in

the rest of the capitalist system, like the racism of Japanese capitalism against Chinese and Koreans. Fanon focuses on racism against black people, with some discussion of anti-Arab and anti-Jewish racism.

Fanon was a psychiatrist and most of his writing about racism is about its subjective aspects: the

psychological pain and confusion it causes. He had a lot of personal experience of racism in Martinique, France and Algeria. However, he took much of his analysis of the psychology of racism from French idealist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre. Fanon claimed that “the black ... needs white approval” but does not get that recognition. Racist contempt and accusations of inferiority make the victims suffer. They rob black people “of any value or originality,” seen only as a thing or “a bodily image,” not a human being. The results he saw were a widespread black inferiority complex and the alienation of blacks from whites and from their own bodies and families. Racism also produces guilt, masochism and phobias in whites. Fanon found these symptoms “in students, workers, and the pimps of Pigalle or Marseille.” He did not consider them mainly class phenomena, but he emphasized some aspects that primarily affected intellectuals like himself.

Fanon did not acknowledge rebellions of enslaved or colonized black people — for example, in Haiti — who sought to overthrow their white rulers, not to win their approval. His one-sided emphasis on psychological pain ignored the healthy anger that has often put black workers in the lead of the fight against racist capitalism.

In his professional work, Fanon struggled to find psychoanalytic analyses of the distress and harmful behavior that racism causes. He did, however, recognize that medical treatment won't accomplish much without eliminating the social and economic bases of racism.

Racism's Material Base

Racism is far more than wrong ideas and hostile attitudes. It is a material system of oppression created by capitalism. Capitalists single out the workers of some racial or ethnic groups and impose especially low wages, bad living conditions and police terror on them. The bosses make much greater profits by doing this.

By creating a system of racist myths and large inequalities in standards of living, capitalists also reinforce their rule with racial divisions among workers. This is a political attack on the whole working class, aimed at preventing a united revolt

against capitalism.

As Marx wrote in 1870, racism “is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it.” Yet this material side of racism is mostly missing in Fanon's work.

In the United States, for example, black adults are 20% more likely than white adults to report serious psychological distress. Black adults and children are more likely to experience feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and worthlessness than white peers.

A great deal of this misery is directly due to economic conditions. Black adults living below the ridiculously low official poverty line are two to three times more likely to report serious psychological distress than those living above the line.

Nor did Fanon focus on ways that schooling and mass culture promote and reinforce racist stereotypes of black “inferiority.” Instead he concentrated on issues of “recognition” that might have made sense in his psychiatric practice but not in mass anti-racist struggle.

Fanon did advocate revolutionary action: “At the individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude.” However, the revolution Fanon had in mind was not for communism but for “national liberation.” As we discussed in an earlier column, these were complete failures for the masses. Fighting back is good for our mental health whatever our “race” or “ethnicity.” But the point of violent struggle is to defeat capitalism, not to make us feel better.

Only communism can destroy capitalism and, with it, racism. Only by ending capitalism's wage system, its borders and its divisions can we create the conditions for the mental and physical health of the masses.

Everywhere on the planet we see masses fighting back. Those who are most oppressed by capitalist racism must take the lead in mobilizing for communism. In the process we will prove to ourselves and to the world the creativity, courage and intelligence of the masses.

To be continued ...

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNIST WORKER PARTY
Read *Red Flag* Newspaper. Look over our website at ICWPRedFlag.org. Write us at icwp@anonymousspeech.com