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## Frantz Fanon: A Portrait

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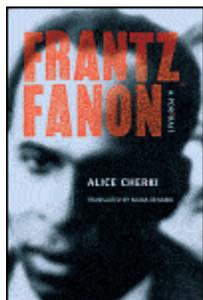
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## Book Review



### H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Alice Cherki. *Frantz Fanon: A Portrait*. Translated by Nadia Benabid. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006. 255 pp. index, Cloth ISBN 0-8014-4038-6; Paperback ISBN 0-8014-7308-x.

Reviewed by Sylvia I. Bergh, Department of International Development, University of Oxford.

Frantz Fanon (1925-61) was a Martinique-born psychiatrist, political activist, and prolific author. He was one of the most prominent thinkers of the twentieth century on the issue of decolonization and the psychopathology of colonization, whose works have inspired numerous anti-colonial liberation movements.

The author of this recent portrait of Frantz Fanon, Alice Cherki, was born into an Algerian Jewish family and worked alongside Frantz Fanon as a young psychoanalyst from 1955 to 1961, i.e. from the time he arrived in Algeria until his death. This period spans the critical years of Fanon's involvement with the struggle for Algeria's independence. The author's motivations to write this book lie in her discovery that younger, well-educated generations are not familiar with Fanon's work, despite his groundbreaking writings on racism, colonialism, the relationship between oppressor and oppressed, and the prospects of developing nations. Apart from saving Fanon from complete oblivion, Cherki's objectives are to "counteract both the unrestrained idealization that holds Fanon to his heroic image and cuts him off from history as well as the powerless and silent reaction greeting bewildering allegations that dismiss Fanon as an apologist for violence and an obsolete figure linked to Third Worldism" (pp. 1-2). Cherki succeeds on both counts. First, she situates Fanon's life as a psychiatrist, political activist, and prolific writer in its wider historical context and paints a vivid picture of his relationships with intellectuals and political leaders. Importantly, she does not hold back on his shortcomings and failures. Second, the last three chapters entitled "The Wretched of the Earth" (discussing Fanon's most well-known book), "After," and "Fanon Today" engage with the critics of Fanon's work and provide an illuminating re-interpretation of Fanon's thinking on violence. They also outline the areas where his contributions remain relevant to this day. Finally, Cherki fulfills a third, more implicit objective, namely to highlight Fanon's achievements as a practicing psychiatrist. As a psychoanalyst herself, she is in a unique position to do this. She was too young at the time to fully assess Fanon's breadth of knowledge, but has since made use of his psychiatric writings and case notes from 1959 and 1960, much of which remain unpublished even today.

The book is divided into ten chapters, excluding a short preface, Introduction, and conclusion. The first seven chapters are chronologically arranged and cover Fanon's

trajectory from his childhood in Martinique, his time in France as both a soldier and a student, the years as a psychiatrist and political activist in Algeria and Tunis, and, finally, his African experiences. The first chapter, entitled "Before Blida" (the psychiatric hospital where Fanon became Chief Resident Physician in 1953), relates the events that shaped Fanon's personality: his discovery of the denial of the history of slavery and of being a second-class citizen, and the racism he encountered on the part of French soldiers. Despite the latter, Fanon decided to join the anti-Nazi struggle in France. Aged eighteen, Fanon justified this decision by stating that "whenever human dignity and freedom are at stake, it involves us, whether we be black, white or yellow. And whenever these are threatened in any corner of the earth, I will fight them to the end" (p. 10). Disillusionment soon followed, however, and a year after leaving Martinique, he wrote "I was mistaken. There is absolutely nothing . . . here to justify my speedy decision to anoint myself as the defender of a farmer's rights, when the farmer, himself, does not care a damn about those rights" (p. 12). As Cherki points out, this episode illustrates well his lifelong vacillation between a disillusionment in humankind and his inability to lose faith in it entirely, between his suspicion of politicians and his readiness to join the causes they promote despite those suspicions (p. 13). By highlighting such vacillations in Fanon's life throughout the book, the author succeeds in deconstructing Fanon's idealized and heroic image.

The second chapter is devoted to a description of Algiers in 1953, and is probably the weakest of the book. Although it provides a valuable background of the country's ethnic make-up and forms of segregation and racism at the time, it does not relate how this society affected Fanon, apart from stating that he "utterly misread its various elements" (p. 54). Nor does the chapter explain in great detail how Fanon came in contact with the youth movements, cultural associations, and Jewish community that apparently "played a key role in introducing him to the Algerian cause" (p. 45).

These shortcomings are somewhat addressed in the next chapter on "Blida," Fanon's time at the Blida-Joinville psychiatric hospital (1953-56), where the author describes the increasing links between Fanon's psychiatric and political work, starting with Fanon's medical treatment of guerilla fighters and relationships with local and regional leaders of the National Liberation Front (FLN) as well as his writings for FLN publications. Fanon's resignation in protest at the brutal repression of union strikes led to his expulsion from Algeria in 1956. After a short spell in Paris (described in the chapter "Fanon Transits through Paris"), Fanon settled in Tunis in the spring of 1957, at the height of the power struggle within the FLN. He was appointed to the FLN press office there and later became the FLN's spokesman, but he also continued to work as a psychiatrist at the Manouba Hospital. This chapter, entitled "Tunis," describes Fanon's relationships with the different leaders within the FLN, and the deep impact on him of Abbane's death, whom he had seen as Algeria's true and designated leader. It also highlights Fanon's writings that criticize the French Left for its passivity in the face of torture and the suffering of Algerians, and its lack of support for Algerian self-determination. Cherki points out the contrast between his political views and his personal networks of friends in Tunis, which belonged mostly to cosmopolitan circles of French and Europeans. A well-known shortcoming in Fanon's thinking is his failure to consider the relationship between religion and politics, but the author also repeatedly criticizes Fanon's sketchy understanding of the nationalist

movement prior to 1954. One of the most fascinating passages in this chapter, though, is the description of Fanon's increasing liaison role between the Algerian Revolution and the liberation movements of a number of African states. The chapter also discusses at length Fanon's book *Year 5 of the Algerian Revolution* (later republished as *A Dying Colonialism*) whose main argument is that the defiant behaviors of the colonized must be seen as a consequence of the colonial structure and not as an immutable feature of the "base personality" (p. 133). Although this is Fanon's least-cited work, Cherki shows how its analysis transcends its historical moment and remains pertinent in Africa as well as Europe today.

The chapter on "Fanon and Africa" illustrates the importance he attributed to the Algerian War for the sociopolitical autonomy of other French African nations and African unity, and the reciprocity between national cultures and wars of liberation. This chapter also relates Fanon's work and travels as the Algerian provisional government's ambassador to Africa, based in Ghana. It was during this time that he became increasingly concerned about "postcolonialism"; the incomplete break with French culture and French colonial interests; and the instatement of compromise governments, power struggles, and corruption, especially in the countries he knew best, such as Senegal, Cte d'Ivoire, and Cameroon, as well as in Algeria. The chapter ends with an account of the failure of the Trans-Saharan Front and its new arms route for Algerian resistance fighters, an idea that was largely inspired by Fanon. Most importantly, given his earlier political activism, Cherki relates how Fanon, due to his deep involvement in events in Africa, became increasingly distant or even indifferent towards French politics and the antiwar demonstrations in France.

The chapter on "The Last Year of Fanon's Life" tells the story of his diagnosis with a severe form of leukemia at the end of 1960 and the frenzied writing of his last book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon's meeting with Sartre in Rome in April 1961 and the latter's promise to write the foreword to the book are recounted most vividly. The chapter ends with Fanon's reluctant trip to Washington D.C. for medical treatment, his death in a hospital there on December 6, 1961 (aged thirty-six), and a detailed account of his state funeral in Algeria.

As already indicated, the last three chapters are devoted to a discussion of Fanon's last book, its reception, and the continued relevance of his work. Cherki interprets *The Wretched of the Earth* as a distress signal and a warning "to alert African nations to the inherent problems of their relationship to the developed nations of Europe." She also discusses the widespread misinterpretation of Fanon's thoughts on violence as set out in this book (mainly due to Sartre's misleading foreword). She argues that Fanon had come to be seen as an apologist for violence due to his interpreters' misguided reading of violence as purifying, when in fact Fanon's violence is a liberating one, a mechanism whereby the self could be freed from the colonizer. She also emphasizes Fanon's absolutely prophetic views on the pitfalls of newly independent nations.

Cherki's original contribution lies in restoring the place of the widely dismissed last chapter of the book, entitled "Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders," by showing how these

reflections on psychiatric illness are in fact central to Fanon's argument. Moreover, Fanon had anticipated the "psycho-affective disorders" that would persist for at least one generation and affect both the perpetrators and victims of rape, murder, and torture carried out in the name of war.

The chapter entitled "After" describes how the Algerian leadership subsequently downplayed Fanon's role in the revolution, and his passage into oblivion in France, where the war in Algeria was seen as a closed chapter. This is balanced by an account of the different initiatives to publish Fanon's works and the conferences held in his memory. Cherki also points to Fanon's influence in the United States, especially on the African American movements of the 1960s led by Malcolm X and Robert Williams, on Ali Shariati's work in Iran in the lead-up to the Iranian Revolution, as well as on the social and political movements of the late 1960s in Japan and elsewhere against the Vietnam War. The final chapter ("Fanon Today") reviews Fanon's continued relevance in recent years in a range of fields, from the political situation in Algeria, to cultural anthropology, psychiatry, linguistics, and literature. Indeed, given that Cherki wrote this book before the events of September 11, 2001 and the recent riots in France, her conclusion could be seen as quite prophetic when she asks: "But is the world really all that different from Fanon's portrayal of a mutually exclusive world that has been cleaved in half and where the only interlocutor between both sides is the soldier or the policeman? Is the problem of violence as a self-gratifying act obsolete?" (pp. 207-208).

As for Fanon's contributions to psychiatry, the book recounts how Fanon, both in Blida and in Manouba, built on his apprenticeship with François Tosquelles to develop an approach to institutional psychiatry and sociotherapy in which the aim was not to muzzle madness but to question and listen to it, and to give voice to patients (as well as the nurses). In one of the most fascinating passages of the book, Cherki recounts the successes of Fanon's methods with European women and its dismal failure with Muslim men, and Fanon's recognition that by using his Western-based sociotherapy program, he had disregarded an entire frame of reference and was in fact guilty of having thoughtlessly embraced a policy of assimilation. In Tunis, Fanon explored the approach of the "one-day stay" treatment where conflicts could be resolved more easily.

One of the book's main strengths lies in explaining the connections between Fanon's psychiatric and political thoughts on alienation by emphasizing the idea that a colonial master discourse could shape the constitution of the individual subjective unconscious. Another strength of the book is its emphasis on Fanon's continuous search for a balance between writing and political action.

There are a few shortcomings which render the book difficult to read at times. For example, it makes numerous references to Fanon's many articles, conference papers, and books, as well as other works that influenced him (such as those by Octave Mannoni), but it does not include a complete bibliography. Similarly, given the enormous number of Fanon's friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, the reading could have been facilitated by a complete list of the "cast" with short biographies, and a complete list of acronyms, especially of political associations and movements. Several citation references are also

missing, some passages are repeats of earlier ones, and the translation, while very good on the whole, omits certain key expressions (such as fellaghas and maquis). Most importantly for non-psychiatrist readers, the text might have benefited from brief explanations of specialist psychiatric terms. However, much of this may be due to the process of translation.

Cherki is clear about the scope of her work. This is not a biography, as she did not interview Fanon's Antillean relatives and many other persons who knew him and are still alive. Her focus is only on Fanon's Algerian experience and she presents it as a long essay or "a testimony once removed" (pp. 3-4). Unfortunately, Cherki fails to fully embrace this "testimonial" position, and shifts back and forth from personal testimony to "neutral" observations, often writing about herself in the third person and relegating her own views to the endnotes. This is a shame, as the resulting mixture between a witness's first-hand account and a distanced, more academic work packed with literary references leaves the reader somewhat confused about the author's narrative position, as well as the exact nature of her relationship with Fanon. (Cherki does not state anywhere in the book that she was in fact the wife of Charles Geronimi, a close associate and friend of Fanon in Blida and Tunis.) The work would have been far more nuanced and enriched if Cherki had fully committed to bringing in her own experiences as they interacted with those of Fanon.

However, these are minor shortcomings when compared to the book's many merits, and the author's achievements are even more remarkable given Fanon's utterly discreet nature. I would therefore strongly recommend this book for anyone interested in a multi-faceted and historically situated account of Fanon's life and thinking, as well as his continued relevance.

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