

Review - Frantz Fanon: Philosopher of the Barricades

Written by Sara Salem

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Review - Frantz Fanon: Philosopher of the Barricades

<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/12/18/review-frantz-fanon-philosopher-of-the-barricades/>

SARA SALEM, DEC 18 2017

Frantz Fanon: Philosopher of the Barricades
By Peter Hudis
Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015

The resurgent interest in Fanon's life and work has produced many excellent biographies and texts, among them David Macey's *Frantz Fanon: A biography* (2012), Lewis Gordon's *What Fanon said* (2015), Alice Cherki's *Frantz Fanon: A portrait* (2006), Anthony Alessandrini's *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives* (2005), and Ato Sekyi-Otu's *Fanon's dialectic of experience* (1996). *Frantz Fanon: Philosopher of the Barricades* is a concise yet rich addition to this growing body of work. Spanning a mere 139 pages, the book manages to bring to life the many issues, debates and causes Fanon was involved with throughout his short life. Deftly moving between theory and praxis, between life history and philosophical debate, Peter Hudis illuminates the rich theorising and commentary Fanon produced at various points in his life. Indeed by naming Fanon a philosopher, Hudis already makes an assertion that is not commonly attributed to Fanon beyond critical theory, namely that Fanon produced theory and philosophy; that his writing is not just a summary of his experiences. While this may seem obvious to those familiar with Fanon's work, it is important to note the continuing division between those who experience life and those who produce theory.

Fanon in many ways produced a body of work that was new and refreshing; that drew on many thinkers before and around him but that also broke from them in crucial ways. Throughout the book Hudis shows in detail how Fanon engaged with Hegel, Marx, Freud, and Sartre – and yet how he constantly broke away from them to posit what for him was always absent in their work: the question of race and racism. Interestingly, while Fanon certainly produced new insights that were intricately connected to the context within which he was immersed, it is also the case that these insights have become increasingly popular today. Fanon's work and ideas have undoubtedly experienced a resurgence over the past decade and are used by scholars, activists and revolutionaries across the world. This question recurs throughout the book: what is it about Fanon that makes him so relevant today?

The book is arranged chronologically, charting Fanon's life from his childhood in Martinique to his death in the United States. Because of its short length, parts of his life are not given as much detail as they perhaps should be – for this, David Macey's (2012) biography of Fanon is perhaps unparalleled. Nevertheless, Hudis makes clear decisions as to which issues to foreground, and it is here that the strength of the book lies. Throughout the book central themes jump out at us, from Fanon's love of psychiatry to the humanism that consistently underpinned his political projects. Although Hudis alleges that postcolonial studies has denied the validity of humanist perspectives, in many ways Fanon's humanism brings to mind that of Edward Said, arguably a central figure within postcolonial studies—if not its founder. This is not a liberal nor Western humanism, but a radical departure away from ideas of equality among humans based on recognition or understanding. Fanon's humanism is rather a call to arms; an attempt to create an entirely new human out of the ravages of European imperialism. Connected to this is Fanon's emphasis on phenomenology. Fanon consistently centres experience as a way of understanding the world and the interactions between subjects and object. It is this that allows for the understanding of the “lived experience of the black person,” (p.8).

At the beginning of the book, Hudis writes that “time seems to be marching backwards” as racism seems to define the shape of globalised capitalism today (p.2). Hudis shows that Fanon's particular understanding of racism at the

Review - Frantz Fanon: Philosopher of the Barricades

Written by Sara Salem

global and subjective levels is what makes him relevant to us today. Throughout Fanon's life, he was to experience moments that brought home to him the reality of racism. Hudis includes a quote from Fanon made to his colleague Alice Cherki:

It was the first time I saw that the history they were teaching us was based on a denial, that the order of things we were being presented with was a falsehood. I still played and took part in sports and went to the movies, but everything had changed. I felt as though my eyes and my ears had been opened (p.15).

These shocks of recognition were the experiences that over time made Fanon see the world for what it was. This drove Fanon to understand the interior life of racism—its lived experiences and the types of neuroses it produced. Here he adopted Marx's concept of alienation, but applied it to racialised subjects rather than the working class. Similarly, Fanon—while agreeing with Freud to some extent—argues that the Freudian move to locate disorders in the contradictions of familial existence ignores the presence of race: "A normal black child, having grown up in a normal family, will become abnormal at the slightest contact with the white world," (p.34). This means that the problem of racism is not an individual problem—and thus its solution cannot be an individual solution; it is a *social* problem requiring a social solution. It is here that we see the continuing relevance of Fanon's work today, for in our age of hyper-individualism, all problems are posed as problems of the individual; the structural and the social have been erased, precisely the sites in which Fanon posited the problem of racism.

This is a radical move for several reasons, among them the fact that it locates racism as a structure that can be unmade: "What is made by us can also be unmade by us," (p.41). However this goes beyond liberal notions of recognition, which for Fanon were about pleas to be recognised as an equal citizen that never went very far. As Hudis writes, "You cannot be accepted on "equal" terms with white society irrespective of race when this society has structured its very mode of seeing in racial terms," (p.52). Instead, what Fanon was calling for was for colonial subjects to be released from the complexes that had resulted from colonialism. This is the humanism Fanon called for.

Another way in which Fanon's analysis continues to be relevant today is through his shrewd judgement of the Western left and its blindness towards race and racism. Discussing the massacre of 30,000 Algerians in Sétif in 1945 and the deafening silence within France that came afterwards, Fanon notes that even the French Communist Party blamed Algerian "provocateurs" for the massacre. Fanon uses this moment to point out that when it came to imperialism and racism, the French – and Western – left was silent at best, supportive at worst. Hudis brings us back to this point throughout the book, centring it as a lesson for us to take home today. Western publics—including leftist parties—have historically supported colonialism and racism; to expect a major departure from this today is perhaps to be naïve and idealistic. Even Hudis at times slips into a Eurocentric understanding of Islam when he discusses Fanon's time in Algeria, emphasising, for example, that Fanon did not support women veiling because this would be to support tradition. Hudis repeatedly constructs Islam as traditional and un-revolutionary, in comparison to secularism (p.102-3, 135). Here he is less nuanced and less aware of Eurocentrism than Fanon, who put much more effort into understanding societies on their own terms, rather than those of their colonisers.

This brings me to my final point on the book's argument for Fanon's relevance today, and that is with regards to neo-colonialism. Fanon spent many years in Algeria, was a member of the FLN and engaged widely with other African independence movements. Although the book does not go into detail on the question of postcolonial nations and the challenges they faced, here Fanon's work continues to be illuminating in identifying the continuing after-effects of colonial rule and the ways in which a dependent bourgeoisie emerged across Africa that continued capitalist exploitation. These legacies have only become clearer over time, even if scholarship has moved away from emphasizing the centrality of European imperialism in creating current political, social and economic conditions across Africa today.

Peter Hudis's book is a timely and interesting introduction to the life and work of Fanon, and part of a growing body of work that asks why Fanon has become increasingly present in scholarly and activist work in our contemporary moment. By centring Fanon's philosophical and political assumptions about the work, Hudis underlines the importance of positioning writers in order to better understand them and their work. Although very short and therefore

Review - Frantz Fanon: Philosopher of the Barricades

Written by Sara Salem

lacking in detail on key political topics, and although Hudis replicates a Eurocentric understanding of certain issues, the book convincingly shows why Fanon continues to be relevant to us today.

About the author:

Sara Salem is an Assistant Professor in Sociology at the London School of Economics. Sara's research interests include political sociology, postcolonial studies, Marxist theory, feminist theory, and global histories of empire and imperialism. She is particularly interested in questions of traveling theory, postcolonial/anti-colonial nationalism, and feminist theory. She has recently published articles on Angela Davis in Egypt in the journal *Signs*; on Frantz Fanon and Egypt's postcolonial state in *Interventions: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies*; and on intersectionality as a travelling theory in the *European Journal of Women's Studies*, among others.