

**FRANTZ FANON:
PSYCHIATRIST AND REVOLUTIONARY THINKER ***

by

Ntongela Masilela

One can no longer take a position that has not already been advanced in another form. It is best to insist on the standpoint one has decided upon and to accept that others will find it mistaken or, if they agree, probably have misunderstood it.

-Hans Belting, **Art History After Modernism** (2003).

Dear Distinguished African Psychiatrists, Medical Doctors and Scientists. It is a great honor to address such an august body of thinkers and medical practitioners of the mind. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Njenga Gitau of Kenya, the President of the Association, for this extraordinary honor of standing before you.

Although Frantz Fanon has been dead now for just over forty years, his relevance to Africa in these years early years of the twenty-first century has not diminished at all. His relevance still persists because he posed fundamental questions and issues to us that we as Africans have not as yet fully responded to. Until Africa realizes or achieves the necessary historical encounter with this great scientist and revolutionary thinker, he will continue posing challenging demands on us.

For someone of my generation who came to political and intellectual awakening during the turbulent decade of the 1960s, the heyday and the euphoric moment of the African Independence Movement, an inaugural intellectual and political encounter with Frantz Fanon in those revolutionary times when we were seventeen to nineteen years old could only have been autobiographical since he represented and articulated our *historical awakening* to the meaning and significance of Africa. His writings, from **Black Skin, White Masks** in 1952 to **The Wretched of the Earth** in 1961, demanded of us a commitment to and identification with Africa. In his essay "Letter to the Youth of Africa" (1958), assembled in **Toward the African Revolution** (1965), Fanon writes the following:

“The colonial world has during the past fifteen years been subjected to increasingly violent assaults and the fractured edifice is in the process of crumbling. No one today challenges the fact that that this liquidation of colonialism constitutes the specific mark of the postwar period. The historic process, resulting from the multiple contradictions inherent in the capitalist system and given dynamism by the national will of oppressed peoples, presides over the birth of independent states. . . It is essential that the oppressed peoples join up with the peoples who are already sovereign if a humanism that can be considered valid is to be built to the dimensions of the universe. . . Youth of Africa ! Youth of Madagascar ! Youth of the West Indies ! We must, all of us together, dig the grave in which Colonialism will finally be entombed!”

The fundamental words in this passage for us then when we were students at Upper Hill School (former Delamare Boys' High School) in Nairobi in 1967, 1968 and 1969 were constructs such as “liquidation of colonialism,” “the historic process,” “humanism,” and “Youth of Africa.” The way Fanon articulated these concepts convinced us that we had been born at the propitious moment in the African history: the historic moment of decolonization . We viewed the writings of Fanon as articulating the historical rationale for decolonization. Fanon was calling us the Youth of Africa to fully participate in this historic adventure. We were really aware that since Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, Mwalimu Nyerere and other political leaders had initiated the process of political decolonization, we could only best embrace Africa by participating in what Ngugi would later designate as calls decolonization of the African mind. Although Fanon was profoundly *political* in his undertaking at this time since he was participating in the Algerian Revolution as its ideologue, we ourselves could only be pronouncedly *intellectual* in our undertakings.

We seriously read Frantz Fanon in Kenya in that particular year of 1967 or 1968, just as many other consciously aware and progressive High School students in many parts of Africa . Though Fanon is an intellectual and revolutionary thinker for all seasons, he is in a truer and deeper sense an intellectual force of the decade of the 1960s: the decade of revolutionary upheavals be they political, cultural, social or economic. Given that this decade was haunted by the spectre of revolution, we read Fanon in tandem with Regis Debray's **Revolution in the Revolution?** (1967), Herbert Marcuse's **One Dimensional Man** (1964), Jean Paul Sartre's **Search for Method** (1963, which in actual fact was an Introduction to **Critique to Dialectical Reason** [1960]), Mao's **On Contradiction** (1938) and other books of that unusual decade. All of these books compelled us to place our African Humanism in relation to universal Humanism. It was in this turbulent

context that many of us at Upper High School in Nairobi transformed Fanon's **The Wretched of the Earth** into our bible in replacement of the bible of Christianity. In a certain sense Frantz Fanon became our Prophet or our Messiah. It is practically impossible to overestimate the impact of this book on us. It fundamentally changed many of us, if not all of us, by causing upheavals in the historical consciousness of ourselves. **The Wretched of the Earth** literally gave us a new historical consciousness to the extent that we each spoke of ourselves as Before and After Fanon. We could never be the same after this historic encounter with Fanon. I have no doubt whatsoever that Dr, Njenga Gitau being the President of this Association, his having become a psychiatrist, and before then a medical doctor was a direct outcome of his momentous encounter with this great psychiatrist from Martinique over thirty years ago. In my instance likewise, the recent publication of my monograph on great Swiss medical historian Henry Sigerist (1891-1957), **Internationalism and Nationalism in Medicine: Henry Sigerist** , and the monographs on South African intellectual history that I'm in the process of publishing, are also the outcomes of this historical encounter with the effects or after effects of Fanonism. I intend to come back to Henry Ernst Sigerist in a moment when I will be coupling his name with that of Frantz Fanon.

Though Fanon was absolutely certain that classical colonialism was in the process of being defeated by the variants of nationalism of Third World countries that had been under imperial domination, his intellectual thought, as exemplified by the above quoted passage, was never characterized by any form of triumphalism. In this sense Fanon is similar to Nelson Mandela, the former President of my country, who was antipathetic to triumphalism. Fanon's antipathy to triumphalism was driven by his understanding of the logic of history as a series of challenges. Fanon was a deep reader or student of history. As such, he was well aware that as classical colonialism was in the process of being defeated by the national will of Third World people, neo-colonialism was in the process of emerging in its replacement. This was made manifestly clear to him by the Congo Crisis of 1960 which culminated in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba. In a searing tribute to Lumumba, in the essay "Lumumba's Death: Could We Do Otherwise," published in his book **Toward the African Revolution** (1964), Fanon makes these observations:

“ Africa 's first great crisis, for she will have to decide whether to go forward or backward. She must understand that it is no longer possible to advance by regions, that, like a great body that refuses any mutilation, she must advance in totality, that there will not be one Africa that fights against colonialism and another that attempts to make arrangements with colonialism. Africa , that is to say the Africans, must understand that there is never any greatness in procrastination and that there is never

any dishonor in saying what one wants and that in reality the cleverness of the colonized can in the last analysis only be his courage, the lucid consciousness of his objectives and of his alliances, the tenacity that he brings to his liberation.”

This passage as well as the essay itself postulate several insightful thoughts. First, that the era of classical colonialism has ended and that of neo-colonialism has been fully inaugurated by the Congo Crisis. Second, that for Africa to overcome its many challenges, it has to act in unity or unison. Third, that Africa 's problems have not been caused only by colonialism and imperialism, but also by we Africans ourselves. This last point was to be at the center of prophetic and revolutionary passages in **The Wretched of the Earth** . It was perhaps these passages that endeared Fanon to us because what he was passionately criticizing was visible to us in the behavior, actions and attitudes of the Kenyan comprador bourgeois when we were in High School some thirty odd years ago. The postcolonial era has been in many a series of tragic episodes, too many to enumerate here. Now and then relieved by true triumphs, the exemplary nature of Julius Nyerere and Nelson Mandela, among others.

Fanon attributable this crisis of modernity in Africa to Africa 's lack of understanding of herself. Principally, Fanon saw the problem as the absence of ideology in Africa . In his war diary, that could also be designated as a logbook, an excerpt from which now stands as the essay, “This Africa to Come”, also in his book **Toward the African Revolution** , Fanon wrote the following regarding the new Africa he wanted to bring into being as well as the necessity of constructing an ideology that would propel Africa into a new era:

“To put Africa in motion, to cooperate in its organization, in its regrouping , behind revolutionary principles. To participate in the ordered movement of a continent---this was really the work I had chosen. . . The Africa of everyday, oh not the poets' Africa , the one that puts to sleep, but the one that prevents sleep, for the people is impatient to do, to play, to say. The people that says: I want to build myself as people, I want to build, to love, to respect, to create. That is the real Africa , the Africa that we had to let loose in the continental furrow, in the continental direction. The Africa that we had to guide, mobilize, launch on the offensive. This Africa to come. . . For my part, the deeper I enter into the cultures and the political circles the surer I am that the great danger that threatens Africa is the absence of ideology. . . For nearly three years I have been trying to bring the misty idea of African Unity out of the subjectivist bogs of the majority of its supporters.”

As this statement makes clear, from the moment of his arrival in Africa in November 1953, specifically in Algeria, Fanon had committed himself to assisting the continent fully and unrelentingly to engage the historical experience of modernity and its unending vicissitudes. He sought to achieve this through several means. First, he was totally convinced that the European colonization of Africa had to be brought to an end, by revolutionary violence if necessary. His joining the Algerian Revolution and becoming its ideologue was an expression of this necessity. He was certain, from his political and psychological analysis of the impact of colonialism, that Europe had upturned and in effect perverted African societies and cultures. He thought and hoped that decolonization would restore things in their proper relationships. In order to ensure that this restoration would be proper and beneficial to the peasants and the working class, Fanon initiated an unrelenting critique of colonialism of the African ruling classes would render the transformation incomplete.

Second, aligning himself with the most oppressed segments of colonial societies, Fanon thought that the most revolutionary change would bring the most equitable society into being. Fanon did not romanticize the peasantry and the working classes, since some of the harshest things he wrote were against the lumpen-proletariat. Nevertheless, he believed that these two classes should be enabled to benefit the most from the process of decolonization. Third, Fanon strove as much as he could to ensure that the decolonization process would enable the unity of African postcolonial states. This was Fanon's real dream: the unification of the African continent. Lastly, the passage makes clear that one of Fanon's principal missions was to establish and articulate a new ideology in harmony with the imperatives of African history. In some of these undertakings Fanon was successful and in some of them he was not; some were combinations of both success and failure, if one can say so.

Among the last things Fanon wrote before dying was his preoccupation with the nature of ideology or ideologies that Africa could or should invent in the process of engaging modernity. This is clear in the "Conclusion" to **The Wretched of the Earth**, where he writes the following:

"It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of Man, a history which will have regard to the sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward, but which which will also not forget Europe's crimes, of which the most horrible was committed in the heart of man, and consisted of the pathological tearing apart of his functions and the crumbling away of his unity. . . For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we

must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man.”

This passage makes clear that although Fanon was very much critical of European modernity, especially its imperial and colonial effects on Third World countries, he never rejected the Enlightenment's legacy in all its complex forms. His close intellectual relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre and Aime Cesaire foreclosed this possibility of rejection. Cesaire's damning **Discourse on Colonialism** (1950) is also not a rejection of European knowledge. The young Fanon's love of Friedrich Nietzsche as well as his passion for the Spanish dramatists of the seventeenth century obviated such a rejection.

Yet this passage clearly indicates that Fanon was clearly in crisis due to certain relationships within European epistemology. This was perhaps the reason that he called for the invention of new concepts by Third World intellectuals in the postcolonial. Looking at the intellectual trajectory of Fanon from Medicine through Philosophy and Psychiatry to Politics, I think this crisis expressed itself most profoundly in his predicament about the role of psychiatry in the colonial context or in the decolonization process. The Algerian Revolution revealed to him this predicament. There is a famous passage in his Letter of Resignation to the Resident Minister in 1956, assembled **Toward the African Revolution** , where the following is written:

“Although the objective conditions under which psychiatry is practiced in Algeria constituted a challenge to common sense, it appeared to me that an effort should be made to attenuate the viciousness of a system of which the doctrinal foundations are a daily defiance of an authentically human outlook. . . If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment, I owe it to myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization. . . The social structure existing in Algeria was hostile to any attempt to put the individual back where he belonged. . . The events in Algeria are the logical consequence of an abortive attempt to decerebralize a people. . . The function of a social structure is to set up institutions to serve man's needs. A society that drives its members to desperate solutions is a non-viable society, a society to be replaced.”

There are various implications that emanate from this extraordinary passage. One is that psychiatry must possess or should have a politics singular to its medical mission: in other words, what is the political practice of psychiatry. Two is that politics and psychiatry should not be separable from each, especially in particular

contexts or in specialized contexts, despite the autonomy each should retain in relation to the other. Three is that psychiatry becomes undoable in oppressive conditions unless it transforms itself into politics. Fourth is that social structure determines the practice of psychiatry in many indirect ways or in unconscious ways than perhaps could be said of philosophy or music. And lastly, paraphrasing Fanon, we should perhaps ask ourselves the extent to which the present crisis in Africa is decerebrating the African people. What this passage would seem to indicate also is that throughout his intellectual trajectory Fanon was constantly preoccupied with the relationship between history and knowledge, to the extent of abandoning Psychiatry for Politics. There is no indication that Fanon would have returned to psychiatry had he lived much longer than he actually lived. Some scholars have speculated that he would have gravitated in the direction of History, writing volumes on the history of national liberation struggles against colonialism as well as about the paradoxes of postcolonial societies.

Fanon's persistent interrogation of the relationship between knowledge and history is perhaps what defines his particular contribution to African intellectual history. This may be the reason that he is considered the “father” of postcolonial studies as is apparent on his seminal influence on contemporary scholars as formidable as the late great Edward Said and Homi Bhabha. Writing of Fanon's situational context in European intellectual history, yet subverting its critical principles, Edward Said makes the following observations:

“But Lukács's theory has voyaged elsewhere too. Recall that between Lukács and Adorno there is first of all a common European culture and more particularly the affinity stemming from the Hegelian tradition to which they both belong. It is therefore quite startling to discover the subject-object dialectic deployed with devastating intellectual and political force in Frantz Fanon's last work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, written in 1961, the very year of its author's death. All of Fanon's books on colonialism show evidence of his indebtedness to Marx and Engels, as well as to Freud and Hegel.”
 (“Travelling Theory Reconsidered”)

Fanon's appropriation of European critical principles and extending them outside the European intellectual theater, and yet subverting them in process, is apparent in several passages scattered in his writings. In ***The Wretched of the Earth*** , Fanon observes:

“When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to or not belonging to a

given race, a given species. In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. This is why Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem.” (p. 40)

In **Black Skin, White Masks** , we read these reflections:

“I hope I have shown that here the master differs basically from the master described by Hegel. For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work. In the same way, the slave here is in no way identifiable with the slave who loses himself in the object and finds in his work the source of his liberation. The Negro wants to be like the master. Therefore he is less independent than the Hegelian slave. In Hegel the slave turns away from the master and turns toward the object. Here the slave turns toward the master and abandons the object.” (p. 220-1)

In the earlier pages of this same book, Fanon had written:

“Before beginning the case, I have to say certain things. The analysis that I am undertaking is psychological. In spite of this it is apparent to me that the effective disalienation of the black man entails an immediate recognition of social and economic realities. If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process:

---primarily, economic;
---subsequently, the internalization---or, better, the epidermalization---of this inferiority.” (p. 10-11).

In a chapter called “Medicine and Colonialism”, in Fanon's fourth other book, **A Dying Colonialism** , we read:

“Introduced into Algeria at the same time as racialism and humiliation, Western medical practice, being part of the oppressive system, has always provoked in the native an ambivalent attitude. This ambivalence is in fact to be found in connection with all of the occupier's modes of presence. . . Reduced, in the name of truth and reason, to saying ‘yes’ to certain innovations of the occupier, the colonized perceived

that he thus became prisoner of the entire system, and that the French medical service in Algeria could not be separated from French colonialism in Algeria.” (p. 121-123).

It would be very tempting to dismiss these reflections of Fanon as only relevant in a colonial context, a historical experience that Africa has supposedly overcome, whatever the effects that may still remain. Fanon is attempting to understand the relationship between knowledge and history in all contexts of political, social, economic and cultural domination. It is very much disputable whether Africa has overcome the neo-colonial phase.

What most immediately concerns me is the imperative that compelled Frantz Fanon to practice medicine and psychiatry through sociological categories thereby pulling them in the direction of politics or bringing politics into them or revealing the inner truth of their political nature. Whatever the nature of rapprochement, Fanon was in effect positing medicine and psychiatry as properly belonging in the intellectual force field of the Social Sciences rather than the Natural Sciences. Here I posit medicine and psychiatry as interchangeable. In these preoccupations, Fanon was attempting to establish the real connections between the individual and the context through the political practice of knowledge. It is perhaps for this reason that Fanon was penetratingly engaged with matters of culture in the broader sense; an engagement that was unusual for a medical practitioner and a psychiatrist trained in psycho-analysis. The unusualness could probably be explained by the predicaments that Fanon enumerates in the aforementioned chapter on “Medicine and Colonialism”: the epistemological basis and historical coordinates of medicine; the historical situation and context of the introduction or intrusion of Western medical practice in relation to other prevailing healing practices such as traditional medicine; the political hindrance of colonialism in preventing the appreciation of medicine; the issue of separating medical practice from the context of political oppression; the ethical trust between a patient and a practitioner in conditions of oppression and domination; the conflict between traditional medical techniques and modern medical techniques; the nature of clinical observation in a setting of intrusive political power; the failure of the sociology of medicine to comprehend the compromised nature of medicine in a colonial context; the truth of medical knowledge and medical practice vitiated by the lie of the colonial situation; the question of separating the role of the doctor from the person who practices it; and the colonial doctor who is a white settler owning enormous property. These ‘problems’ as well as others compelled Fanon to re-position medicine and psychiatry in the fields of knowledge as well as attempting to transform their constitutive nature.

There are striking similarities between Fanon's understanding of the situational

context of medicine and psychiatry and their possible epistemological restructuring and the endeavors of the great Swiss medical historian, Henry Ernst Sigerist (1891-1957), who was thirty-four years older than Fanon, approximately two generations separating them. This is the name I would love to bring to Africa. This is the reason I have written a monograph called **Internationalism and Nationalism in Medicine: Henry E. Sigerist**, which is scheduled to be published and launched in my country South Africa in a few months. The name of Sigerist is not totally new to Africa. He came to my country for about two months to give a lecture at the University of Witwatersrand just a few months before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. He gave a most extraordinary lecture, "University Education," about his European intellectual formation that can be found in his book **The University At The Crossroads** (1946). I will not discuss this lecture here since I have mentioned it extensively elsewhere. After receiving his medical degree from the University of Zürich, he studied medical history, in order to forge an intellectual bridge between the Natural Sciences and the Cultural Sciences (specifically the Humanities). He belonged to the last generation of Europeans in the early years of the twentieth century to study Classics. In the process learned to speak about ten languages, including Sanskrit, Arabic, Chinese, Persian, Russian.

Where does the extraordinariness of Henry Ernst Sigerist reside! In the interest time, I will only give a synoptic view of his achievements. Like Fanon, but historically preceding him, Sigerist constructed a *system of intellectual knowledge* that was not circumscribed by the logic and parameters or boundaries of medical sciences or psychiatry since this is our central concern in this presentation. I would like to draw attention to these distinguishing hallmarks of Sigerist historical and intellectual thought. First, his history of Western medicine is in actual fact a reconstruction of the genesis and development of modernity as it was shaped by the emergence of modern science against so-called revealed "knowledge" and tradition, a science based on direct *observation* rather than *speculation*. His reflections on the great Renaissance doctors, the Belgian Andreas Vesalius and the German Paracelsus, are a great salutation of the necessity of direct experience in the development of new forms of knowledge. Second, he makes clear that the establishing of modern anatomy by Vesalius based on the human body against the ancient anatomy of Galen which was based on the structure of animals, was enabled or facilitated by the great drawings of the human body, particularly those of Leonardo da Vinci. Looking at this historical instance, Sigerist takes the opportunity to argue that all disciplines should avail themselves of the opportunity of learning from or discoursing with other disciplines in order to enhance their development. Third, reflecting on his own love of the literary naturalism of Emile Zola, he indicates that Zola through his uncanny descriptions of the diseases of coal miners enhanced the powers of the health sciences and the medical sciences for detailed observation. Concerning

this particular observation, Sigerist can legitimately be posited as the founder of Medical Humanities. In other words, he strongly believed that the Humanities and the Sciences should always remain in a state of dialogue with each other. Fourth, believing that medicine should be preventive rather than intrusive, Sigerist was sensitive to the sociological and economic determinants of the role of the sciences in society. This observation and formulation lead him to embrace collectivist enterprises rather than individualistic ones. Fifth, observing that the modern sciences, especially medicine, had invented their particular modernity through observation, rationality and logical explanation, he believed that internationalism rather than nationalism was constitutionally spontaneous to their nature as forms of knowledge. Here Sigerist was indicating that politics are deeply implied or embedded in scientific or medical practices. I think Fanon would have very affirmatively and wholeheartedly agreed with this.

All of these hallmarks of Sigerist's intellectual enterprise establish the affinities between him and Fanon. What is their legacy for us in Africa today. I think they were convinced that particularized forms of knowledge should be practiced or articulated in such a manner that they would transform national cultures or at the very least leave assist in the construction of *abiding intellectual legacies* . I think Fanon's unrelenting critique of colonial psychiatry was a call for the making of intellectual heritages of psychiatry in a post-independence or postcolonial Africa. We need various volumes written on *intellectual history of African psychiatry* or an intellectual history of psychiatry in Africa. We need biographies of our medical doctors and psychiatrists. The late great Nigerian psychiatrist Thomas Lambo would be an excellent starting point. A major comparative study of Frantz Fanon and Thomas Lambo should be undertaken. For this to be possible, that is the writing of the intellectual history of African psychiatry, the preservation of all the relevant documents by you our scientists is necessary. We need to have autobiographies written by you. I'm aware of the unfairness of this request given the pressing demands on your time. But such an intellectual history is not possible without the preservation of the documents of the history of your clinical practices. It is my hope that the Association of African Psychiatrists has a centralized archive institution. Many constructions still need to be undertaken on the vital role of psychiatry in Africa.

Presently engaged with the reconstruction of South African intellectual history from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, I'm very much conscious of the importance of the newspapers of that era in making such an undertaking possible. The retracing of the construction of modernity in South Africa is not possible such preserved documentation. One of the great modernizers in the twentieth century in South Africa was a medical doctor Alfred Bitini Xuma. As president of the African National Congress in the 1940s, he completely transformed the organization into an extraordinary instrument of

modernity. In doing this, he definitely played a seminal role in the formation of South African modernity. A recent book on him by an American scholar testifies to this legacy.

We need to begin constructing the formation of African modernity from the perspective of African psychiatry.

Thank You.

Claremont [Los Angeles], California.

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