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A Dying Colonialism by Frantz Fanon

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between Arendt and sociologists over the nature and causes of totalitarianism highlight features of the phenomenon contemporary political sociologists would do well to be reminded of. What is more, Baehr pursues this recovery in a novel and promising manner: he gives us neither potted acontextual summaries nor plodding historical treatments, but often riveting essaylike chapters that take us just far enough inside a given intellectual-historical episode to allow us to grasp its essentials, and then immediately pull us out to contemplate the broader significance. The book is also interdisciplinary in a way that few are. Rather than simply bringing multiple disciplinary perspectives to bear on some problem, it explicitly thematizes the tensions between competing perspectives, and between humanistic and social-scientific approaches more generally. Beyond this, Baehr writes clearly and with verve, and the book serves as a reminder of the power of good sociological prose.

But Baehr's book is virtuous in another way: it is politically brave. Relatively few sociologists work on what many observers see as one of the defining social phenomena of our time: the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Even fewer in our notoriously left-leaning field have had the audacity to point out its egregious moral failings and the world-historical dangers it poses (not that the West is blameless in its emergence). Baehr does. In his concluding chapter, which promises to be a segue into his next book, Baehr brings Arendtian ideas, tempered by his prior discussion, to bear on radical Islam, concluding that while it shares certain features with totalitarianisms past, it is in fact a novel phenomenon of the sort to which Arendt wanted to alert us. Insofar as this is the case, Baehr suggests, sociological understanding of Islamic fundamentalism—an urgent task—may require the development of theories and approaches not yet in our intellectual armament. Only time will tell if Baehr is right about this last point (if there is one weakness in the book, it is that the arguments developed in the last chapter are not very systematic). But one thing is clear: while our responsibilities force us to persevere, books like this make it hard to go back to what can sometimes seem our only-slightly-less-dismal science.

*A Dying Colonialism.* By Frantz Fanon. New York: Grove Press, 1965. Pp. 181.

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The vicissitudes of Frantz Fanon's reputation make an interesting study. Fanon died months after finishing *The Wretched of the Earth*, which appeared to mixed reviews in France in late 1961. But the American

\*Another review from 2049 to share with *AJS* readers.—*Ed.*

edition found a ready popular audience in the late 1960s, and the book was in eight languages by 1970.

In the academic world, Fanon's work found its audience more slowly. Of little influence in the 1960s, it enjoyed moderate visibility in the social sciences in the 1970s. Although this faded in the 1980s, by then students of literature had discovered Fanon, an engagement that grew steadily through the 1990s and 2000s, eventually returning Fanon to the social science agenda. Then his work again faded after it became clear that religious challenges to secular nationalism were far more powerful than Fanon had imagined.

All this was outside France. In Fanon's linguistic and cultural home, the collective need to forget the horrors of the Algerian war kept Fanon largely invisible, and indeed, even Algeria itself did not see an edition of *The Wretched of the Earth* until 1987, just before yet another descent into political chaos.

Fanon's reputation has rested on two books. *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) told Fanon's astounded, angry reaction to French racism. *The Wretched of the Earth* evoked his experience in the revolution of Algeria and the politics of sub-Saharan Africa. Between these, in 1959, came the more reflective *L'an cinq de la révolution algérienne*, translated as *A Dying Colonialism*, which captures Fanon at the turning point between two selves.

Frantz Fanon was born July 20, 1925, in Fort-de-France, capital of Martinique. Nurtured by an upwardly mobile middle-class family, Fanon lived a boyhood typical for his background, but talent and ambition gradually took him to the elite educational tracks through which French colonialism hoped to promote assimilation. In *lycée*, Fanon was a student of Aimé Césaire, then a struggling poet and teacher, fresh from defeat in the examinations for university teaching in France, but brilliant, charismatic, and militantly black. Césaire would become an internationally famous poet as well as a central figure in Martinican politics, outliving his student by 47 years.

The Second World War brought Fanon to France and combat in the black units of the Free French Army, a first taste of heroism—he was injured and decorated—as well as of new varieties of racism. After a brief return to Martinique to pass his orals, Fanon returned to France, where he decided to study medicine in Lyon, rather than dentistry in Paris, as originally planned. In Lyon, he drifted into an interest in psychiatry, made his first acquaintance with Algerians (migrant workers who were his patients), and met Marie-Joséphine Dublé (Josie), whom he would shortly marry. Once qualified, he spent two years in the remarkable therapeutic community of St. Alban, where he was mentored by its intense and eccentric director François Tosquelles. In these years, he produced *Black Skin, White Masks*, dictating the book to Josie.

In 1953, Fanon sat his psychiatric exam and became eligible to be chief of service. He chose Algeria, saying that the metropolitan French already

had enough psychiatrists. He arrived just as the long-smoldering Algerian Revolution entered a new phase. Various forces quickly pushed Fanon into opposition, chief among them the experience of treating in his hospital the poor, the maimed, and the terrified along with those whose minds had been overwhelmed by the terrors of colonial war. By mid 1955 Fanon had been secretly recruited by the dominant rebel organization, the FLN (National Liberation Front); although he took no public stands, his views were well known. By late 1956 he was receiving death threats; he resigned his position and was officially ejected from Algeria. Moving to Tunis, he took another psychiatric position and gradually became one of the chief spokesmen for the Algerian Revolution, contributing regularly to *El Moudjahid*, the FLN's biweekly newspaper.

In early 1960 Fanon became the representative to Ghana for the provisional Algerian government. At the end of 1960, after a punishing exploratory trip through Mali to the southern borders of Algeria, Fanon felt weak, sought medical advice, and was diagnosed with leukemia. Treated in the Soviet Union in April 1961, he relapsed soon after, and, crossing the frontiers of the Cold War, went to the United States for treatment in October. He died December 6, 1961. In his last year, he compiled/wrote *The Wretched of the Earth*.

It should be noted from the outset that none of Fanon's books is really a book. None was composed with care and long reflection, in successive drafts, for a clearly conceived audience. Fanon was a dictater, not a writer. *Black Skin* was—amazingly—originally conceived as Fanon's thesis for the medical degree. Although obviously influenced by Aimé Césaire's by then widely known *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, it has none of that work's extraordinary poetry, self-conscious design, and disciplined thematics. Similarly, *Wretched* was assembled by a dying man out of some old case histories and articles, a talk to Second Congress of Black Authors and Writers, and a long, published article on violence, all edited and filled out with newly dictated material.

This collage quality is less evident in *Dying Colonialism*, which comprises five parts, each touching on a particular group or phenomenon as related to the Algerian Revolution: women, radio, the family, medicine, and Europeans. The last of these is a previously published article, but the other sections were dictated by Fanon to his wife in early 1959. But although the book was produced very quickly, its tone is more reflective and more revealing than those of *Black Skin* and *Wretched*. In part, this was by necessity. By this time, Fanon's three years in Algeria were two years in the past, and his memories and notes had to be eked out with information gleaned from the many exiles whom Fanon treated in Tunis.

The five essays are a wonderful mixture of insightful observation, psychopathological observation, revolutionary rhetoric, Sartrean philosophy, and sheer passion. The essay on radio for example gives us wonderful insights: that by crowing about French victories in the field, Radio Alger itself made clear to the Algerians that French power could be challenged;

that French language hallucinations (among Algerians) seemed to change from threatening to benign as the Revolution wore on (and language became less of a mobilizing force); that French jamming of the Voice of Fighting Algeria led frustrated listeners to improvise their own optimistic messages out of the shrieking static. At the same time, the whole analysis is colored by relentless and rather romantic insistence on the (existential) creation of the new nation by its enactment of itself in the very act of revolution. So we hear of broadcasts in French, Arabic, and Kabyle, which “unified the experience [of listening] and gave it a universal dimension” (p. 89).

In the essay on medicine, Fanon argues that even colonial medicine, which “in all objectivity and all humanity” ought to be perceived as utterly beneficial, is perceived by the colonized as just another part of colonial oppression. (He clearly spoke from bitter experience.) Moreover, because the colonized held back from colonial medicine until the last possible moment, colonized patients were likely to be extremely sick, and most often died, which in turn reinforced the general mistrust. Fanon’s discussion of the patient interview is brilliant (“When the colonized escapes the doctor and the integrity of his body is preserved, he considers himself the victor by a handsome margin”; p. 128) as are his remarks on patient compliance with treatment (“When he does [eventually] come back . . . an interview with the patient reveals that the medicine was taken only once, or, as often happens, that the amount prescribed for one month was absorbed in a single dose”; p. 129) Fanon examines this complex situation both in the light of cultural difference and in the light of the colonial power’s disturbance of traditional culture (“The patient gives evidence of the fear of being the battleground for different and opposed forces”; p. 131). He then moves on to discuss those doctors who become active colonialists and settlers, dispossessing native land, conniving at the French rules for informing on patients (about gunshot wounds, e.g.) and even serving the torturers by reviving patients for further torture. In the end, however, here too he succumbs to romanticism: the coming of the Revolution brings rapid acceptance of modern medicine and reintegration of the Algerian doctors whose turn to modern medicine had been regarded as betrayal: “Once the body of the nation begins to live again in a coherent and dynamic way, everything becomes possible” (p. 145). But for all the romanticism, this essay—undergirded by painful experience—is the best in the book.

The chapter on European participation in the Revolution by contrast seems to be wishful thinking. Supporters of the Algerians among the European population of Algeria were few indeed. To be sure, there may have been more extensive participation by local Europeans early in the war, when Fanon was still in Algeria, before the battle of Algiers. And it is important to recall that Fanon himself, although black, was undoubtedly perceived by Algerians as a metropolitan. (He spoke no Arabic, beginning the language only in 1956.) And thus in this chapter he was,

in a sense, defending himself. But as to Fanon's remark that "never has a member of the Front deceived a French democrat [i.e., a supporter of the Revolution]," that cannot for a moment be believed. The Algerian War was of unexampled brutality, the stakes were very high, and truth, as Fanon himself admitted, was an early casualty.

Most famous and most debated of the chapters in *Dying Colonialism*, however, is the first, "Algeria Unveiled." Here Fanon discusses the role of women in the Revolution. The first section of the essay attributes this role to a conscious FLN (male!) decision and an expanding pattern of recruitment. The second claims that even the women's "alleged confinement" in the pre-revolutionary period was in fact a chosen withdrawal into a secret realm untouchable by the colonizers. "The Algerian woman, in imposing such a restriction on herself, in choosing a form of existence limited in scope, was deepening her consciousness of struggle and preparing for combat" (p. 66). This is anachronism. Moreover, for all that Fanon throughout accuses the French ethnologists of exoticism, he himself had hymned the exoticism of cross-race desire in *Black Skin*, and his language here is no more neutral than there: "The shoulders of the unveiled Algerian woman are thrust back with easy freedom. She walks with a graceful, unmeasured stride, neither too fast nor too slow. Her legs are bare, not confined by the veil, and her hips are free" (p. 58). There follows an elaborate account, drawn from the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty, of the unveiled woman's corporeal experience.

Generations of scholars have debated Fanon's attitudes toward women. He was, after all, a man who asked his French wife to type his description of how a black man feeling a white woman's breasts felt that he was seizing all of white civilization. But it is not the misogyny or paternalism that strikes one in this chapter as much the extraordinary romanticism. The attitude to women in this chapter is oddly close to Victorian pedestalization, from the lustful eyes with which Fanon imagines the Europeanized young Algerian woman vamping the French soldiers while she carries crucial information to FLN leaders (She is Nana as an Algerian) to the cult of family and inner strength with which he encircles their more conservative mothers.

Undergirding this romanticism is pure will. Everything in this chapter, indeed, in the whole book, bespeaks Fanon's determination to be Algerian, to become one with this nation with which he had—in objective terms—little connection. Algeria was a largely Arab and Muslim country; Fanon was a West Indian black and a secularist. Algeria was a colony; Fanon came as a senior officer in the colonial civil service. The Algerian Revolutionaries were riven with factional quarrels that often ended in cold-blooded murder; Fanon idealized them as the vanguard of a unified new nation. And the sequel was to prove Fanon wrong in dozens of ways, as the country became a one-party, Islamicized, bureaucratic command state, largely dependent on its former colonial masters, with women thrust back into the "traditional" roles to which the metropolitans had objected in the

first place. (Fanon had earlier interpreted colonial attempts to liberate women as another aspect of French oppression.)

Why then is this book, and Fanon's work more broadly, so important? It is important first for its sheer emotion, its passion, its rage at the horrors of colonialism and racism. Despite the talents and abilities that took Fanon to the metropolis at 21, even average whites there took him not for a psychiatrist, a doctor, or an intellectual, but simply as a *négre*. *Black Skin* is the enraged but nonetheless often subtle tirade against that experience. Fanon went to Algeria and found that there, far from being the oppressed, he was regarded as one of the oppressors, in effect a European Frenchman. Despised from above in one setting, he was mistrusted from below in the other. In *Dying Colonialism* we find Fanon at the transition point where these experiences of racism and of dominance came face to face with his sheer horror at life in Algeria: a world of bombings and reprisals, of torture and violence, of hatred and lies. He chose to act and did so as best he could. It is little surprise that he overdid his identification with the Revolution. Facing death at 36, he made in *The Wretched of the Earth* his romantic, existential assertion that he too was an Algerian. More broadly, by that act he asserted the unity of all colonized peoples.

Fanon's action underscores the political and moral quality of scholarship, something at once evident when we read social science outside the metropolis. The English poet W. H. Auden spoke better than he knew when he said "Thou shalt not commit a social science." He meant we should not reduce the rich particularities of humanity to an architecture of variables. But his words have a more biting, political sense that he did not intend. To commit social science—outside the metropolis of America and Western Europe—is to commit an overtly political act. Of the authors read in this past year's essays, Fanon and Kenyatta were active revolutionaries. Bâ became a militant feminist. Freyre's work was appropriated as rightist ideology. Qu returned to China to find himself a despised "reactionary." Only Ghurye, of these six, lived a typical academic life. Freyre and Fanon were exiled, Kenyatta was imprisoned in a concentration camp, and Qu was sent to the countryside to expiate his class position.

In the metropolis, social science is safer, in both senses of the word "safe": more protected from intervention, but also less daring and hence less in need of drastic discipline. All too often, the scholarship of the metropolis evolved into unimaginative analysis of measures whose only reality was their enactment by existing social and political institutions: "delinquency," "inequality," "health-related quality of life," and so on. Moral commitment degenerated into ahistorical judgment of the past on criteria whose standards the judges themselves had never been asked to meet, writing as they did in comfortable metropolitan universities at the heart of world-dominant societies rather than in the fearful crucibles of Algeria and its like.

To reading Fanon, then, we must bring a certain humility. His work testifies that there is no way to live a purely universal life or to write a

purely universal scholarship. Any scholar must be who he or she is, in a particular place at a particular time, and must make of self and experience and place and time a body of work. The standard for that work is that it humanely enrich our knowledge of the world. It is a high standard, but one Fanon meets.

Fanon himself contemns sociologists and ethnologists repeatedly in *Dying Colonialism*. For him, they are fools at best, colonial tools at worst. Yet, oddly enough, in the French occupational army that Fanon so much hated there was an angry young intelligence clerk who wrote just such sociological works as Fanon rejects. Three of them concerned Algeria itself. Read today, Pierre Bourdieu's books on Algeria retain the muted anger of their writer, but read beside Fanon, they seem politically tame indeed. Which then was the real Algeria: the one the political scholar saw and described or the one the scholarly politician enacted and proclaimed? Both.