BOOK REVIEW

Following Fanon
Fanonian Practices in South Africa: From Steve Biko to Abahlali baseMjondolo by Nigel C. Gibson

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For scholars and followers of the psychiatrist, revolutionary theorist and anticolonial activist Frantz Fanon, the year 2011 marks a dual anniversary: It has been 50 years since Fanon’s death and the publication of his famous and final book, Les damnés de la terre (usually translated into English as The wretched of the earth, rather than the more accurate The damned of the earth).

These, without a doubt, are both historically significant events: Fanon is an iconic twentieth century intellectual. After his death he quickly became, not unlike Ché Guevara, almost instantly recognisable as masthead of popular resistance extending far beyond the very particular struggles (the decolonisation of Algeria) to which he committed his labour and life. However, Fanon’s influence also exceeded his mere symbolic potency and portability as an image: During the 1960s and early 1970s the English translation of Les damnés de la terre became a revered and often inflammatory manual for various anticolonial and black empowerment struggles the world over, especially in the USA and South Africa (in the latter case, via the
Black Consciousness philosophy of Steve Biko and others). *The Wretched* became a guidebook, call to arms, warning; it was a book young revolutionaries wanted to study and with which to be seen. To this day it maintains its uneasy status as both controversial and a classic in the literature of twentieth century political thought.

In terms of sheer recognisability in our image saturated world, Guevara perhaps had more “success” as pop cultural icon. He remains the ultimate countercultural pinup. At the same time, however, Guevara’s relevance as intellectual and practical resource for contemporary popular movements and struggles also became diluted in the process. We could say that Fanon yielded more *theoretical* returns than Guevara: He came to be seen, even after the gradual demise of Third Worldism and the failure of so many postcolonial states, one of the darlings, an honorary founding father of sorts, of the burgeoning field of postcolonial studies. Since the 1980s, Fanon has been one of this field’s go-to theorists, an instant dispenser of authenticity and political license for scholars of literature, culture, race and identity. For a generation of postcolonial theorists, Fanon represented the radical, activist edge of an otherwise very self-reflexive and textually dominated intellectual environment. He became the link to Africa and the Third World in a disciplinary movement mostly confined to the English departments of Euro-American universities. But rather than truly representing the promise of revolution, the Frantz Fanon of postcolonial studies served as a melancholic reminder of its ultimate, even necessary failure.

In other words, if the tradition of postcolonial studies has salvaged Fanon, it has done so at considerable cost to his continued potency as a political theorist. The Fanon of postcolonial studies seemed more interested in cultural hybridisation than in revolution; more interested in textual politics than in material struggle; more interested in the fluidity of identity than in the rigor mortis of racial absolutism; more interested in diasporas than in postcolonial Africa; and more interested in poststructuralist disenchantment with the subject than in a reinvigorated humanism. It is not surprising that *Black skin, white masks*, the book Fanon wrote before he became involved in the Algerian struggle, gradually eclipsed *The Wretched of the earth* as the central text within Fanon scholarship. Fanon was also dislodged from his (by then unfashionable) intellectual roots in Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and in some instances almost completely assimilated to the designs of Lacanian High Theory.

This trend has generally characterised the appropriation of Fanon in critical psychology in South Africa as well. Derek Hook, for example, in his important delineations of Fanon as a theoretical resource for critical psychology, focuses almost exclusively on *Black skin, white masks* – ironically, Fanon’s writings about, inspired by and from Africa, become all but invisible. In his new book, *Fanonian Practices in South Africa: From Steve Biko to Abahlali baseMjondolo*, Nigel Gibson introduces us to and forcefully argues for a very different Fanon.

Although his interest is social movements and radical democratic politics, Gibson’s work will be essential reading for critical (and community) psychologists.
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By insisting on the centrality of The Wretched of the earth for a productive engagement with Fanon in relation to contemporary (South) African politics and struggles for liberation and democracy, Gibson confidently moves beyond the appropriation of Fanon to psychoanalytic preoccupations with identity and misrecognition. His Fanon is still committed to struggle against oppression, to a transformative humanism, to an analysis of the political economy of the postcolonial state, and to a critique of neo-colonial and imperial relations of power in the world today.

In the process Gibson not only demonstrates that Fanon is still relevant, but that he may well be a necessary theorist for our times and for our place. Fanon’s reflections on spontaneity, the pitfalls of national consciousness, and elite transitions and xenophobia in the postcolony truly resonate with the South Africa we live in today. But Gibson does not simply wish to apply Fanon in a sterile academic manner. Fanon is engaged with here as a resource for practice and reflection in relation to specific struggles and the emergence of historic political subjectivities in post-apartheid South Africa: The social movements of the poor and the shack dwellers’ movements in particular.

Gibson’s book does a number of things, and does them very well. It extends and historicises the by now familiar left critique of South Africa’s transition and post-apartheid political economy by locating it within Fanon’s almost prophetic diagnostics of the fault lines of postcolonial independence and transformation. It traces and eloquently discusses the Fanonian origins of Steve Biko’s Black Consciousness philosophy and revolutionary humanism in South Africa. It offers sharp analyses of neo-liberal capitalism, poverty and xenophobia in contemporary South Africa. And as a final point, it offers an excellent introduction to (and Fanonian reading of) the emergence of the shack dwellers’ movement Abahlali baseMjondolo.

For critical and community psychologists in South Africa, who wish to confront their times and their country in a theoretically sophisticated but nevertheless practically engaged manner, this lively, forceful book is essential reading.

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