

Peter Hudis. *Frantz Fanon: Philosopher of the Barricades (Revolutionary Lives)*. London: Pluto Press, 2015. Pp. 176. \$20.00 (cloth).

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Frantz Fanon's voice looms large today. But, according to a new critical biography by Peter Hudis, *Frantz Fanon: Philosopher of the Barricades*, Fanon is frequently misquoted and often misunderstood even by those who embrace his ideas. The Fanon presented to us in this short but richly perceptive text devoted his life to political activism, and was a complex thinker who applied his knowledge of psychoanalysis and philosophy in service to the national liberation struggles of his day.

Hudis's goals in writing this book were twofold. First, he wants to help us develop a deeper understanding of Fanon's writings in historical context. Second, he wants to show how it speaks to us today—for example, to blacks and Latinos in the U.S. facing discrimination and police violence and immigrants from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East in Europe facing a nativist backlash and discrimination because of their religious beliefs. Hudis delivers in both ways.

Frantz Fanon was a psychiatrist, humanist thinker, and radical political theorist who devoted his life to the struggle to end colonial domination in Algeria and other parts of the world. His writings have influenced scholars in diverse fields of post-colonial studies, as well as revolutionaries all around the world.

Aside from major works on psychology, Fanon's philosophical and political work were shaped by his exposure to the phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the existentialism of Sartre, the master-slave dialectic of Hegel, and Marx's ideas about society, economics and politics. Most of these writers showed little interest in race, so it was up to Fanon to stretch their ideas and apply them to the lived experiences of racially oppressed people.

Fanon's encounters with racism during World War II "convinced him of the need to grasp the problem at its root" (p. 28). Phenomenology and existentialism, with their emphasis on "action, immediacy, and

engagement” with the world as experienced by the individual would give him the tools he needed “to conduct a philosophically grounded examination of racism on the lived experiences of black people” (p. 28–29).

According to Hudis, one of Fanon’s most important insights was that race is not natural and that all racial categories, such as black and white, are not real. Fanon rejected the idea of an ontology of blackness or negritude. As he argues in his book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, our notions of biological race are socially constructed. According to Fanon, “It is the colonist who fabricated and continues to fabricate the colonized subject.” Hudis adds:

Blackness [for Fanon] is not a ‘natural’ reality – it is not a form of being that just ‘is’. Blackness is instead a construct of specific social relations. It is *produced, fabricated*, not simply *given*. The black ‘exists’ as black, only in relation to the white: there is no pre-existing black essence that a black person can fall back upon (p. 31).

Fanon wanted to abolish race, because he believed that race distorts our view of each other, training us to have an orientation that sees the world in terms of “blackness” and “whiteness,” a world in which race seems to define one’s character and human potential. While we may be influenced by biology, or by other aspects of our culture and personal background, he was deeply committed to the idea that human beings have no predefined nature.

A second key insight of Fanon is that he is careful to locate the basis of racism in social reality, that is, “racism is produced by a structure of colonial and class domination that is wedded to specific socio-economic determinants.” (p. 41). He rejected the idea that human beings have always been racists, or that because of our *nature*, everyone is racist. If racism is rooted in our nature, there is nothing that can be done about it. Fanon believed that society created racism, and if we can make it, we can also unmake it.

Several months before his death in 1961, Fanon published the book that now defines his legacy, *The Wretched of the Earth*, which as Hudis writes, “has become renowned for its prescient warning of the dead-ends and regression that would afflict so many newly independent countries in the developing world” (p. 112). The book reflected Fanon’s deep concerns about increasing conflicts between various African states, regionalism, tribalism, and growing Islamic extremism.

It is important to read it in context however, as otherwise what it says about the use of violence, the role of the peasantry, and the threats faced by liberation movements from within can be misunderstood. Specifically, Fanon was deeply contemptuous of the nationalist bourgeoisie who rose to power after the anti-colonial struggles. Stretching Marx, he posited that the peasantry, not the working class, would be the revolutionary class. Fanon spelled out positive features of violence not because he fetishized violence; rather, he worried that the gains of the revolutions were being lost due to neocolonialism and because of unprincipled compromises the leaders of independence movements were making with former colonial powers (he was correct). The use of violence might be the only way for the peasantry to resist.

Hudis is careful to expose Fanon's blind spots (including his silence about the invasion of Hungary in 1956), and rightly observes that the violence used by colonized subjects has not been transformative, nor prevented neocolonialism. Notwithstanding these errors, Fanon's writings remain powerful and relevant today because, as Hudis correctly points out, Fanon "grounds a negative critique of racism and dehumanization in a positive, affirmative vision, of the human being who struggles to resist these conditions" (p. 5).

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This edited volume brings together contributions from some well-seasoned and respected experts of Myanmar. In itself, the book is an important achievement and the result is readable and highly informative. The pieces in the book are eclectic, but this is a strength. The authors delve into new and original research questions, such as MP behavior in