

Psychiatry in history

The enduring psychiatric legacy of Frantz Fanon: 20 July 1925 to 6 December 1961

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Frantz Omar Fanon was born in Martinique on 20 July 1925. He died from leukaemia in Bethesda, Maryland, USA, on 6 December 1961, at 36 years of age. Fanon is best known for his critical philosophical and political writings published at the cusp of independence movements in France. These are still widely studied by social and political scientists, giving him almost cult status in revolutionary movements worldwide, even 60 years after his death. His 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks* critically examined the psychological impact of colonisation on the colonised. In a personalised narrative full of poetic imagery, Fanon questioned the cognitive dissonance inherent in the experiences of an intellectual Black man (with a mixed-race mother), unable to fit into the marginalised life of people of colour, but rejected by his adopted French identity, for which, as a soldier in the Free French Army during the Second World War, he had hitherto been ready to die.

Fanon studied medicine at the University of Lyon, graduating in 1951, and trained in psychiatry in Saint-Alban Hospital, coming under the influence of Dr François Tosquelles, who held radical thoughts on psychopathology. After practising in several posts in French towns proper, Fanon moved to Algeria, North Africa, in 1953. As he said in a letter to his brother Joby: 'I'm going to Algeria. You understand: the French have enough psychiatrists to take care of their madmen. I'd rather go to a country where they need me.' He worked as a consultant psychiatrist, responsible for 200 psychiatric patients in Blida-Jonville Hospital in Algeria from 1953 to 1956, and later worked in Tunis, where he put his theoretical work on social therapy into practice. In Tunis, disillusioned by the torture and inhumane treatment of natives, and already a war veteran, he became an advocate of violent overthrow of colonialism, and became a combatant, this time against France. His later critical writings, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1959) and *A Dying Colonialism* (1961), were about politics and the pedagogy of decolonisation.

Fanon was one of the earliest psychiatrists to propagate the view that mental illness and discrimination were both forms of exclusion, and that racism could be a precipitant, as well as a perpetuating factor, in mental illness. His academic writings on psychiatry are less well-known, but important all the same. He was to reject the then prevailing concepts of medical justification for colonialism, including claims of biological ideas of racial superiority. He advocated culturally sensitive treatment and integration of psychiatric patients into society, rejecting the prevailing methods of psychiatry as tools for social control.

Many of Fanon's ideas and practices were precursors to much of what we now term recovery and rehabilitation psychiatry. This includes transcultural and cross-cultural psychiatry, focusing on understanding the role of culture and social contexts in psychiatric treatment, including the use of spiritual and religious beliefs, much like the concerns of today's spirituality special interest groups.

Fanon was one of the first advocates to use the concept of day hospitals, redesigning his psychiatric wards to be as unrestricted as possible, giving patients a choice in treatment, much against the grain of colonial psychiatric practice, which treated the colonised population in almost penal institutions. In desegregating wards in a Muslim country, he gave a voice to women far before the concept of open wards were the norm. Fanon was also one of the pioneers of many socio-therapeutic tools we take for granted today, including vocational therapy, drama therapy and art therapy.

Although Fanon's life concerns centred on the racial treatment of minorities in colonies, they are extrapolated to include the treatment of any marginalised group. This includes immigrants, individuals of lower social classes, and in fact anyone outside mainstream society living in a marginalised world, and this is what might make his work relevant for a further 60 years. In a changing world full of challenges requiring unity of purpose devoid of racial bias, including climate change, gender equality and renewed concerns about migration, and the revival of nationalism based on ethnic identities, his legacy of advocating racial understanding and mutual respect in all of humankind is likely to stand the test of time.

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