

## Reviews of books

Leo Zeilig, *Frantz Fanon: A Political Biography*. Second Edition. London: I. B. Tauris (pb £14.99 – 978 0 7556 3821 5). 2021, xxi + 279 pp.


Frantz Fanon (1925–61) needs little introduction. Among the most prominent Black thinkers of the last century, his work has been acknowledged as canonical around the world. Best known for his first and last books, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon attained multiple roles as a psychiatrist, anti-colonial activist and social philosopher, which together generated a mind and worldview uniquely attuned to the vicissitudes of colonialism and decolonization. There simply was no other figure with the same résumé of qualifications and experience. Fanon has consequently presented both an opportunity and a challenge to the biographer. On the one hand, the enigma of Fanon – his unusual credentials, his shifting politics, his wide-ranging personal geography – has been a source of temptation for scholars seeking to understand the motivations behind his thinking over time. On the other hand, these same enigmatic qualities, which are further underpinned by his untimely death from cancer at the age of thirty-six, have rendered Fanon an ever elusive figure. We know Fanon from his writing, but what was he like as a father? A husband? A soldier during World War Two?

*Frantz Fanon: a political biography* is the second edition of a book first published in 2015. Leo Zeilig is a noted biographer, having produced works on Patrice Lumumba, Thomas Sankara and, most recently, Walter Rodney. He is also an editor of the *Review of African Political Economy*. What Zeilig consequently brings to this biographical project is an attention to Fanon's political evolution, particularly after 1953 when he moved to Blida-Joinville, Algeria, outside Algiers, to take up a position as a staff psychiatrist. Consisting of seven chapters plus an introduction, the bulk of *Frantz Fanon* – six chapters total – dwells on this vital period when Fanon became conspicuously active as a supporter of anti-colonial struggles in Algeria and elsewhere. Indeed, first-time readers of Fanon may need further background. Zeilig's focus on this later period, though important, abbreviates the potential for a more complete account and interpretation of Fanon's life.

Born in Martinique, Fanon experienced a relatively affluent, middle-class childhood, with a private education that included a fateful encounter with fellow Martinican Aimé Césaire as his secondary school teacher. Négritude became an early source of critical thought for Fanon – one he would grapple with, as seen in *Black Skin, White Masks*. This book is a complicated assortment, if not quite a synthesis, of philosophizing on such issues as racial assimilation, language acquisition and emergent psychoanalysis, in addition to Négritude and its limitations. Though critical (and often self-critical), it does not call for decolonization in the strident manner of *The Wretched of the Earth*. Born a French citizen, Fanon was instead more tentative and reflective at that time. *Black Skin, White Masks* is a work of criticism like those by W. E. B. Du Bois and James Baldwin, who were also Black citizens of a country that, despite its constitutional law, denied them equal rights in practice.

The context of Algeria and the start of the Algerian Revolution in 1954 constituted a pivot point for Fanon. As recounted by Zeilig – and it should be stressed that Zeilig does an excellent job of placing Fanon’s life within this vibrant historical context – the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) sought to break from the bourgeois nationalism that had dominated Algerian politics in the preceding decades to establish instead ‘a broad, cross-class alliance’ (p. 61) that was more grassroots in orientation. It is through this social understanding of the FLN that Zeilig situates Fanon and the wider political world he embraced. Indeed, as indicated earlier, this biography is strongest in its outlining of the political ferment that led to the writing of *The Wretched of the Earth*, with Zeilig offering a detailed chronology and a grounded mapping of Fanon’s movements from Blida-Joinville to Tunis, to Accra, and elsewhere during this chaotic, though productive, period.

Zeilig provides a careful reading of Fanon’s final work. He is not uncritical of Fanon’s conceptual generalizations, at one point describing how they might ‘throw sand in the eyes of the reader’ (p. 187). More specifically, he discusses how Fanon idealized the peasantry as a vanguard for revolution. This political vision was not only strategically misplaced, but, in contrast to many Fanonists, Zeilig underscores how this argument has proven detrimental for recognizing and supporting urban working-class politics in the subsequent decades. ‘The real history of working-class action in the Third World has often been concealed,’ Zeilig writes in his book’s conclusion. ‘Fanon’s role in helping to conceal this reality makes his legacy decidedly ambiguous for those of us who seek to develop (and recover) such a politics today’ (p. 243). *Frantz Fanon* is ultimately to be commended for its balance of political commitment and nuanced criticism, which serves to both demythologize and enhance our appreciation of this indispensable, protean thinker.

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Elleni Centime Zeleke, *Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964–2016*. Leiden and Chicago IL: Brill and Haymarket Books (hb €139 – 978 90 04 41475 4; pb US\$30 – 978 1 64259 341 9). 2019/2020, 281 pp.

*Ethiopia in Theory* is a thought-provoking original work that pushes disciplinary boundaries. It is bold in its theoretical and epistemological grounding, and emancipatory in its practical implications. The book shines the spotlight on knowledge production and social science practice in Africa. This is done by narrating the story of the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s and 1970s and how this movement appropriated Marxist and social science ideas. The book launches into an investigation that redefines our understanding of critical theory in an African context. The main concerns of this inquiry have implications for how we view and approach knowledge production within African Studies. One of the original contributions of the book is that not only is it