

LES DAMNÉS DE LA TERRE

*Debout les damnés de la terre,
Debout les forçats de la jail.*

(The first two lines of Eugene Pottier's original words for the song,
'L'Internationale'.)

Jack Woddis

FRANTZ FANON, who died in 1961, has already become some-
of a legend. A young psychiatric worker from Martinique, he
threw in his lot with the F.L.N. in the struggle for the liberation of
Algeria, but died of leukaemia at the early age of 36, on the very
eve of Algeria's victory. His writings have had a considerable influ-
ence among educated Africans, and equally, if not more so, among
European intellectuals. In Italy, for example, a Frantz Fanon Centre
has been established, which holds seminars on Fanon's work and
ideas, and issues a regular journal, *Bollettino di Note Informazioni
e Documenti*. In France, Fanon's writings have had wide currency,
especially his main work, *Les Damnés de la Terre*, which appeared
in 1963 with a special foreword by Jean-Paul Sartre. This book has
now been published in England under the title, *The Wretched of the
Earth*.*

Fanon's life, as shown by this remarkable book, was dominated
by a burning hatred of colonial and racial oppression. No one can
read a single page of Fanon without sensing the depth of his just
feelings. In vivid imagery, writing almost as if his nerve-ends were
exposed, he attacks without mercy all those whom he regards as
standing in the way of the liberation of the down-trodden millions
of Africa. It is doubtful if any writer has ever been able to depict
so vividly and with such passion the feelings of an oppressed people
in the face of their hated oppressor. Every barbed word against the
colons of Algeria is equally an exposure of Smith and the white
settlers of Rhodesia.

Fanon has many penetrating things to say, too, on the question
of national culture and its relation to the national democratic
revolution. He writes devastatingly on the weaknesses of the African
bourgeoisie, although he tends to lump together, without distinction,
the *comprador* and bureaucratic bourgeoisie, the feudal land-
owners, the urban petty-bourgeoisie, the intellectuals and the
national bourgeoisie—as if all are equally to be scorned, and all
equally to be regarded as props of neo-colonialism.

Fanon, to his credit, tries to analyse class forces in the African

revolution, but his weakness here is that he relies too easily on superficial impressions gleaned from a few countries, and consequently makes sweeping generalisations which are not borne out by the facts. It is significant that he uses no statistics, nor does he provide concrete details or examples, when making his class analysis. Briefly, his 'theory' on the rôle of classes in Africa is that 'in the colonial countries the peasants alone are revolutionary' (p. 48) while 'the proletariat' is that section of the colonised population which has been 'most pampered by the colonial régime' (p. 88), which is 'the most comfortably off fraction of the people' (p. 98), and is therefore incapable of playing any significant rôle in the revolution. In the urban areas, Fanon looks to the 'core of the lumpen proletariat' in whom he expects that 'the rebellion will find its urban spearhead' (p. 103).

Fanon provides no evidence to justify this 'theory'. He rests his case on eloquent argument. If he had bothered to examine the important rôle played by the African working class—their numerous strikes and demonstrations in which hundreds were shot, killed or wounded, and thousands arrested and imprisoned—in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, in Ghana and Nigeria, in Guinea, Mali, Cameroun, Niger, and Senegal, in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika, in Sudan and Zambia, in Southern Rhodesia and South Africa—he could never have concocted his 'theory'. In most African territories the peasants—who, after all, are the overwhelming majority of the population—have been the *main support* of the national struggle, but this has always been alongside the struggle of the working class which has been the most politically aware, acted as a pace-maker, and provided cadres and often leadership for the national movement as a whole.

It is important to note that Africa's most advanced national leaders estimate the rôle of the working class quite differently from Fanon. Speaking of the Guinea trade union and working class movement, Diallo Seydou has said: 'Its rôle at every instant is political'. Mamadou Keita has described the Mali working class as 'a fundamental base' of the party. Kwame Nkrumah has made a similar assessment of the working class of Ghana. Other African leaders have made parallel appraisals.

Fanon's attempt to pose the African worker against the peasant, on the alleged grounds of the better material conditions enjoyed by the former, ignores the peculiarity of the class structure of Africa. The overwhelming majority of African workers have been casual, un-

skilled migrants, who periodically return to the land to work as peasants. A 'worker-peasant' is a common type, the peasant taking up wage labour in order to help the rest of his peasant family whom he has left behind on the land. His relatively higher wage is not to enrich himself but to assist the whole family. This is confirmed by T. M. Yesufu (*An Introduction to Industrial Relations in Nigeria: 1962*), as well as by the I.L.O. African Advisory Committee report on 'Methods and Principles of Wage Regulations' (Tananarive, April 1962).

It is not without significance that Fanon's attempt to belittle the rôle of the African working class in the struggle for national independence, has been taken up and used by a whole number of bourgeois 'experts' on Africa, especially in the United States (see, for example, the essay by Elliot J. Berg and Jeffrey Butler, in *Political Parties and National Integration in Tropical Africa*, 1964). Fanon, no doubt would have been shocked to find his writings being taken up and used by such apologists of capitalism; but life is a harsh teacher, and the logic of Fanon's argument here, whatever his intentions, is to lend support to all those who wish to foster a stunted form of capitalism in Africa, and keep the working class in a subordinate position. Attempts to minimise the rôle of the African working class in the struggle for national liberation are part of the ideological and political struggle to keep the workers out of decisive positions of power and influence in the post-war independence period.

Fanon is correct in drawing to our attention the peculiar and important rôle played in Africa by the young, unemployed and most depressed sections of the urban population. Amilcar Cabral has noted the same phenomenon in Portuguese Guinea. But Fanon goes further; he looks to all 'the pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed and petty criminals' (p. 104) to throw themselves 'into the struggle for liberation like stout working men'. This criminal lumpen-proletariat element, however, is a most dangerous and unreliable ally, and is certainly not to be regarded as 'one of the most spontaneous and the most radically revolutionary forces of the colonised people' (p. 103). In fact, Fanon himself is forced to admit (p. 109) that in practice it has been the imperialists who have been able to make frequent use of the lumpen proletariat *against* the national struggle—and he cites here the very relevant examples of Algeria, Angola and Congo (Leopoldville).

Fanon's confusion on many essential points has, unfortunately, resulted in his ideas being taken up and used in a distorted fashion

by cold war warriors who ignore the main purpose of Fanon's work, and who fail to recognise (or wish to cast aside) the fact that Fanon hated not only colonialism and racialism; he equally detested capitalism, both that of the imperialist oppressor and equally that of his miserable imitator in Africa, for whom Fanon had nothing but the most withering contempt.

Fanon admittedly has a limited understanding of the real nature of the twentieth century. The important rôle played by the Soviet Union and other socialist countries in assisting the Algerian people in their liberation struggle has been commented on by Ben Bella, as well as by Col. Boumedienne. The rôle of the socialist world appears to have been outside Fanon's cognisance. Neither does he apparently recognise the long and consistent struggle of the French working people against their own Government's war in Algeria. In view of his failure to make a correct appraisal of the forces making for Algerian liberation, it is not surprising that he fails to appreciate that it is the combination of the socialist world, the national liberation struggle (or 'the Third World', to use his term), and the international working class movement which constitutes the decisive factor of our epoch. It is this combination which guarantees, as Lenin so wisely forecast, that 'the movement of the majority of the world's population, which at first is directed towards national liberation, will turn against capitalism and imperialism and may play a much greater revolutionary rôle than we expect'. This total conception is increasingly being embraced by Africa's most outstanding leaders.

Those who wish to isolate Africa and Asia from their natural allies have attempted to utilise Fanon's work for this purpose. It is true that Fanon calls on the people of Africa to turn their backs on Europe, but there is no mistaking that it is capitalist Europe to which he really refers:

Colonialism and imperialism have not paid their score when they withdraw their flags and their police forces from our territories. For centuries the capitalists have behaved in the underdeveloped world like nothing more than war criminals. Deportations, massacres, forced labour, and slavery have been the main methods used by capitalism to increase its wealth, its gold and diamond reserves, and to establish its power. . . . In a very concrete way Europe has stuffed herself inordinately with the gold and raw materials of the colonial countries: Latin America, China and Africa. From all these continents, under whose eyes Europe today raises up her tower of opulence, there has flowed out for centuries towards that same Europe diamonds and oil, silk and cotton, wood and exotic products. Europe is

literally the creation of the Third World. The wealth which smothers her is that which was stolen from the underdeveloped countries (pp. 79-81).

Fanon's explanation tends to be oversimplified, and his viewpoint is not always clear. But it is hard to believe that his intention was to isolate Africa from all that is progressive in the rest of the world. He asserts, without equivocation: 'The Cold War must be ended, for it leads nowhere' (p. 83). He calls for a great effort to 'rehabilitate mankind and *make man victorious everywhere*', and adds that this task 'will be carried out with the indispensable help of the European peoples, who themselves must realise that in the past they have often joined the ranks of our *common masters* (my italics; J.W.) where colonial questions were concerned. To achieve this, the European people must first decide to wake up and shake themselves, use their brains, and stop playing the stupid game of the Sleeping Beauty'. No one who was anti-European could have displayed such genuine concern for the real fate and future of Europe.

Fanon died a young man. He was cut off in the midst of his development. He had witnessed the results of appalling tortures and massacres, a glimpse of which we see in that section of the book in which Fanon describes a number of his psychiatric case histories. It would be remarkable if Fanon did not write with bitterness, or develop his ideas with a certain exaggeration. But there was more to his outlook than hatred of oppression and racialism. Was it an accident that for the title of his book he chose the phrase of '*L'Internationale*', the anthem of the international working class which ends with the words '*L'Internationale serra le genre humain*'?

It was the fate of the 'human race' which was really at the core of all Fanon's thinking. And when the political inadequacies of his book have been forgotten, the noble struggle against colonialism to which he devoted his life will still be remembered.
