

When Violence Was What the Doctor Ordered

Adam Shatz's "The Rebel's Clinic," a new biography of the psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon, aims to restore complexity to a man both revered and reviled for his militancy.

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Frantz Fanon, in the center of the second row, at his psychiatry clinic in Tunis, circa 1959. Archives Frantz Fanon/Imec

THE REBEL'S CLINIC: The Revolutionary Lives of Frantz Fanon, by Adam Shatz

Rhetoric that is polemical, that is caustic, that is ruthlessly extreme is potent in one sense yet vulnerable in another. It seizes attention and attracts acolytes; it is memorable and therefore memeable. But such strength can also be brittle. Writers who deploy it are susceptible to being cherry-picked and caricatured. They get enlisted in disparate causes and excerpted in college syllabuses. They become icons — whether to be smashed or revered.

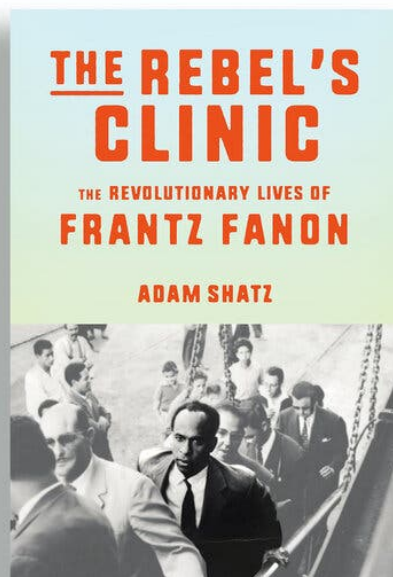
I kept thinking about this paradox while reading "The Rebel's Clinic," Adam Shatz's absorbing new biography of the Black psychiatrist, writer and revolutionary Frantz Fanon. In the decades since his death in 1961, Fanon has become that figure of double-edged distinction: an "intellectual celebrity," as Shatz puts it, whose writing has been recruited for "a range of often wildly contradictory agendas" — secular and Islamist, Black nationalist and cosmopolitan — each trying to claim his uncompromising energy for its own.

For all his unwavering radicalism, he led a roving existence. He was born on the French Caribbean island of Martinique in 1925 and died, at 36, in a hospital in Bethesda, Md., in what he had called “the country of lynchers.” In between, he fought the Nazis in France, directed a psychiatric hospital in Algeria and eventually became a spokesman for that country’s National Liberation Front, known as the F.L.N., in its war against French colonial rule.

He was both a militant and a doctor, someone who promoted a “belief in violence” while also practicing a “commitment to healing.” An acquaintance recalls being struck by Fanon’s compassion: “He treated the torturers by day and the tortured at night.”

Fanon’s French secretary told Shatz that she hated seeing Fanon “chopped into little pieces,” arguing that those who tried to isolate one part of the man and his work “missed the indissoluble whole.” Shatz’s book is an attempt to restore a sense of fullness to Fanon, whom he largely, though not unconditionally, admires.

Fanon could be “vain, arrogant, even hotheaded.” In his first book, “Black Skin, White Masks” (1952), he derided homosexuality and wondered about “women who just ask to be raped.” During the last months of his life, while dying of leukemia, he wrote “The Wretched of the Earth” (1961). It depicted violence committed by colonial subjects against their oppressors as not only a matter of strategy, but also a psychological boon.



“Violence is a cleansing force,” Fanon wrote. (Shatz says that the line is better translated as “violence is dis-intoxicating.”) “It rids the colonized of his inferiority complex, of his passive and despairing attitude.” This was the kind of incendiary declaration that made some readers, including those who were politically sympathetic, recoil. The left-wing journalist [Jean Daniel](#) wrote a positive review in L’Express while confiding his revulsion to his diary: “a terrible book, terribly revealing, a terrible harbinger of barbaric justice.”

Shatz, the United States editor for The London Review of Books, is a mostly steady hand in turbulent waters. His chosen title highlights a side of Fanon that often gets eclipsed by the larger-than-life image of the zealous partisan — that of the caring doctor, one who was a “painstaking, diligent reformer in his day-to-day practice as the director of a mental hospital,” and, eventually, of a secret clinic for Algerian rebels. (David Macey’s [2001 biography](#) offers more detail on Fanon’s upbringing in Martinique.)

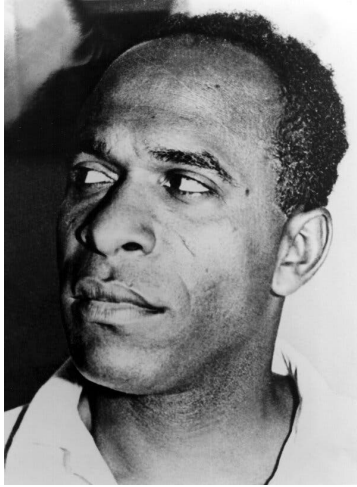
At his hospital in Algeria, Fanon recognized the therapeutic importance of communal belonging and everyday activities. He paid attention to details, even down to the quality of the food, telling his staff that the patient who complains about the fare is “developing the sense of a taste for nuance.”

But at the same time, Fanon was becoming radicalized. When the F.L.N. launched a war for independence in 1954, French colonial forces reacted with unbridled brutality. At his clinic for rebels, Fanon treated victims of interrogation who had been waterboarded, violated with bottles or shocked with electrodes affixed to their genitals.

France liked to talk a big game of liberal ideals, but Fanon viewed the notion of cooperation between colonizer and colonized as just a fig leaf for domination. The occupation was maintained by violence; Fanon the doctor was seeing the horrific consequences up close. He berated a French friend for leaving Algeria. “I don’t want it to be beautiful,” Fanon wrote in a letter, presumably about what would come next. “I want it to be torn through and through.”

And it would be torn through and through, even if Fanon didn’t live long enough to see everything that happened. Expelled from Algeria in 1957, after his hospital’s involvement with the rebels had been exposed, he moved with his wife and son to Tunis, where he served as a loyal propagandist for the F.L.N., as it became ever more authoritarian and paranoid. He stayed silent when the group assassinated a friend and fellow revolutionary. After a unit of the F.L.N.

murdered more than 300 villagers in Melouza for the crime of supporting a rival rebel group, Fanon held the party line, publicly denying any responsibility.



Frantz Fanon in an undated photograph. “Violence is a cleansing force,” he wrote. “It rids the colonized of his inferiority complex, of his passive and despairing attitude.” Credit...Everett Collection

Part of what gives “The Rebel’s Clinic” its intellectual heft is Shatz’s willingness to write into such tensions. But sometimes he tips into generosity when something tougher is needed. He acknowledges feminist critiques of Fanon, who was persistently drawn to “hard men” and talked about needing to be a “god” to his wife, a journalist known for her radical views. “Yet Fanon formed strong attachments with many of his female colleagues,” Shatz writes, a defense that gets perilously close to “some of his best friends were. ...”

According to interviews conducted by the scholar Félix Germain for his 2016 book [“Decolonizing the Republic,”](#) Fanon would [publicly hit his wife](#), saying, on at least one occasion, “I avenge myself.” Shatz steers clear of these disturbing allegations. Maybe his research debunked them, or called them into question. If so, it would have been good to know.

Because, of course, violence is a core part of “The Wretched of the Earth,” something that Shatz addresses head on, offering a smart, careful reading. He blames Jean-Paul Sartre’s notorious preface (“Violence, like Achilles’ spear, can heal the wounds it has inflicted”) for fixating on the book’s first chapter, “On Violence” — glorifying carnage without heeding Fanon’s call to channel such impulses “into a disciplined armed struggle.” Shatz directs our attention to Fanon’s last chapter, which includes wrenching case studies from his practice,

involving both victims and perpetrators of violence. These show that even as Fanon wrote messianically about anticolonial violence, “he did not expect the psychological damage to be easily repaired.”

Shatz points to this “striking ambivalence” in a work of otherwise “militant self-certainty.” He is right, even if he emphasizes it more than Fanon’s book does. When a text begins with a lyrical exaltation of decolonization’s “red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives,” ending it with some case studies does little to tamp down the blast radius. Violence, whether in word or in deed, overwhelms. It crushes ambivalence — after all, that’s exactly what violence is supposed to do.

While writing the book in his final months, Fanon traveled to the United States for treatment with the help of the C.I.A., which was apparently eager to demonstrate American good will so that Algeria wouldn’t fall under Soviet influence. Shatz portrays a man whose penchant for “rhetorical extremity” could obscure how horrified he was by the brutality he had seen. Fanon left little by way of his private thoughts, so “his inner life will always elude us,” Shatz says. But in a rare journal entry, Fanon did allow this: “Not everything is so simple.”

THE REBEL’S CLINIC: The Revolutionary Lives of Frantz Fanon | By Adam Shatz | Farrar, Straus & Giroux | 451 pp. | \$32

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/21/books/review/the-rebels-clinic-adam-shatz-frantz-fanon.html>