

A Supplement to the Newsletter *Bunji*, September 1978.
Darwin 1978
By Bill Day

A BLACK AFRICAN WRITES ABOUT CULTURE AND THE PEOPLE.

Franz Fanon was a doctor and a writer who fought for his people, the black people of Africa, until he died in 1961, at the age of 36. He tried to understand the problems of the African tribes living under European colonialism, fighting for freedom and becoming new nations.

Fanon's best known book is 'The Wretched of the Earth' and it contains much useful advice to Aborigines of Australia. Of course there are great many important differences between the position of our people and those of Africa which Fanon writes about. However, oppression is oppression and struggle is struggle – there is enough in common to make a study of Franz Fanon's books well worth our while.

Here we summarise chapters 3 and 4 of the book. When Fanon talks about the 'bourgeoisie' of a colonial system, he includes all those blacks who hold privileged positions or who are necessary for the colonial system to run smoothly, particularly in the towns. Read on and judge for yourself: (Page numbers are from the Penguin Book). [Note: The analysis reprinted below was first printed in *Bunji* in 1978 at a time when the federal government was encouraging so-called Aboriginal self-determination and Aboriginal land rights were becoming a reality in the Northern Territory. Despite these apparent advances, the Northern Land Council had approved uranium mining against the wishes of the local people. In 2008 the federal intervention into Aboriginal communities again makes political analysis an urgent priority for Aboriginal opposition to the new hegemony.]

'The national bourgeoisie of under-developed countries is not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labour; it is completely canalised into activities of the intermediary type. Its inner most vocation seems to be to keep in the running and to be part of the racket... We have said that the native Bourgeoisie which comes to power uses its class aggressiveness to corner the positions formerly kept for foreigners. On the morrow of independence, in fact, it violently attacks colonial personalities: barristers, traders, landed proprietors, doctors and higher civil servants. It will fight to the bitter end against these people "who insult our dignity as a nation." It waves aloft the notion of the nationalisation and Africanisation of the ruling classes.

The fact is that such action will become more and more tinged by racism until the bourgeoisie bluntly puts the problem to the government by saying "We must have these posts." They will not stop their snarling until they have taken over every one.

'The national bourgeoisie, since it is strung up to defend its immediate interests, sees no farther than the end of its nose, revealing itself incapable of simply bringing national unity into being. (Page 128) ...it will discover the need for a popular leader to whom will fall the dual role of stabilising the regime and of perpetuating the domination of the bourgeoisie... (133) The leader, who has behind him a lifetime of political action and devoted patriotism constitutes a screen between the people and the rapacious bourgeoisie. He acts as a braking power on the awakening consciousness of the people. (135) The masses begin to sulk, they turn away from this nation in which they have been given no place and begin to lose interest in it. (136)

In the under-developed countries, we have seen that no true bourgeoisie exists; there is only a sort of little greedy caste, avid and voracious, with the mind of a huckster, only too glad to accept the dividends that the former colonial power hands out to it. (141) It is easy to neutralise this bourgeois class in that, as we have seen, it is numerically, intellectually and economically weak. (142) The national bourgeoisie has all the more opportunity to take over from the oppressor since it has been given time for a leisurely tête-à-tête with the excolonial power. (142) The bourgeoisie of an under-developed country is a bourgeoisie in spirit only. It is not its economic strength nor the dynamism of its leaders, nor the breadth of its ideas that ensures its particular quality... Consequently it remains at the beginning, and for a long time afterwards, a bourgeoisie of the civil service. (144)

The political party in many parts of Africa which are today independent is puffed up in a most dangerous way. In the presence of a member of the party, the people are silent...but in the street when evening comes...the bitter disappointment of the people, their despair but also their unceasing anger makes itself heard. (147) We who are citizens of under-developed countries, we ought to seek every occasion for contacts with the rural masses. (150) We must above all rid ourselves of the very Western, very bourgeois and therefore contemptuous attitude that the masses are incapable of governing themselves. (151) It is true that if care is taken to use only a language that is understood by graduates in law and economics, you can easily prove that the masses have to be managed from above. (152)

In an under-developed country experience proves that the important thing is not that three hundred people form a plan and decide upon carrying it out, but that the whole people plan and decide, even if it takes them twice or three times as long...The future remains a closed book as long as the consciousness of the people remains imperfect, elementary and cloudy (156). A program is necessary for a government which really wants to free the people politically and socially. There must be an economic program; there must also be a doctrine concerning the division of wealth and social relations. In fact there must be an idea of man and the future of humanity. (164)

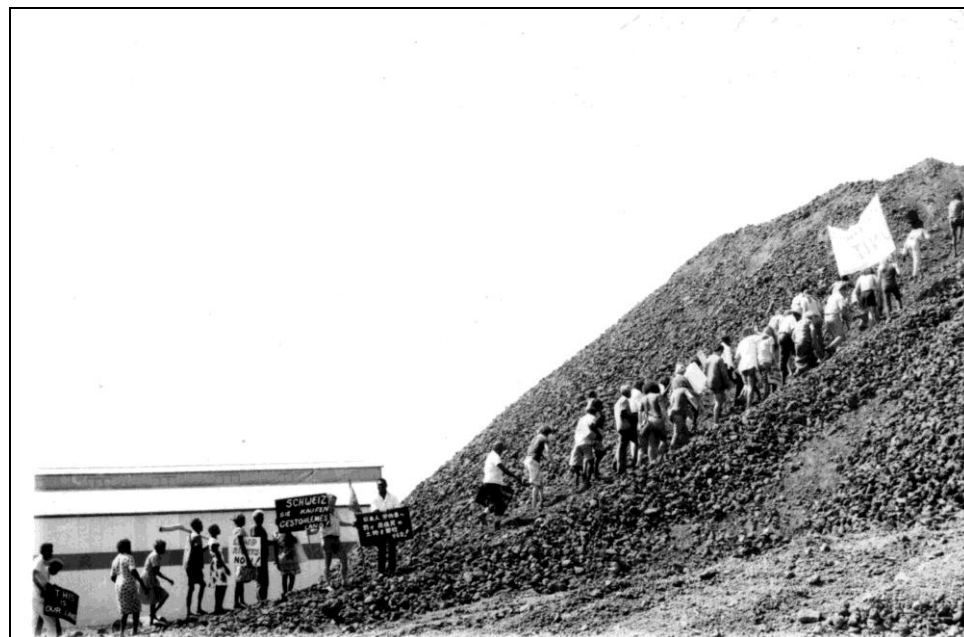
All under-developed peoples, contrary to popular belief, very quickly build up a political and social consciousness before the stage of nationalism. If this happens we find in under-developed countries fierce demands for social justice which paradoxically are allied with often primitive tribalism. (164) But if nationalism is not made explicit, if it is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words into humanism, it leads up a blind alley. (165)

ON NATIONAL CULTURE (Chapter 4)

It is not enough to try to get back to the people in that past out of which they have already emerged; rather we must join them in that fluctuating movement which they are just giving shape to and which, as soon as it has started, will be the signal for everything to be called into question. (187) We must work and fight with the same rhythm as the people to construct the future and to prepare the ground where vigorous shoots are already springing up. (188) ...persistence in following forms of cultures which are already condemned to extinction is already a form of nationalism; but it is a demonstration which is a throw-back to the laws of inertia. There is no taking of the offensive and no redefining of relationships. There is simply a concentration on a hard core of culture which is becoming more and more shrivelled up, inert and empty. (191) Colonial exploitation, poverty and endemic famine drive the native more and more to open, organised revolt. The necessity for an open and decisive breach is formed progressively and imperceptibly, and comes to be felt by the great majority of the people. (192) Stinging denunciations, the exposing of distressing conditions and passions which find outlet in expression are in fact assimilated by the occupying power in a cathartic process. (192)

The continued cohesion of the people constitutes for the intellectual an invitation to go farther than his/her cry of protest. (193) [An attentive spectator] will note unusual forms of expression and themes which are fresh and imbued with a power which is no longer that of invocation but rather of the assembling of the people, a summoning together for a precise purpose. (196) This struggle which aims at a fundamentally different set of relations between persons cannot leave intact either the form or the content of the people's culture. (198)

ALL QUOTES FROM 'THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH' BY FRANZ FANON (1925-61), published by Penguin Books. Translated from the French by C Farrington.



Above: Protestors climb the iron ore stockpile at Fort Hill Iron Ore Wharf, Darwin, on National Aborigines Day, 1972 (Photograph NT Library)