

Achille Mbembe ~ On The State Of South African Political Life



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In these times of urgency, when weak and lazy minds would like us to oppose “thought” to “direct action”; and when, precisely because of this propensity for “thoughtless action”, everything is framed in the nihilistic terms of power for the sake of power - in such times what follows might mistakenly be construed as contemptuous.

And yet, as new struggles unfold, hard questions have to be asked. They have to be asked if, in an infernal cycle of repetition but no difference, one form of damaged life is not simply to be replaced by another.

The force of affect

Indeed the ground is fast shifting and a huge storm seems to be building up on the horizon. May 68? Soweto 76? Or something entirely different?

The winds blowing from our campuses can be felt afar, in a different idiom, in those territories of abandonment where the violence of poverty and demoralization having become the norm, many have nothing to lose and are now more than ever willing to risk a fight. They simply can no longer wait, having waited for too long now.

Out there, from almost every corner of this vast land seems to stretch a chain of young men and women rigid with tension.

As tension slowly swells up, it becomes ever more important to hold on to the things that truly matter.

A new cultural temperament is gradually engulfing post-apartheid urban South Africa. For the time being, it goes by the name “decolonization” - in truth a psychic state more than a political project in the strict sense of the term.

Whatever the case, everything seems to indicate that ours is a crucial moment in the redefinition of what counts as “social protagonism” in this country. Mobilizations over crucial matters such as access to health care, sanitation, housing, clean water or electricity might still be conducted in the name of the implicit promise inherent to the struggle years - that life after freedom will be “better” for all.

But fewer and fewer actually believe it. And as the belief in that promise fast recedes, raw affect, raw emotions and raw feelings are harnessed and recycled back into the political itself. In the process, new voices increasingly render old ones inaudible, while anger, rage and eventually muted grief seem to be the new markers of identity and agency.

Psychic bonds - in particular bonds of pain and bonds of suffering - more than lived material contradictions are becoming the real stuff of political inter-subjectivity. “I am my pain” - how many times have I heard this statement in the months since #RhodesMustFall emerged? “I am my suffering” and this subjective experience is so incommensurable that “unless you have gone through the same trial, you will never understand my condition” - the fusion of self and suffering in this astonishing age of solipsism and narcissism.

So it is that the relative cultural hegemony the African National Congress (ANC) exercised on black South African imagination during the years of the struggle is fast waning. In the bloody miasma of the Zuma years, these years of stagnation, rent-seeking and mediocrity parading as leadership, there is hardly any center left standing as institutions after institutions crumble under the weight of corruption, a predatory new black élite and the cynicism of former oppressors.

In the bloody miasma of the Zuma years, the discourse of black power, self-affirmation and worldliness of the early 1990s is in danger of being replaced by the discourse of fracture, injury and victimization - identity politics and the resentment that always is its corollary.

Rainbowism and its most important articles of faith - truth, reconciliation and forgiveness - is fading. Reduced to a totemic commodity figure mostly destined to assuage whites' fears, Nelson Mandela himself is on trial. Some of the key pillars of the 1994 dispensation - a constitutional democracy, a market society, non-racialism - are also under scrutiny. They are now perceived as disabling devices with no animating potency, at least in the eyes of those who are determined to no longer wait. We are past the time of promises. Now is the time to settle accounts. But how do we make sure that one noise machine is not simply replacing another?

Settling Accounts

The fact is this - nobody is saying nothing has changed. To say nothing has changed would be akin to indulging in willful blindness.

Hyperboles notwithstanding, South Africa today is not the "colony" Frantz Fanon is writing about in his *Wretched of the Earth*.

If we cannot find a proper name for what we are actually facing, then rather than simply borrowing one from a different time, we should keep searching.

What we are hearing is that there have not been enough meaningful, decisive, radical change, not only in terms of the life chances of the black poor, but - and this is the novelty - in terms of the future prospects of the black middle class.

What is being said is that twenty years after freedom, we have not disrupted enough the structures that maintain and reproduce "white power and supremacy"; that this is the reason why too many amongst us are trapped in a "bad life" that keeps wearing them out and down; that this wearing out and down of black life has been going on for too long and must now be brought to an end by all means necessary (the right to violence?).

We are being told that we have not radically overturned the particular sets of interests that are produced and reproduced through white privilege in institutions of public and private life - in law firms, in financial institutions such as banking and insurance, in advertising and industry, in terms of land redistribution, in media, universities, languages and culture in general.

"Whiteness", "white power", "white supremacy", "white monopoly capital" is firmly back on the political and cultural agenda and to be white in South Africa now is to face a new-old kind of trial although with new judges - the so-called "born-free".

Politics of impatience

But behind whites trial looms a broader indictment of South African social and

political order.

South Africa is fast approaching its Fanonian moment. A mass of structurally disenfranchised people have the feeling of being treated as “foreigners” on their own land. Convinced that the doors of opportunity are closing, they are asking for firmer demarcations between “citizens” (those who belong) and “foreigners” (those who must be excluded). They are convinced that as the doors of opportunity keep closing, those who won’t be able to “get in” right now might be left out for generations to come - thus the social stampede, the rush to “get in” before it gets too late, the willingness to risk a fight because waiting is no longer a viable option.

The old politics of waiting is therefore gradually replaced by a new politics of impatience and, if necessary, of disruption. Brashness, disruption and a new anti-decorum ethos are meant to bring down the pretence of normality and the logics of normalization in this most “abnormal” society. Steve Biko, Frantz Fanon and a plethora of black feminist, queer, postcolonial, decolonial and critical race theorists are being reloaded in the service of a new form of militancy less accommodationist and more trenchant both in form and content.

The age of impatience is an age when a lot is said - all sorts of things we had hardly heard about during the last twenty years; some ugly, outrageous, toxic things, including calls for murder, atrocious things that speak to everything except to the project of freedom, in this age of fantasy and hysteria, when the gap between psychic realities and actual material realities has never been so wide, and the digital world only serves as an amplifier of every single moment, event and accident.

The age of urgency is also an age when new wounded bodies erupt and undertake to actually occupy spaces they used to simply haunt. They are now piling up, swearing and cursing, speaking with excrements, asking to be heard.

They speak in allegories and analogies - the “colony”, the “plantation”, the “house Negro”, the “field Negro”, blurring all boundaries, embracing confusion, mixing times and spaces, at the risk of anachronism.

They are claiming all kinds of rights - the right to violence; the right to disrupt and jam that which is parading as normal; the right to insult, intimidate and bully those who do not agree with them; the right to be angry, enraged; the right to go to war in the hope of recovering what was lost through conquest; the right to hate, to wreak vengeance, to smash something, it doesn’t matter what, as long as

it looks “white”.

All these new “rights” are supposed to achieve one thing we are told the 1994 “peaceful settlement” did not achieve - decolonization and retributive justice, the only way to restore a modicum of dignity to victims of the injuries of yesterday and today.

Demythologizing whiteness

And yet, some hard questions must be asked.

Why are we invested in turning whiteness, pain and suffering into such erotogenic objects?

Could it be that the concentration of our libido on whiteness, pain and suffering is after all typical of the narcissistic investments so privileged by this neoliberal age?

To frame the issues in these terms does not mean embracing a position of moral relativism. How could it be? After all, in relation to our history, too many lives were destroyed in the name of whiteness. Furthermore, the structural repetition of past sufferings in the present is beyond any reasonable doubt. Whiteness as a necrophiliac power structure and a primary shaper of a global system of unequal redistribution of life chances will not die a natural death.

But to properly engineer its death - and thus the end of the nightmare it has been for a large portion of the humanity - we urgently need to demythologize it.

If we fail to properly demythologize whiteness, whiteness - as the machine in which a huge portion of the humanity has become entangled in spite of itself - will end up claiming us.

As a result of whiteness having claimed us; as a result of having let ourselves be possessed by it in the manner of an evil spirit, we will inflict upon ourselves injuries of which whiteness, at its most ferocious, would scarcely have been capable.

Indeed for whiteness to properly operate as the destructive force it is in the material sphere, it needs to capture its victim’s imagination and turn it into a poison well of hatred.

For victims of white racism to hold on to the things that truly matter, they must incessantly fight against the kind of hatred which never fails to destroy, in the first instance, the man or woman who hates while leaving the structure of whiteness itself intact.

As a poisonous fiction that passes for a fact, whiteness seeks to institutionalize

itself as an event by any means necessary. This it does by colonizing the entire realms of desire and of the imagination.

To demythologize whiteness, it will not be enough to force “bad whites” into silence or into confessing guilt and/or complicity. This is too cheap.

To puncture and deflate the fictions of whiteness will require an entirely different regime of desire, new approaches in the constitution of material, aesthetic and symbolic capital, another discourse on value, on what matters and why.

The demythologization of whiteness also requires that we develop a more complex understanding of South African versions of whiteness here and now.

This is the only country on Earth in which a revolution took place which resulted in not one single former oppressor losing anything. In order to keep its privileges intact in the post-1994 era, South African whiteness has sought to intensify its capacity to invest in what we should call the resources of the offshore. It has attempted to fence itself off, to re-maximize its privileges through self-enclaving and the logics of privatization. These logics of offshoring and self-enclaving are typical of this neoliberal age.

The unfolding new/old trial of whiteness won't produce much if whites are forced into a position in which the only thing they are ever allowed to say in our public sphere is: “Look, I am so sorry”.

It won't produce much if through our actions and modes of thinking, we end up forcing back into the white ghetto those whites who have spent most of their lives trying to fight against the dominant versions of whiteness we so abhor.

Furthermore, we must take seriously the fact that “to be black” in South Africa now is not exactly the same as “to be black” in Europe or in the Americas.

After all, we are the majority here. Of course to be a majority is a bit more than the simple expression of numbers. But surely something has to be made out of this sheer weight of numbers. We can use this numerical force to create different dominant standards by which our society live; paradigms of what truly matters and why; entirely new social forms; new imaginaries of interior life and the life of the mind.

We are also in control of arguably the most powerful State on the African Continent. This is a State that wields enormous financial and economic power. In theory, not much prevents it from redirecting the flows of wealth in its hands in entirely new trajectories. As it has been done in places such as Malaysia or Singapore, something has to be made out of this sheer amount of wealth -

something more creative and more decisive than our hapless “black economic empowerment” schemes the main function of which is to sustain the lifestyles of the new élite.

The neurotic misery of our age

Finally, it is crucial for us to understand that we are a bit more than just “suffering subjects”. “Social death” is not the defining feature of our history. The fact is that we are still here – of course at a very high price and most likely in a terrible state, but we are here.

We are here – and hopefully we will be here for a very long time – not as anybody else’s creation, but as our own-creation.

To demythologize whiteness is to dry up the mythic, symbolic and immaterial resources without which it can no longer dabble in self-righteousness or in the morbid delight with which, as James Baldwin put it, it contemplates “the extent and power of its own wickedness.” It is to not be put in a position in which we die hating somebody else.

On the other hand, politicizing pain is not the same thing as advocating dolorism. In fact, it must be galling to put ourselves in a position such that those who look at us cannot but pity us victims.

One way of destroying white racism is to prevent whiteness from becoming a deep fantasmatic object of our unconscious.

We need to let go of our libidinal investments in whiteness if we are to squarely confront the dilemmas of white privilege. Baldwin understood this better than any other thinker. “In order really to hate white people”, he wrote, “one has to blot so much out of the mind – and the heart – that this hatred itself becomes an exhausting and self-destructive pose” (Notes of a Native Son, 112).

This is what we have to find out for ourselves – in a black majority country in which blacks are in power, what is the cost of our attachment to whiteness, this mirror object of our fear and our envy, our hate and our attraction, our repulsion and our aspirations?

Part of what racism has always tried to do is to damage its victims’ capacity to help themselves. For instance, racism has encouraged its victims to perceive themselves as powerless, that is, as victims even when they were actively engaged in myriad acts of self-assertion.

Ironically among the emerging black middle class, current narratives of selfhood and identity are saturated by the tropes of pain and suffering. The latter have

become the register through which many now represent themselves to themselves and to the world. To give account of who they are, or to explain themselves and their behavior to others, they increasingly tend to frame their life stories in terms of how much they have been injured by the forces of racism, bigotry and patriarchy.

Often under the pretext that the personal is political, this type of autobiographical and at times self-indulgent “petit bourgeois” discourse has replaced structural analysis. Personal feelings now suffice. There is no need to mount a proper argument. Not only wounds and injuries can't they be shared, their interpretation cannot be challenged by any known rational discourse. Why? Because, it is alleged, black experience transcends human vocabulary to the point where it cannot be named.

This kind of argument is dangerous.

The self is made at the point of encounter with an Other. There is no self that is limited to itself.

The Other is our origin by definition.

What makes us human is our capacity to share our condition - including our wounds and injuries - with others.

Anticipatory politics - as opposed to retrospective politics - is about reaching out to others. It is never about self-enclosure.

The best of black radical thought has been about how we make sure that in the work of repair, certain compensations do not become pathological phenomena.

It has been about nurturing the capacity to resume a human life in the aftermath of irreparable loss.

Invoking Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko and countless others will come to nothing if this ethics of becoming-with-others is not the cornerstone of the new cycle of struggles.

There will be no plausible critique of whiteness, white privilege, white monopoly capitalism that does not start from the assumption that whiteness has become this accursed part of ourselves we are deeply attached to, in spite of it threatening our own very future well-being.

Previously

published

in <http://africasacountry.com/2015/09/achille-mbembe-on-the-state-of-south-african-politics>

