

POLITICS AND THE GRAMMAR OF MUTUALITY

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Thomas Cousins reflects on the Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism as a nascent experiment in re-thinking the political and evolving an intellectual community based on an ethic of mutuality.

THOUGHTS AFTER THE FIRST DAY OF
THE JWTC WORKSHOP (6 JULY)

The Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism drew together a thrilling mix of students and teachers, initiates and sages, from south and north, for an ambitious attempt to “rethink the political”. Whether consciously or not, much was being staked, not only in the concepts and conclusions of this Workshop, but in the mode of conversation and the quality of mutual regard that such a commitment to this topic invites.

Achille Mbembe’s initial address on Monday 6 July opened up an array of questions, concepts, and methodologies, that provoked us for the duration of our time together and no doubt after. I must acknowledge the richness of the discussion around the many provocations that Professor Mbembe offered with his characteristic generosity. I take up here only a tiny portion of the rich fabric that was sown collec-

tively, in the hopes that others will pursue equally provocative lines that enrich their own thinking.

There were a number of themes that struck me that Monday morning. The first was the possibility of rethinking the political. The immediate challenge of delimiting the political (that is: What is the political?) did not settle despite many a plea and return to the question, and much dispute as to its limits, paradoxes, and bleeds. Are we correct to assume that the proper object of the political is the state and its attendant contests of inclusion? What other forms of life might be given to the political? Secondly, in this formulation, what is it to “re-think” the political? I would like to see more attention to the question, for us, of what is called “thinking”. Following from this, what is it to *re*-think? A confession of earlier hastiness? Of newfound inadequacy? Acknowledgement of doubt and incompleteness of the project? Empirical insistence? This return, this (re)doubling of thought, feels to be critical to the formulation of time that Mbembe offered as vital to the problem of the human and its rendering as expendable under “late” capitalism. The return of the repressed, perhaps, in this double-motion, as if we what we had first thought had now become excrement, spent, wasted, unto our (re)new(ed) commitments, sensibilities, compassionate entanglements.

The problematic most provocatively outlined by Mbembe – the necessity of redeeming the human from capitalism’s capacity (and tendency) to make waste of human material – was the springboard for multiple lines of flight. He suggested that South Africa offers us a privileged place from which to ask about the human because of the centrality of race to the history of capitalism in this country. What is crucial here is the specific configuration of capitalism in

which the human takes the form of waste. Not only waste as produced bodily and socially by humans, but waste as a result of a process of excretion; of the capacity of capitalism to waste human life; of waste as that which is other than human.

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Central to the imaginary of waste in this discussion is Marx’s sense of the fate of the human, as he describes it in *Capital Volume 3*, the Transformation of Surplus-Value into Profit: “If we consider capitalist production in the narrow sense and ignore the process of circulation and the excesses of competition, it (capitalist production) is extremely sparing with the realised labour that is objectified in commodities. *Yet it squanders human beings, living labour, more readily than does any other mode of production, squandering not only flesh and blood, but nerves and brain as well.* In fact it is only through the most tremendous waste of individual development that the development of humanity in general is secured and pursued, in that epoch of history that directly precedes the conscious reconstruction of human society. Since the whole of the economising we are discussing here arises from the social character of labour, it is in fact precisely this directly social character of labour that produces this waste of the workers’ life and health.”

Thus Mbembe’s project, namely how to retrieve the human from a history of waste, is hinged crucially on the possibility of the event – as singularity, as newness – as that which allows the future itself to be imagined, staked, redeemed – and it relies on a

formulation of ‘human’ and ‘political’ that deserves further excavation. What is the picture of the human here? What is excessive or exceeds (and therefore can be disposed of)? What difference does it make to think in terms of becoming human; that is, what are the ontological stakes of ‘the human’ in this vision of politics? Mbembe’s suggestion that we are no longer able to live with difference, and hence we build walls to live only with ourselves, speaks to a sense of ontological insecurity that some have suggested marks relations in South Africa. I wonder whether we might ask instead (additionally, excessively) what our notion of human is here, as an epistemological challenge immanent to a politics of hope, and whether other histories and alternative forms of life might not be at work beneath our attention? Thus, ethnographically, what could we learn from the ways in which the worlds under our study produce relations, novelty, perdurance?

As enriching to our conceptual and political armoury as the image of human-as-waste might be, what would an archaeology of waste reveal? What other possibilities ride on the coat-tails of this notion? A European history of the humoral body and our late “forgotten fear of excrement”, as Kuriyama suggests, might be the beginnings of a history of waste that takes into account, archaeologically, the psychoanalytic, the social, the ethical, and the political. (See Dominic Laporte’s *History of Shit*, in which he suggests that the management of human waste is crucial to our identities as modern individuals – including the organization of the city, the rise of the nation-state, the development of capitalism, and the mandate for clean and proper language).

Talk in the Workshop of disposability and excess inevitably raised the spectre of sacrifice in our con-

versation. I wonder if it proved a source of great misunderstanding and site of superficial agreement as to the importance of the unaccountability of sacrifice, of the logic of sacrifice to all concepts of value. Bataille’s much-appreciated reflections on the notion of excess themselves draw foundationally on the ethnographic material that has inspired the massive literature on the irrationality, and impossibility, of the gift; of the madness of the destruction of value as a form of politics.

Thus, after our first faltering steps toward a mutually shared language, what place are we to give the notion of sacrifice? What is its status in Mbembe’s formulation of hope and a redemptive, almost messianic desire for retrieval of the human from the waste-dumps of capitalism? How are we to accommodate the ethnographic record of sacrifice and its importance to politico-religious life for many people, even those not of the Abrahamic traditions? What are we to do with the new secular theodicies that circumscribe our ‘late’ sensibilities, that make us wary/weary of reminders of the importance of the religious in our thinking ‘neighbour’, ‘enemy’, ‘future’, ‘hope’... ?

A last thought on the rich notion of excrement: Rendering the human as waste must actively destroy not only the relations of production that render the poor (once fortunately) exploitable (which presumably leaves only relations of consumption as inadequate grounds for any kinds of politics or possibilities for the human) but also must discount, even destroy again and again, analytically at the very least, the actual forms of value that arise in everyday life; the actual survival of real flesh and blood human relations in some form or another, however brutish they appear to our sensitive dispositions. The

material gestures, at least to this anthropologist, to the importance of paying attention to the humble, mundane, impure complexities of lives borne up and sometimes jettisoned in these “late” times. Comments, additions and subtractions are welcomed. Mutuality in/deed.

THOUGHTS AFTER THE EVENT OF THE JWTC (20 JULY)

From the first mention of mutuality in Achille Mbembe’s opening remarks, through the commotion caused by Michael Hardt’s conception of the common, to the final meditations on de-militarising society by David Goldberg, I would hazard that something approximating community was formed over ten intense days in Johannesburg. The experimental was the chosen mode and theme for the inauguration of this Workshop, although not an experiment in which subject and observer could be easily designated, nor its results presupposed. At the very heart of an experiment that was first and last a question of *conversation* was the development of a capacity for *reception*: for receiving, hearing, speaking, seeing, in a way that offered, almost in the modality of sacrifice, the grounds for (re)conceiving the political and our ethical comportment through its (late) problematics. What became clear over the time of the Workshop was that the generosity of those present extended far beyond the base metals of time and money to an ethic of ‘taking care of’, in the Foucauldian sense, for the cultivation of a fertile space of critical regard and careful engagement.

What better way to confront the question of the political than to place the pragmatics of (intellectual) accommodation, habitation, and care in the centre of Afropolitan Johannesburg? The pressure cooker of the Workshop was only intensified by the

public debates (on populism, the Left, Zionism and Palestine); by the photographed occupation of Palestine exhibited in the Old Fort prison adjacent to South Africa's shrine to constitutionalism; and by the occasional escape over the Mandela Bridge into the old city centre. Through a kind of full-bodied experimentalism the ambition of the Workshop (to re-think the political) was drawn from its lofty heights to more humble concerns for the ways and means with which we might frame this question in our own locales. Such humility notwithstanding, the howls of the activists at the failures of the Left (Ashwin Desai: who would want to identify with such a residual notion anyway?), the frustrations of the theorists at those who would act too hastily, the mean imaginations of the empiricists who cling to the real and the loopy fantasies of the futurists not sufficiently grounded in the contradictions and impasses of capital – all, in their excess, made for an alchemy that yielded both value and residue.

Johannesburg, eGoli, the city of gold, place of excess, dredgings from the deep and wastes of human life: will this suffice as a Southern pole to (re)orient an alternative formulation of the political? Will the ethics of a new form of mutualism founded on some conception of the human prove adequate to the task of a critical, active/activated re-thinking of the grounds upon which the earth moves, upon which it is acted? In our glorious mutuality, then, what space have we made for animality, locality, the godly, the mythical, the non-city, the possible, in the moment of this late humanist enterprise?

I would suggest that the most valuable residue of the efforts expended in Johannesburg was the beginnings of a vocabulary with which to recognise and receive each other. What distance from the

Kantian critique would the arc of this new language then describe? By what criteria would we judge each other's actions: political, ethical, economic? In this regard Adi Ophir's gift to the Workshop was the facility for thinking in/for a particular location. By doing things with words, Ophir introduced the possibility of a new lexicon, for "new words for the fabrication of reality". In the Palestine of his presentation we met again "the checkpoint", "the screen", the territory, the animal made human in its association through language. For Ophir, and I would suggest for our mutual concern, the political as *somewhere between the singularity of event and the everyday coexistence that is always already political* opens up for us the possibility of entering into language together, upon new terms, of wording our world(s) differently.

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To bring together political theorists, philosophers, sociologists, theorists of the postcolony is necessarily to embark on a project to find a common language, owned by none and attributable to all, distributed justly and expressed fairly. Interpretation, observation, problematization – perhaps not in that order – are the terms that demand a mutuality forged, not through the barren methods of the 'old' critique, but through attention and care for the world as we find it. Problematization, in Ophir's terms, as running the seam between the necessary and the contingent, as resisting naturalisation, as opening up the event (as that which baptises the political) to the possibility of a different future for power, is what we might

lay down as a technique *in common*, as a *mutual* project, for thinking resistance, dissent, difference.

As a forum for cosmopolitan thinking the Workshop holds much promise; indeed it takes the form of the promissory in its orientation to future meetings, action, political forms. What will be the residue of the Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism? What shall exceed the bounds of its space and time? What further work does it inspire, invite or necessitate? Shall its language fail beyond the confines of those present at its birth? For those who participated, how are we to reciprocate this gift? What lines of flight are opened by this event? And finally, what of its own shadow, its exclusions and its failures? For all the theorists and activists of the political, the social, the ecological, the literary, and the postcolonial that peopled this Workshop, what moves and acts would be commensurate with our developed sense of the common, the mutual, or the ethical? Only by inhabiting this language, by finding our way about and trading in these re-valued terms do I think that we have the beginnings of a Workshop. Promise indeed.