The Earth as it was really seen from Apollo 17.
One of the most circulated images in history, NASA's photograph of 'the blue marble' was rotated before distribution to conform to the usual view of the world with the north at the top.
Photo Credit: NASA
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EDITORIAL: ARGUING FOR A SOUTHERN SALON

Lara Allen and Achille Mbembe
(University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa)

A global initiative emanating from the South, The Johannesburg Salon, aims to provide a public space dedicated to the discussion of ideas across three domains: intellectual, political and aesthetic.

The Johannesburg Salon is an experiment. It is a contingent and in-process attempt to merge elements of an intellectual-cultural magazine with a public discussion forum. Notwithstanding the misgivings of many of our Anglophone writers (who associate the term Salon with amateur opera and sad canapés) we have called this forum a Salon in an attempt re-establish the ideal of a public space fundamentally dedicated to intellectual discussion; one that recognises the central place of ideas in public life. We also wish to rework the notion that such a forum is the exclusive domain of old Europe. The Johannesburg Salon is an attempt to utilize the opportunities for global conversation offered by the spatial and temporal compression of the virtual environment. The 21st Century manifestation of the internet allows The Johannesburg Salon’s public to be from all over the world, and to meet simultaneously.

Through the Salon we wish to achieve a number of objectives across three domains: intellectual, political and aesthetic.

First, we wish to contribute to the formation of a fully democratic public sphere in South Africa and elsewhere in the world by fostering a culture of informed public debate. In part we hope to achieve this by making academic knowledge more broadly accessible. At present much of the knowledge produced by scholars and intellectuals fails to reach the public. This is very much the case for work generated by the Social Sciences and, to a lesser degree, the Humanities. As a result of the confinement of academic writing to a small circle of reception, the work that is being produced by scholars – which should be understood as a particular form of wealth – is generally not being deployed in the processes through which we are trying to build nations and address such global issues as underdevelopment, overconsumption, non-sustainability, inequality and violence. This has a deleterious effect on the nature of public discussion and debate, and partially accounts for the impoverished nature of the public sphere around much of the world at present.

The goal of facilitating dialogue unlikely to happen in other forums is shared with our sister projects hosted on Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism (JWTC) website. The four projects are intended to facilitate different kinds of meeting and conversation about ideas in distinct phases of evolution: these are communicated with various degrees of immediacy, and mediated by centralised JWTC organisation to different extents. For instance, The Workshop is the only face-to-face forum: it occurs once a year in Johannesburg and entails a significant amount of centralised organising. At the other end of the spectrum The Network ultimately should entail predominantly peer-to-peer communication. The Blog is the platform for ongoing, almost real-time dialogue, with the JWTC offering a facilitatory function through a moderator. The Salon, which will have four volumes per year, constitutes the most worked and mediated part of the overall project because it is edited. It is, however, our hope that ideas and conversations will wander from one forum on the JWTC site to another. For example, the photographic exhibition by Ariella Azoulay was part of The Workshop, generated a response on The Blog, and has become a feature in The Salon Volume 1. We hope that other features in The Salon will generate responses that will go onto The Blog, and perhaps inspire presentations in next year’s Workshop.

The second objective in creating The Johannesburg Salon is to enable a negotiation of global trends and ideas from a base in the South. If it is the case that knowledge production is the primary means through which the wealth of nations is creat-
ed, it is also the case that most acknowledged knowledge is produced in the West (or the global North). We wish to shift, if even only slightly, the nature of global scholarly debates and public conversations that are currently dominated by the perspectives of the North and West. We see this Salon, therefore, as a global initiative emanating from the South. To facilitate this orientation, we have assembled a core group writers comprised of scholars and intellectuals who are literally and figuratively based in the South. Figurative situatedness is made necessary by the complex reality of the global circulation and traffic of individuals that characterises the contemporary academy. We recognise that while physically some writers may be partially, or even wholly, hosted in Northern or Western institutions, their political, intellectual and/or aesthetic orientation is of the South.

Third, we wish to acknowledge the value of knowledge created and transmitted through modes apart from scholarly analysis expressed through written text. In particular we are interested in the realm of aesthetics: in capacity of the creative arts (visual, plastic, textual, sound, performance and digital, for instance) to reveal insights and facilitate particular kinds of understanding that are harder to achieve through academic research and critique. We therefore reserve feature space in The Salon for original art works, and for discussion about the processes of creative production.

A further principle driving The Salon is our wish to facilitate the public discussion of contingent ideas: ideas in process. We are interested in the generative possibilities of experimental, provisional thought and hope that The Salon will become a space for trialling ideas and generating dialogue. We are much encouraged by the intellectual generosity and courage with which the contributors to Volume 1 have leapt into this interstitial space. Many have specifically responded to our requests to be provocative, to present content in a way that does not shy away from intelligent polemics, and to court controversy when necessary.

Our commitment to experimentation has meant that the project of The Salon has itself already been through several iterations: Volume 1 is very different to that outlined in our preliminary plans. Initially we conceived of The Salon as a space where discussion of issues would evolve out of reviews of books and other scholarly and artistic representations and responses to contemporary conditions (film, poetry, music, and the visual arts, for instance). However, the interests of our writers have morphed the project into a space for think pieces that are not necessarily initially inspired by other texts. In many ways the writers featured in Volume 1 are a self-selected group who have in common the willingness to invest time and energy in an as yet unproven project, and the content comprises what these contributors most wish to write about in the present moment. Nevertheless a number of themes have emerged in Volume 1 that engage some of The Salon’s core agendas.

For instance, in keeping with our appreciation of the interpretative powers of the creative arts, there exists in this volume an interest in the power of the image, and its relationship with the imagination. We suggest that this is not surprising as the domination of the image is one of the foundational features of our times. In particular there is an interest in the capacity of the visual arts to communicate uniquely textured meaning with regard to the underside of life, what Jacques Lacan calls ‘the Real’: decay (see Pamila Gupta’s piece), and the impact of sexual and military violence and resulting trauma at the level of the social and on individuals. (See articles by Sarah Nuttall with Penny Siopis, and the conversation around Ariella Azoulay’s exhibition with Juan Orrantio and Ravinder Kauer). Furthermore, in a certain way Sarah Calburn’s article and her work of architecture are about a visual response to the fear of violence.

Received notions about the intellectual relationship between the West and its Others are addressed by Ato Quayson in his argument that existential ennui, usually reserved for individuals in the urban West, effectively describes the struggles of archetypal rural characters in classic African fiction. Similarly, several contributors propose that the condition of postcoloniality is not exclusively experienced in former colonies, but also continues to affect the metropolitan countries that enjoyed colonial power. (See, for instance, articles by Peter Geshiere and...
his respondents, as well as those by Paul Gilroy and Achille Mbembe.) Together these arguments suggest that the circulation of ideas and the conditions they describe between the South and its Others is not direct or straightforward, but may best be described as what Sarah Nuttall terms her recent book ‘entanglement’.

One of the most provocative thematics emerging from the debates over the contemporary reach and relevance of the idea of postcoloniality is a nascent plea for a slightly different, or at least additional, approach. Articulated most clearly, albeit in different ways, by Mbembe (in the article by Thomas Cousins) and Gilroy is the idea that what is needed to shift the world out of the present impasse in terms of typical relationships between former colonies and their colonisers is what Mbembe calls a politics and ethics of mutuality. Although Gilroy warns that a new and more productive path will not be possible until former perpetrators stop disavowing their colonial shadow.

The question of whether these and other provocations offered in *Volume 1* will enjoy valency beyond the small group of writers that propose them will be answered in the following months. Will readers respond and become writers? Will this Southern-based Salon attract an active global public? Are we right that such a venue is needed and desired and will be used?
**Populism: The New Form of Radicalism?**

**Jean Comaroff**
(University of Chicago, United States of America and University of Cape Town, South Africa)

Populism is often little more than a ‘figure of excitable speech’ used to disparage and discredit. But can it — should it — also be more than this?

“Populism” is very much a trope of our times: sometimes, it can serve as a term of social analysis and critique, but more often it is a figure of excitable speech (to invoke Judith Butler’s phrase), one used to disparage and discredit. Populism is generally less an identity we claim than one attached to us by others. We might profess to be “of the people,” or “for the people” (that is, “popular”). But seldom do we dub ourselves “populist” as such, for the word carries associations of crowd-pleasing and cheap emotionalism. Yet it is precisely its intrinsic slipperiness that makes the term so productive in political rhetoric.

In the run-up to last year’s US election, Sarah Palin was frequently accused of “shameless” populism in claiming to be the voice of “Main Street America,” an accusation she almost invariably countered with the charge of “elitism” – no matter that such slanging matches took place among rival factions of the unabashedly empowered and endowed.

If Palin’s populism was of the right wing, “call it like I see it” kind, there were those who as readily dubbed Barak Obama a populist (a term often used interchangeably with Socialism on the US right). As this suggests, “populism” is what linguists call a *shifter*: though it is almost always used in opposition to that deemed “elite” or “establishment”, its meaning is in fact highly relative to the context in which it is deployed. It is often totally reversible in “pot calling the kettle black” debate (vide the slanging matches between Clinton and Obama in the US democratic primaries of 2007, in which they vied for *echt* blue collar credentials; also the speed with which Obama was dubbed an “elitist” when overheard to remark that those chronically without work in small-town America were “embittered”, clinging to “guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them”).

Similar sorts of accusations circulated in the run-up to the 2009 South African elections, to be sure, especially in respect of the campaign style of the avuncular Jacob Zuma, described in an *Agence France-Presse* article of September 12, 2008, as having an “avowedly populist approach to politics”. Those who have decried Zuma’s willingness to court supporters who insist that they will “take up arms and kill” on his behalf have been dismissed as “elitist”, even “counter-revolutionary”. A piece in the *Cape Argus* of November 14, 2008, aptly captured the ambivalence inherent in the term: “Is he an astute politician who speaks to ordinary people’s concerns, or a dangerous populist who may be undermining the Constitution?”

Of course, excitable speech is one thing, the business of actual governance is another. A graffitus on a wall on the South Side of Chicago, also dating back to November 2008, read: “Obama will change everything!” Once Obama actually took power, op-ed-writers, bloggers, and media chatterers of all persuasions primed each other for the onset of the disappointment and compromise. And so it has been of course – although thus far the *realpolitik* has been more nuanced, and less cynically instrumental than many had feared. Likewise, we await with interest to see how the sweeping campaign promises of Jacob Zuma will translate into pragmatic policy now that he has taken office; how the inevitable failure to work miracles in hard times will play among those who have vested in him the capacity to bring about a millennium, long postponed. Commentators the world over have juggled irreconcilable images of Zuma: of a likeable chauvinist conjuring perilously with mob-rule, or plain-spoken champion of economic equalization, whose real offence to the comfortable classes is the threat of material redistribution, also long overdue. In practice, these images are often not all that easy to separate – for justifiable reasons, having to do with the passion and power inherent in mass action itself. Yet precisely because of their sublime, transformative potential, these popular forces require critical assessment, leadership and institutional channelling if reflexivity, and
critical assessment are to generate effective, sustainable politics. And this entails careful, ongoing analysis and argument; it requires work that goes beyond simple reductionism, or dismissive labelling – like the easy, combative application of terms like “populism” itself. This need not necessarily be the task of scholars or vanguards: some of the most clear-sighted understanding comes from those directly affected by oppressive conditions, those who live the discrepancy between rhetoric and reality, political ideals and palpable actualities. But we must also be wary of making a fetish of real, “concrete experience”. As Gayatri Spivak insisted in “Can the Subaltern Speak”, we cannot let go of the concept of ideology: consciousness is mediated by social and economic conditions, and cannot simply be taken at face value. To do this is to be complicit with the kind of realism that denies the effects of historical conditions. It is also to renounce on what Edward Said called the “critics institutional responsibility”.

Despite (or perhaps, because of) these ambiguities, “populism” is more than ever a concept to be conjured with across a wide spectrum of public debate in our present world, notably – but not uniquely – in post-colonial, post-totalitarian contexts (in Latin America, Russia, and Zimbabwe, but also arguably in the Italy of Berlusconi or in Sarkozy’s France). In South Africa, the term is currently much in play: scholarly reports, such as one by Ari Sitas, decry the rise of “populism and mutinous energy” that threatens to abort the process of “national democratic revolution”; and unashamedly interested pieces take aim at the spectre of rising redistribution (like an article in the Cape Times on July 3, 2009, that headlined: “Populists abuse us by forcing a few to pay for all” – this from the Director of the Free Market Foundation in defence of privatized health care). Why the seemingly heightened appeal of the term at this juncture? And on such contentious terrain, can the construct retain any usefulness as tool of analysis – even critical assessment – or is it irretrievably immersed in the rhetoric of reciprocal defamation?

If what characterizes modern democratic politics is the sovereignty of the people (rather than of God or the King), then it is hardly surprising that most modern political movements – democratic and totalitarian alike – claim to act in the name of the populace – even though, as Jacques Rancière has caustically noted, “the people” themselves tend to disappear at precisely the point at which they are being invoked. If we take populism to mean that form of mobilization that invokes the people as its main alibi, then we need to understand it as conjuring with a fetish – a fetish with two faces: one progressive, the other reactionary. Thus, the recurring contrast between the general will and the fascist volk, the demos and the lumpen horde. Under late liberal conditions, when the old coordinates of left, right, and centre seem to have been profoundly undermined, it is increasingly difficult to set these faces apart in any thoroughgoing sense. The ambiguous politics of populist leaders in Latin America, for example, is hardly unprecedented, building on the enduring legacies of Peron and Bolivar. But it has flourished under late liberal conditions, presenting an ever more confusing amalgam of progressive and proto-fascist elements.

As scholars and citizens, however, it is incumbent on us to make such principled discriminations – to gauge the effectiveness of the “socialism” practiced by Lula in what is in many ways a neoliberal Brazil, for instance, or of the indigenismo on which Morales seeks to base state-craft in contemporary Bolivia. Also, it is important to distinguish the real redistributive gains of these populist regimes from the more self-serving autocracy of the likes of Hugo Chávez. We must, by the same token, be ready to make clear-eyed distinctions between the rumbustious rise of Zuma to the South African presidency, and the possibility that his common touch may become an equalizing hand. Making these judgements is no easy task; we cannot simply copy populism’s own strategy of blithely separating friend from enemy, or proclaiming global axes of good and evil. Neither will ready-made liberal benchmarks – like “respect for property”, “due process”, and the “rule of law” – provide unequivocal markers for distinguishing democrat from demagogue. For such normative measures require careful contextualization, especially in postcolonial, post-revolutionary situ-
lations, where property and the law have long been sites of struggle, having served the cause of oppressors and liberators alike. In Latin America, populist leaders (both authoritarian and otherwise) have tended to push for greater politico-economic inclusion. Their efforts to reverse entrenched neocolonial hierarchies have put them on collision course with domestic elites and proponents of the Washington consensus. But, as Claudio Lomnitz and Rafael Sánchez point out, they have also generated the excesses of Chavismo, in terms of which all dissent is “alien and monstrous”, and opposition routinely reduced to the terms of “Zionist-Fascist-Euro-Gringo Imperialism”.

While populism is most frequently understood as the embodiment – often, the literal incorporation – of power in the person of the charismatic leader, it can also be a salient dimension of grass-roots mobilization, of organizations of more or less routinized kind. In post-Apartheid South Africa, a populist thrust animates a range of social movements: from the manifestly anti-elitist struggles of the Anti-Eviction Campaign, Abahlale, and the “Poors” (which, suggests Ashwin Desai, are all directed toward the struggle for the minimal conditions of a dignified life) to the rights-based civil activism of the Treatment Action Campaign; from the vibrant profession of born-again faith and prosperity gospels to the quest to reinstate the death penalty; from progressive labour activism to boisterous thuggery that dismisses all critique as “counter-revolution”.

About all this, I make three points.

First, a certain populist radicalism – an opposition to the dictatorship and doxa of elites, whether they be the Ancien Régime, Tsarist autocracy, the capitalist classes, colonial rulers, the established church, intellectual vanguards or whatever – is a necessary, if not sufficient condition of mass transformative movements in all times and places. Such populist mobilization forces a clear line between “the people” and those who oppose their interests; it shatters the thrall of regnant ideologies and endorses popular experience as a basis for valid knowledge, desire, intention. It can also serve to debunk pious cant and sophistry, to unmask self-serving ideologies and illegitimate representations. In the history of South African struggle against apartheid, mass action has had a defiantly populist strain, ordinary people refusing domination in the street, the workplace, in church and state in the name of incontrovertible human freedoms. The colonized, here, have had a keen understanding of the agents and the means of dispossession. In this sense, unmasking the brutality of imperial rule involved a relatively clear, dualistic politics; in this situation, the lines of class/race oppression were closely overlapping and relatively clearly drawn. In the postcolony, things are more confusing. As ever, a 1990’s Zapiro cartoon captures this shift succinctly: It features Joe Slovo, one of the drafters of the South African Freedom Charter, a leader of the anti-colonial Umkhonto we Sizwe, and Minster of Housing in the first democratic government. Surveying the sea of newly enfranchised citizens, all looking to him to cure a raft of deep-seated ills, he quips: “Oi Vey, do I miss the Struggle”. In fact, the Freedom Charter was itself a populist document – too populist, some would subsequently claim. The new postcolonial constitution, with its capacious, late modern stress on individual rights, is perhaps not populist enough.

But in itself (and this is my second point) the white heat of populism has never been enough. This is because, in itself, it thrives on radical reductionism. The line between the populace and its enemies fails (often, deliberately) to acknowledge difference within the ranks of the people. In fact, populism often seeks to suppress such differences – inequalities in terms of power, wealth, sexuality, culture – in the interest of dominant stereotypes, of parts that stand in for wholes. Populism also often fails to account, in any nuanced fashion, for the actual terms of relationship between people and elites in given times and places, or to consider adequately the complex collaborations and contradictions that shape the totality of which they are part. These structural features (the shifting relation of state and capital, for instance, or the implications of such shifts for the position of labour, or the precise imbrication of...
class, race, gender, and age) give historical form to particular fields, particular kinds of social action. Taking account of these features is an essential requirement for a meaningfully conceived, adequately directed politics.

The white heat of populism ... thrives on radical reductionism. It fails to acknowledge difference within the ranks of the people.

Indeed, in its strident rage, populism often fails to generate terms capable of explaining its own conditions of existence. In place of careful analysis of social and historical circumstances, it relies on more uncompromising emotive dualisms – those standing for, or against, the leader, “the people”, or the “revolution”. In the service of such polarizing calls-to-arms, populism often enlists mechanisms like scape-goating, witch-finding and conspiracy theory – that collapse structural forces into blood and guts passions, like love, jealousy, hatred. Thus it frequently traffics in tropes like anti-Semitism, homophobia, xenophobia: unrepentant attacks on Jews and homosexuals have been an integral dimension of Chávez’s politics, for example. The fire of populism often excoriates the putative “sophistry” of analysis, theorization, complexification. In that sense, it is often anti-political (remember the anti-political rhetoric of Ross Perot and his electronic town hall; it is mirrored in a host of recent right wing attacks on the abuses of “big government”). Populism favours direct, putatively unmediated action, based on compelling emotions and self-evident truths.

Populism favours direct, putatively unmediated action, based on compelling emotions and self-evident truths

Thirdly, populism has taken on greater salience under late-liberal conditions, and is ever more in danger of reinforcing the reductionist tendencies inherent in much current politics (or “anti-politics”) – that is to reinforce the tendencies fostered by popular identitarian movements, by born-again faith, and by militant liberalisms that champion market forces sans state regulation. As John Comaroff and I argue in *Ethnicity, Inc.*, current world conditions have undermined allegiances of class and party in many contexts, substituting other bases of identity above and below the level of the nation-state, identities that focus on essences rather than relations, on “culture” rather than “politics”. And while such shifts have opened the door to novel possibilities, new coalitions, and vibrant trans-local networks, they have also fostered fundamentalism, the “end of ideology”, and the deflection of politics into the market, technicism, and the law. It remains to be seen whether the current recession – and the radical call in many quarters for more regulation – will stem the anti-political tide – in the US, or anywhere else; whether it will reinforce the need for collective institutions of control and redistribution. For there are also signs of the opposite: as anger has risen across the US and UK at the spectacle of profligate bankers bailed out by public money, there has been much talk of the return of an “old-fashioned populism” that implies a plummeting faith in all major social institutions. In addition, as Vincent Crapanzano shows in *Serving the Word: Literalism in America from Pulpit to Bench* (2000), the rise of religious renewal and a fervent fundamentalism in both economics and the law in many places has reinforced a distrust of liberal humanist visions of world making, of the uses of socio-historical analysis and critique. The “crisis” has called forth a spate of moral opprobrium, to be sure, as if the current chaos were the work of excessive greed, rather than the thor...
oughgoing rapaciousness of finance capitalism qua system. But there is little evidence that current state interventions, at least among dominant Western powers, will institute significant breaks on this rapaciousness, or revert, as some suggest, to a modified Keynesianism. Signs are that current interventions will do little more than “save Capitalism” (as an article in Harper’s, September 2008, puts it) – probably in leaner, meaner form.

the voice of the people is often not pretty, or loving, or democratic

Meanwhile, shifts in the nature of public culture – its means of communication and modes of production – have had an important impact on the nature of late modern populism. The continuing hegemony of free-market values and the commercialization of formerly national media across the world have uncoupled mass communication from state projects, ceding popular representation ever more to whoever and whatever generates profit. As unregulated special interests, marketing, and low-cost programming have flooded broadcast networks, those insisting on the necessity, in a democratic society, of lively political-aesthetic criticism are branded as elitist by custodians of mass-marketed programming. Typical, here, is the false democratism used to rationalize the signature genres of late liberal popular media – like talk radio and reality TV – that profess to deliver unmediated truths in a manner that also happens to be a cheap mode of producing culture for profit, and of ostensibly dispensing with “elite professionalism” (that is the craft of creative cultural production).

populist energy without any social consciousness, any ethics of social responsibility. From this no truly progressive politics can emerge.

But the voice of the people is often not pretty, or loving, or democratic: democracy, after all, is a complex social idea, and an even more complex social formation, whose ways and means require constant review and reinvention. It is not simply the right to give vent one’s authentic (even, one’s unabashedly chauvinist) self in the name of unvarnished truth. The talk radio populism of American media titans like Rush Limbaugh, Bill O’Reilly, and Lou Dobbs (“we want to hear from you, the listener”) encourages hate-speech as the real vox populi. And it is now a global genre: similar anti-immigrant (sometimes, frankly racist) rhetoric spews out unchallenged by editorial comment or counter-argument on BBC feedback programs, and on South Africa talk radio; and likewise on so-called reality TV across planet. This clamour of disembodied opinion might build an upsurge of emotion, but it is seldom structured to permit engaged dialogue, or vectors of accountability. Mass-mediated populism, identity politics, and libertarianism all reinforce in each other an essentially post-humanist, post-sociological, post-political tendency that allows the vitality of popular sentiment to fall to the lowest common denominator – that of the uncivil rant. It encourage us to seek nothing more in politics other than our own narcissistic reflection – for all else (critique, struggle for more encompassing insight and justice) is dubbed spoiling, elitist, unpatriotic, counter-revolutionary. This is populist energy without any social consciousness, any ethics of social responsibility. From this no truly progressive politics can emerge.

All this is well-captured in a sequence from the film made by Pierre Carles about the life and work of Pierre Bourdieu – Sociology as a Martial Art. In one of the closing scenes, Bourdieu seeks to persuade a group of angry Beur youth in a Paris banlieu that they need to understand the concept of social inequality in order to formulate a politics to counter exclusion. Amidst cynical dismissal and accusations of being a bourgeois parasite, he persists, warily: “You need to understand social inequality”. Exclusion, he implied, was a complex social fact. Understanding its social composition then was not a matter of elitism: it the essential starting point of any effective politics. This seems to be a lesson well worth repeating.

This text was written as an opening statement for a Roundtable on Populism, held at WISER, the University of the Witwatersrand, on July 6, 2009; as part of the Johannesburg Workshop in Theory of Criticism.
Should supporters of liberal democracy in South Africa fear the Zunami? Daryl Glaser suggests that those hoping for a quieter post-election life should be careful what they wish for.

Two authoritarian sub-traditions of the ruling Congress movement have long loomed large among potential threats to the constitutional democracy founded in the 1990s: radical nationalism and the Leninist variant of Marxism. They are now joined by a third: populism. Like nationalism and like Marxism (but unlike Leninism), populism contains democratic and progressive possibilities. But like them, too, it has a democracy-unfriendly side. With Jacob Zuma in power at the head of a movement that is populist in important ways, it is worth dwelling a little on this phenomenon. In what ways is Zuma a populist, and how bad a thing is it if he is?

The rise to power of Zuma can only be made fully intelligible if we invoke a version of the elite-mass distinction – a distinction at the heart of populist discourse, and which cuts across the Marxist class schema of bourgeoisie versus proletariat. The Tripartite Alliance Left likes to think that the ANC’s 2007 Polokwane conference shifted the balance of forces in favour of the working class and against capital. There may be some truth in this depiction: the organized working class is certainly a part of the coalition that triumphed there, and its assertive presence is enough to unsettle big business. But the Zuma coalition is a multiclass one that extends well beyond the unionized proletariat to encompass a range of subalterns – shack dwellers, hostel dwellers, semi-educated urban youth, peasants, farm workers – as well as local and provincial party cadre, Zulus, traditionalists and pro-Zuma businessmen. This coalition was mobilized, not against capitalists, but against a range of ‘insider’ elites, first and foremost the leadership cadre and businessmen around Thabo Mbeki but encompassing, if often only subliminally, liberal judges and journalists, intellectuals, gender activists and urban sophisticates. Against these forces the ‘Zunami’ represented an anti-establishment revolt. The leaders of that revolt won at Polokwane. April 22 2009 was mere ratification.

In some ways this triumph must be a good thing for South Africa’s liberal democracy. Whether you are a defender of liberal democracy (like this writer) or one of its critics, you are likely to see some of its genius as lying in an ability to rotate elites peacefully through power and provide institutional channels for expressing popular grievances. If long-run democratic stability depends on popular legitimacy, then Polokwane restabilised the democratic order by reconnecting it to a popular base. The ANC may remain entrenched as a ‘dominant party’, but Polokwane served as the vector of a mass desire for change, and it secured a change of government if not of party.

Moreover, liberal democracy has nothing to fear from an economic shift to the left, least of all the sort of moderate shift likely in fact to take place. (It would be surprising if South Africa shifted as far to the left economically as George W. Bush took the US in his final months in office!) Far from being narrowly ‘bourgeois’, liberal democracy is logically capable of accommodating working class power and gains, as many liberal-democratic polities did during European social democracy’s long postwar hegemony. The ideological reaction that shoved governments to the neo-liberal right from the late 1970s swept along dictatorships as well as liberal democracies. Indeed, mass electoral politics made for effective resistance to the wholesale abolition of welfare states. And if one purpose of liberal democracy is to enable a populace to test alternatives to failed ruling ideologies, then South Africa is surely due, democratically speaking, for a shift from economic policies that have been complicit in some of the world’s worst levels of inequality and unemployment. To be sure, a slow shuffle away from in-your-face neoliberalism commenced already under Mbeki in the early
2000s, but those initiating it did not bring the labour movement with them. From now on the Left will be inside the tent, forced to take partial responsibility – and to the extent that it gets to shape policy, will be accountable – for further moves in a leftward direction. Good: give it a go.

liberal democracy has nothing to fear from an economic shift to the left

Nor is there a threat to constitutional democracy in the fact that our new leader is under-educated compared to his predecessor-plus-one. Mbeki is a fine example of the damage that intellectuals can do in power. Instead of accepting the limits of his expertise and taking his cue from global medical-scientific consensus on HIV/AIDS, Mbeki experimented on his people with policies inspired by late-night trawling on internet sites. Mbeki’s Africa/nism, which drove his insistence that colonialism rather than HIV caused AIDS, was moreover seriously ideological. The populist Zuma is ideologically shapeless and nurtures few pretensions about his intellectual powers. Happy to be the top guy, he is likely to leave health policy decisions to people who are guided by current scientific wisdom rather than by paranoia about the Western medical-industrial complex. Liberals rightly defend intellectual avant-gardism against popular prejudice and social conformity, but socially progressive liberals should refrain from intellectual snobbery. Indeed they ought to welcome socially progressive liberals should refrain from interventions necessary to counter ‘bourgeois’ institutions and plots. What lends Zuma-ism its particular lethality may indeed be this conjunction of Marxism-Leninism and post-ideological populism.

Another nasty thing about populism – democratically speaking – is its romanticisation of popular common sense and the corollary of this, an animus towards independent intellectuals, cultural liberals, modern women and variously defined outsiders, from gays to immigrants. Zuma has never in fact been an anti-African xenophobe, but it is telling that many of his fans are and assume him to be. Zuma’s ANC is faithful to the party’s post-1994 commitment to elite-level gender equality, but its president has signaled an affinity with men who think that women should be both sexually available and punished for getting pregnant in their unmarried teens. Ignoring the provisions and intention of the Bill of Rights, he has suggested that gay boys should be beaten to toughen them up and that the rights of the criminally accused should be curtailed. And some at least of Zuma’s followers understood their rebellion as directed against intellectuals, their anti-intellectualism directed in the first instance at the Shakespeare-quot ing ex-president but including in its sights the many lawyers, academics and commentators who recoiled at the prospect of Zuma’s ascent to power. If intellectual snobbery is bad, so is anti-intellectualism, the currency of many a tyrant determined to impose thought control on society. In many ways, then, the Zuma brand – a potpourri of benevolent patriarchy, virility, folksiness, Zulu authenticity and fealty to customary and religious values – jars with...
the spirit of egalitarian and liberal modernity supposedly animating the new constitutional order.

It will be interesting to see how the juxtaposition of conservative populism and Marxist progressivism works out within the Zuma coalition.

The Leninist Marxism of Zuma-supporting leftists stands in a curious relationship to this brand, both awkward and supportive. Leninists are all too ready to join in attacks on ‘counter-revolutionary’ intellectuals, yet Marxism is itself historically a movement of intellectual vanguardism. Twentieth-century Marxist-Leninist regimes counterposed a conservative ‘socialist’ morality to bourgeois decadence, yet Marxism’s DNA is modernizing. In its will to school rather than celebrate the raw masses, and to champion modernity against reactionary forces and prejudices, Marxism is more like liberalism than populist traditionalism. It will be interesting to see how the juxtaposition of conservative populism and Marxist progressivism works out within the Zuma coalition.

How worried should liberal democrats be about Zuma’s populism? In the aftermath of Zuma’s swearing in, our new president has been the perfect statesman, dressing in suits rather than leopard skins, speaking in reassuring tones. Several factors could keep the authoritarian side of Zuma-ite populism in check. First, Zuma has in a sense won: if his drive was for personal vindication, he has succeeded. He can call the mobs off: as a creature of post-ideological populism, he has no further agenda of radical disruption that requires their service. As a post-ideological populist, moreover, Zuma is content to leave policymaking to policy wonks. Policy recklessness is not on the cards. Further, and in contradistinction to many a populist, Zuma is very much a party man, and he is the man of a party that has long and strong traditions of collectivism in leadership. Zuma insists that he has no policy approach distinct from that of the ANC, and he probably means it. The popular cult of Zuma – the belief in Zuma’s almost Jesus-like powers – is not matched by any confidence that the leader has in his own redemptive magic. Whether or not one finds comforting this subordination of president to party, it certainly helps to neutralize one potential hazard of populism, the emergence of a strongman. Finally, Zuma is the benign patriarch sort of populist: he likes everyone in his kraal, not excluding the Vryheidsfront Plus. Inclusivity comes more naturally to him that it did to Mbeki.

If, as earlier conceded, populism has a democratic upside, its post-election deflation may not be a wholly good thing. When we look at Polokwane, we can choose to see a vindictive cadre humiliating a democratically elected leader, but we can also choose to see an inspiring pushback against Robert Michels’ iron law or oligarchy. We can choose, that is, to see evidence of a party grassroots determined to hold its leaders to account, whether in party conferences or (as briefly seemed to happen afterwards) via parliamentary portfolio committees. Progressive liberal democrats surely want the bottom-up assertion and accountability, even if they do not want intimidating crowds or riot. It’s a difficult balancing act: but those hoping for a quieter post-election life should be careful what they wish for.

Nor should we think that the threat to democracy-crucial institutions has entirely passed. Zuma’s inclusiveness has a conditional feel, and it is meant to disarm those contemplating adversarial politics. We still lack a clear sense of what the new leadership intends for the judiciary and media, not to mention the provinces. What are we to make of the ANC’s continuing apparent refusal to accept that any party other than itself should control a province or big city? If the good side of populism can be put back in the box, the bad side of it can be conveniently released when necessary – witness the thugs of the MK Military Veterans’ Association marching on Helen Zille to demand her apology for impugning Zuma’s sexual honour. If maintaining the post-1994 constitutional order matters to you, best keep your guard.
IDEAS AND ELECTIONS IN INDIA

Mukul Kesevan
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Indian electoral politics may be animated by populism, caste-based politics and curious coalitions, but ultimately the process is still driven by notions of ‘democracy’ and other big ideas.

As a consumer of news, you could be forgiven for thinking that this year’s Indian elections were ideology-free. Pundits in the press and on the television news channels were always saying that votes were bought and that coalitions were constructed out of caste fractions; politicians defected, political parties switched sides with frictionless ease and the policies contained in party manifestoes were irrelevant to the democratic process because they were never seriously discussed. Add up these defects and what India seems to have by way of elections is the mechanism of representative government without the large ideological contestation that is, or ought to be, a democracy’s reason for being.

This is wrong in so many separate ways that you would need a scroll the length of a toilet roll just to list them, but let me try. Let’s start at the top, with the great political coalitions that have ruled India in recent times. The received wisdom about coalitions is that ideology matters less than pragmatic accommodation and it’s true that the Hindu majoritarian Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has cohabited with parties that aren’t hectoringly ‘Hindu’ to cobble together governing majorities both at the Centre and in the provinces.

But if you, as a voter, were to examine the composition of the National Democratic Alliance led by the BJP, its ideological coherence would become apparent. Its main constituents are the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Shiv Sena, the Shiromani Akali Dal, the Asom Gana Parishad and the Janata Dal (U). The first four of these five parties are natural ideological allies because their politics are founded on a common premise: the belief that religious majorities should be hegemonic in their home territories.

The Akalis think it’s proper for Sikhs to dominate Punjab; the AGP, which champions the cause of Assam’s Hindu majority, was born out of the massacre of Muslims in Nellie in 1983; the Shiv Sena specialises in stoking the anxieties of Marathi-speaking Hindus in Maharashtra, and the BJP performs the same service for Hindus in general at an all-India level. Ideologically these parties are made for each other; the negative proof of this is that it’s impossible to see any of them switching sides to join the United Progressive Alliance led by the Indian National Congress.

The reason the fifth party, Nitish Kumar’s Janata Dal (U), was in the news is precisely because it is obvious that it is ideologically distinct from its allies in the NDA. The alliance between the BJP and the JD (U) has been a durable marriage of convenience: it gives the JD (U) a governing majority in the important Gangetic province of Bihar and it gives the BJP an ally in a state that sends a large number of members of parliament to the Lok Sabha. However, given Nitish’s secular, socialist pedigree (he comes out of a tradition of home-brewed socialism pioneered by Dr Ram Manohar Lohia), it wasn’t surprising that both the Congress and the JD (U) indicated in coded ways their openness to post-election negotiations, should the need for those arise.

It’s worth noting in this context that the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), a party with a longstanding alliance with the BJP in the south-eastern state of Orissa, opted out of the NDA before the elections citing the involvement of militant Hindu cadres connected to the BJP, in the violence against Christians in Kandhamal district last year. Since we’re trying to measure presence or absence of ideological scruple in Indian electoral politics, it’s worth remembering that Orissa is an overwhelmingly Hindu state, so the alienation of a Christian minority wouldn’t have done significant electoral damage to the Biju Janata
Dal’s prospects. Breaking with BJP, though, carried a real electoral cost because dividing the erstwhile alliance’s votes benefited the BJD’s main electoral enemy in Orissa, the Congress. The BJD might have reckoned that its success in local elections was a sign that it could go it alone but it’s clear that Chief Minister Navin Patnaik’s ideological distaste for ethnic cleansing in his backyard played a role in his break with the NDA.

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Similarly, the idea that caste-based politics diminishes India’s democracy, that it represents a narrow self-interest that is antithetical to the great universal ideas that ought to animate a democratic republic, is silly. Whether you think caste quotas or reserved constituencies for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are right or wrong will depend upon your reading of Indian society. If, like the Left parties, you think that the fault lines in Indian society correspond to class, you’re likely to take one view; if, like the great ideologues of plebeian castes in colonial and post-colonial India (Jotiba Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram and Kumari Mayavati) you think that India’s social contradictions are based on caste, you’ll take another. Both are ideological positions that deserve to be taken seriously.

Led by Mayavati, the Bahujan Samaj Party’s ambition of assembling a coalition of plebeian castes and communities, opportunistically allied to select upper caste groups, to capture political power is as respectable a part of democratic politics as the strategy of social democratic parties in Europe to merge organized labour and sections of the middle class to produce a governing majority.

A staple indictment of electoral politics in India is that it is vitiated by an unseemly populism. Populism in this usage denotes a politics that panders to public need without rationally counting the costs of the promises made. So promises to sell rice at one or two rupees per kilo are routinely derided as populist. M.G. Ramachandran, the late chief minister of Tamil Nadu, was accused of populism when he instituted free mid-day meals in government schools in his province. The mid-day meal scheme has since come to be seen not just as a nutritional supplement but as an enabling measure that helps draw children, specially the girl child, into the educational system. Some would argue that using populism as a pejorative description of subsidy is itself an elitist feint intended to close off ideological debate about the proper role of the state in shoring up the livelihoods of the poor.

The simplest way of illustrating the viscerally ideological nature of Indian democracy is to look at the two issues that have remade electoral politics over the past twenty years: (a) the BJP’s campaign to build the Ram temple on the ruins of the Babri mosque destroyed by politically incited Hindu vandals in 1992, and (b) the extension of reserved quotas to Other Backward Classes on the strength of the recommendation made earlier by the Mandal Commission.

It’s legitimate to disapprove of both affirmative action quotas as well as communal mass mobilization as political projects but both were born out of powerful, long-mulled ideological positions. No one who has lived through the last two decades in India as a politically aware adult can seriously argue that factional self-interest has replaced ideological contestation as the engine of democratic politics. Individual and factional ambition, and the greed and calculated fickleness that it engenders, has played its part in colouring electoral politics in India, but the context for this ambition, the arena itself, has been landscaped by large political ideas.
TRUE HUMANISM?:
CIVILISATIONISM,
SECURITOCRACY AND
RACIAL RESIGNATION

Paul Gilroy
(London School of Economics, United Kingdom) © Paul Gilroy

The fundamental challenge of our time, asserts Paul Gilroy, is to imagine an ethical and just world that truly fulfils the promise of humanism and enacts the idea of universal human rights. This cannot be achieved through comfortable liberalism. It requires direct confrontation with both the disconcerting realities of the dark shadow of colonialism and its ongoing legacy, and the continuing damaging naturalisation of racialised thinking.

The idea of locating ethics, that is of seeing ethical judgment as the grounded, historical product of particular places and social relations is now deeply unfashionable among academics. It fits badly into a scholastic culture where imperial hubris is normative and civilisationism has attained the status of common sense; where culture is routinely invoked as an absolute; where universality is at a premium and anything that smacks of “relativism” only summons up the supposed failures of multiculturalism, postcolonial plurality and misplaced tolerance. The world is being configured in a pattern of contending civilisations. Buoyed up by scientistic rhetoric, an incorrigibly ethnocentric objectivism reigns supreme.

Radical attention to a politics of location, relation and situation had been common to several earlier generations of left, green, feminist and anti-colonial critics of modern epistemology and political ontology. That spirit linked critical writing by feminist intellectuals after Beauvoir (Rich, Jordan and Haraway, for instance) to the emphasis on local scale that characterized ethnographic studies after “Writing Culture” and under the impact of broader debates about postmodern knowledge and modern epistemes.

This was the period in which thinking globally and acting locally became banal. Attention to locality and sub-national formations had been endorsed by moral and political criticism that saw western modernity as mired in the imperial and colonial patterns that emerged during the era of anti-colonial conflict (particularly Fanon, Senghor and Césaire). My own work has challenged the assumptions of methodological nationalism and pointed to sub- and supra-national processes as well as to the possibility of cosmopolitan approaches both methodological and ethical.

Today, mainstream discussion is drifting in a different direction. It has once again become content with a simpler, linear emphasis on progressive time. The constitutive outside of modern, occidental rationalism and any concern with the particular ecology to which those traditions belong are not judged significant. As security has become the overarching imperative, culture and civilization, ambiguously recoded as both race and religion, are offered as the favoured media through which we may determine the worth of our own particular social and cultural life on a developmental scale that bears all the marks of its nineteenth century antecedents. The old – what we used to call the new, culturalist racism – has been elaborated in newer formations, usefully identified by Mahmood Mamdani as “culture-talk”.

The aliens await their reformation whereas in our post-secular world, the aspirations of a narrowly-specified enlightenment are assumed to be as foundational and indispensable as they are automatic. The overdeveloped countries are increasingly fortified. They retain their monopoly on the future. Savages, primitives and, most importantly, Moslems enact and embody the past. They may eventually be able to share our ultimate destination but they lag far behind. Proof of the fact that they will have to catch up resides in their “medieval” approaches to questions of governance which are especially problematic with regard to sexuality and gender. Their distaste for the free speech which supposedly anchors and unites “western” democracies also marks them out as culturally retarded. The bodies of women are the primary objects on which fundamental cultural differences are registered.

This is not a racial discourse as such but it replicates important elements of that exclusionary and hierarchical logic, dividing human beings according to fixed, heritable attributes. Muslims emerge from the excesses of culture-talk as infrahuman beings. Their belligerent alterity is almost inexplicable. The enthusiasm for the revised orientalism of texts like Patai’s The Arab Mind in US military circles is an obvious symptom of this problem.
Muslims emerge from the excesses of culture-talk as infrahuman beings. Their belligerent alterity is almost inexplicable.

POSTCOLONIALISM

Focusing on the issue of ethics in a postcolonial setting, requires that we note how the dialectical re-writing of enlightenment has been repudiated along with all other twentieth-century perspectives that contemplated the association of progress with catastrophe. The resulting intellectual settlement is precarious but powerful. It requires a denial of the significance of colonial and imperial history which must remain peripheral even though the principal zones of contemporary conflict (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, Kenya) were pushed into war by the decomposition of the British empire.

The repression of imperial history means that nazism is understood as an exceptional, unprecedented and absolute evil that belongs only to Europe. Accordingly, Israel alone is recognized as bearing the scars of victimization and of an ineffable trauma that cannot be allowed to become merely another historical event.

The ethical arguments that produced this outcome are worth briefly reconstructing. They were closely tied to a particular view of literature, art and culture because the aftershock of Nazi genocide complicated the tactics, forms and styles of artistic representation.

There were other qualitative issues at stake. This mass killing could not be ignored. It had been the result of a practical application of eugenic rationality. This was a modern, bureaucratic and hi-tech outrage: fully compatible with the normal tempo of civilizational development. After all, IBM had created the punch-card system that made the killing practicable. Henry Ford and Daimler-Benz had supplied the trucks. Other corporate powers provided the technology that industrialized the merciless implementation of racial hygiene.

There was a second cultural dimension. An authoritarian government with strong and distinctive aesthetic attributes had bonded ultranationalist unreason to racialised governmental rationality. Fascist public culture annexed the epoch-making power of advanced communicative technologies and offered itself to its citizen-consumers as a spectacular variety of art. The kitsch dramaturgy of light, fire and stone, revealed that barbarity and refined European civilization were, unexpectedly, fully compatible.

The ethical and aesthetic dilemmas involved here generated a battle of ideas. It was swiftly accepted as part of a larger political, philosophical and moral problem that was connected to debates over theodicy, over the complicity of European civilisation with racism and fascism, over the role of technology and debased, instrumental reason, over the timeliness of lyric poetry and the ethics of documentary representation, indeed over the validity and shifting character of western culture and the political ontology it articulated habitually in nationalist forms.

In the shadow of catastrophe, luminous survivor testimony and morally contested memory, culture had to be salvaged and made anew. In novel, perhaps in redemptive forms, art would contribute to a revised definition of what Europe was and what its values would become in the future. Culture would reacquaint Europe with the humanity from which it had been comprehensively estranged.

Explicit consideration of the damage that racism had done to democracy and civilization was central to this important phase of critical self-examination. Jews, gypsies and other lesser peoples had not been admitted to the same degree of human being as their killers. They were infra-humans confined to the grey zones where they could be disposed of with impunity, as waste. Racism had made that goal acceptable. Primo Levi and others pointed out that racism had facilitated the reduction of the victims’ humanity in the interests of their killers.

The post-1945 reaction against fascism fostered the emergence of a new moral language centred on the idea of universal human rights. These innovations combined to ensure that the legacy of humanism and the category of the human were pending in Europe’s liberal cold-war reflections. However, the bloody impact of colonial rule and of the bitter wars of decolonization that followed it were never registered in the same manner. The UNESCO moment did not last long (Levi-Strauss).

Europe’s reflexive exercises were well-intentioned but they stopped a long way short of a properly cosmopolitan commitment to understanding the history of the Nazi period in the context of earlier encounters with the peoples that Europe had conquered, sold, exploited and sometimes sought to eradicate.

The continuity between those histories of suffering was largely overlooked and dismissed (with Sven Linqvist an important exception). The broad, human significance of the awful events proved difficult to grasp and discuss. That problem intensified once philosophical and political anti-humanism were lodged at the core of radical and critical thought. Without the buttress of a humanistic outlook shaped
explicitly by a non-immanent critique of racial hierarchy, attempts to understand Europe's colonial crimes fractured precisely along the lines of the very race-thinking which had originally brought these tragedies about.

The strange, infra-human people in the torrid zones, were not merely different from Europeans. It bears repeating that they were behind them also. Traveling into their dwelling space was, in effect, a kind of time travel just as there were temporal disruptions when they arrived unwanted inside the citadels of overdevelopment.

Mass killing inside the temperate zone rightly provoked an intense moral debate while mass killing in Africa and other remote, colonial places was often merely an expression of the natural disposition towards chaos, barbarity and war found among savage, extra- and pre-historic peoples. At best, Africans and other colonial subjects were classified as the children of the human family. At worst, they were consigned to their doom by the unstoppable force of social and economic progress which had joined nature and history together to secure inevitable extinction.

Africa had never been allowed to become part of the west’s official, historical world. The colonial peoples held under European rule were relegated to a twilight condition that corresponded to the lower value placed upon their lives by their conquerors, rulers and exploiters. They were the refuse of dynamic, global progress.

In these inhospitable circumstances, trying to see Europe's imperial horrors in the context of tainted moral authority, remained an unpopular exercise. Western civilisation opposed savagery in a Manichaean pattern so there was nothing else to say. The movements aimed at liberation from colonial power took a different view. Without renouncing the goal of development, they were determined not to repeat the errors and evils which had distinguished Europe's modern history (see Fanon and Césaire).

Detailed knowledge of Europe's colonial crimes was once difficult to access but there is now no excuse not to be intimately familiar with it. The open secrets of genocidal governance, of torture and terror as modes of political administration had been muted so that they did not make uncomfortable demands upon comfortable, metropolitan consciences. The West's resurgent colonial ambitions have made that history more relevant than ever even if today's torturers listen to Heavy Metal and Hip-Hop rather than to Bach and Beethoven.

Contemporary geo-politics may be burdened by illegal and reckless military adventures, but it is being imagineered so as to reproduce the world in the Manichaean patterns that defined the racial order of the colonies: them and us, sheep and goats, black and white, cross and crescent.

Rather than seek to sharpen those antagonisms and the political theology they project, we must try and find an alternative which could break the polarity of having either to pretend an impossible tolerance for the unbearable, or ethnocentrically to privilege the primary group to which one is assigned by the metaphysics of race and the contingencies of nationality and ethnicity.

In my country, the discomforting history of empire has been deeply repressed and dismissed. Rather than work through the unsettling legacy of the colonial past with the aim of contributing to a convivial and sustainable postcolonial polity, or as part of a strategy to avoid repeating past mistakes, we are invited into the comforting folds of a revisionist fantasy which promotes the revival of imperialism in what we are told is an anodyne, postmodern form. That choice sanitises the record of brutality and indifference, replacing it with a deluded conception of homogeneity and connectedness which is usually derived from a selective and partial sketch of the country during the second world war — a moment in which our national collective can conveniently imagine itself to be not only culturally homogenous but also a fortuitous combination of wounded victim and righteous victor. For Brits, if not for the Irish, empire is either irrelevant or simply too historically remote.

RACISM IN PARTICULAR

Culture talk promotes particular forms of power and inequality. Its tacit racialisation of law and life requires ongoing critical analysis that recognizes their constitutive power and symptomatic ethical signature. However, it is by no means clear exactly where the brutality, contempt and indifference they encourage departs from the familiar repertory of violence and injustice that distinguishes our species. Though they may be quantitatively greater, bureaucratically more sophisticated and even morally com-
plex, the manifold wrongs committed in the name of race do not always appear to be different from other kinds of terror.

Negotiating these problems exclusively as epistemological matters is mistaken.

Identifying anti-racism with ethics as well as politics requires us to consider what we favour as well as what we oppose. As the social movements forged around class and gender solidarity have faded, ecological and anti-military concerns have become more central. Both developments foreground what we can only call the human dimensions of risk, vulnerability and security. Here too, the need for innovative thinking about the forms of ethics that might be appropriate cannot be ignored.

The US is now exporting its own peculiar racial technologies worldwide. Globalised, race and absolute ethnicity reveal and even stand for the unyielding power of life’s infernal machinery: for the things that we cannot change about ourselves and our world. That is a very odd outcome for an arbitrary system for classifying human beings that corresponded precisely with the terminal points of Europe’s long-distance trading activity. However, it matches perfectly with the history of the world’s more successful exercises in settler colonialism (like the US) where there is thought to be absolutely nothing unnatural about de facto racial segregation and the nomos that legitimates it.

As those US-sourced ways of thinking about race and ethnicity, identity and difference become more influential, it is becoming commonplace to want to secure existential and cultural foundations. Today its seductions appear to bring certainty and even a measure of security back into an insecure, liquid world where commerce and politics alike agree that identity is fundamental.

Limited time means that we will have to leave the disassembling of the concept of identity for another occasion. Suffice to say that the desire to be authentically, absolutely different from others is ubiquitous. Our predicament associates that aspiration with a second related yearning. The psychological benefits of being recognized as incorrigibly particular are augmented when they are combined with the pleasures of being seen to be part of a group that is primally and effortlessly bonded. This disposition recalls the mindset of those who imagine they can secure themselves by researching their family trees.

As those US-sourced ways of thinking about race and ethnicity, identity and difference become more influential, it is becoming commonplace to want to have and enjoy what are taken to be the benefits of an old, that is distinctively modern, attachment to race. People imagine that goal can be accomplished without having to reckon with any of the problems associated historically with past racisms. Race can, in effect, be redeemed from racism by phenomenology, by culturalism, by the imperatives of identity, even by a new materialism that presents itself as a taboo-breaking act of daring to transgress the platitudes of liberal humanism. All of these positions make the refusal to submit to race appear naive, foolish and scientifically or theoretically unsophisticated.

As political ontology, race afforded modern selves secure existential and cultural foundations. Today its seductions appear to bring certainty and even a measure of security back into an insecure, liquid world where commerce and politics alike agree that identity is fundamental.

The automatic, pre- and post-political variety of being together which results does not merit the name solidarity. It is insufficiently conscious for that. The idea of seriality transposed from philosophical discourse into the field of group psychology seems more useful. That way of being together is based upon being both absolutely particular and interchangeably similar with those that you can love because they are judged to be already like yourself. Outside of war-time, that kind of bond is a long way from the practice of democratic politics though it does have powerful political effects. It reproduces a view of identity in exclusively Manichaean forms and affirms a deeply narcissistic mood in which members of a collectivity effectively choose themselves as an object of erotically-charged affection.

**ANTI-RACISM**

Anti-racism has to struggle against these odds. If it survives at all, it has often been diminished and promoted narrowly so that it can accommodate those patterns. It becomes unconcerned with the difficult work of imagining a better, alternative world emptied of racial hierarchies. Constricted and abbreviated, it is content with the simpler goal of separating a neutral or benign idea of race from the unwholesome racism and nationalism with which it has been
so long entangled. In this approach to nature and racialised social life, all of the comforts, pleasures and spurious certainties of racialised being in the world are left intact. Raciality comes upon us without significant historical baggage. There are no legacies of error, suffering, confusion and horror. Decked out in the bright colours of culturalism and absolute ethnicity, race is seen either as an incontrovertible cipher of irrepressible difference – which these days makes it a good thing in itself – or as a natural variety of division which uniquely human beings are unable to escape.

In these conditions, to think that racial difference could be done away with appears absurd. Indeed a realist attachment to race is projected as a profound measure of political maturity. Enthusiastically or reluctantly, we are resigned to the facts of race and absolute ethnicity. There is no alternative. The pragmatic political goal is to minimize racism while leaving the stolid architecture of racial and ethnic difference intact. Thus race emerges as a problem of diversity management.

The psychological dimensions of resignation to race are counter pointed by immediate technological and political issues. The molecularisation of racial differences and the shift towards genomics suggest that this order of natural difference is becoming more not less important.

Recently, the popular authority of commentators as diverse as the academics Steven Pinker, James Watson, Niall Ferguson and George Steiner, and the journalist Max Hastings has combined to translate what they take to be the latest fruits of resurgent racial science into the iron laws of middlebrow scientific commonsense. This suggests that as a species we are “hard wired” to prefer those who are like us from those who are alien – an outcome which fits tidily with the outlook of people who already believe that the primary human disposition towards others is essentially conflictual and selfish.

In the Guardian, Ferguson cited Anders Olsson, a US-based neurobiologist of fear, to the effect that we must sternly if somewhat ambivalently confront the persistent power of race lodged in our genetic makeup. Hastings asserted that only “the idiot Left could deny” the reality of the simple truths involved in the workings of a “tribalism ... which has influenced mankind since the beginning of time”. George Steiner, sometime custodian of lofty cosmopolitan and humanistic values, offered to the readers of a Spanish newspaper his opinion that racism was inherent in everyone and racial tolerance only skin-deep.

He staged the argument in the midst of a curious fantasy deeply marked by a peculiarly British idiomatic engagement with the consequences of mass economic settlement from the commonwealth after 1945: “It is very easy to sit here in this room and say racism is horrible”, Steiner told his interviewer. “But ask me the same thing if a Jamaican family moved next door with six children and they play reggae and rock music all day. Or if an estate agent comes to my house and tells me that because a Jamaican family has moved next door the value of my property has fallen through the floor. Ask me then!”

Steiner’s Jamaicans can be seen as bastards in the venerable Caribbean lineage that descends from Montaigne’s Cannibals. They seem to be curious, timeworn creatures. It is impossible not to wonder what layers of meaning were at stake in that particular national or perhaps ethnic designation “Jamaican”? What is its relationship to the tacit language of polite race-talk on the one hand and the inflammatory mythology of populist-nationalist race-talk on the other? Would the grim situation Steiner describes be substantively different if the aliens living noisily next door were Trinidadian or Barbadian; Bangladeshi, Croatian or Surinamese? If they were Polish, German, French or Swiss? If they had immigrated to Britain like Steiner himself for academic rather than manual work?

To make the point more bluntly, what exactly is the sign “reggae” contributing to his horrible scenario, particularly when rendered equivalent to all the cold, brutal savagery that is bound up with the contemptuous word “rock” in this aggressively high-cultural context? Would opera, polkas, tangos, accordion or country and western music have produced the same rhetorical and necro-political effects? Steiner is on record elsewhere as having told a roomful of Asian and African academics that the “third world could not afford the luxury of universities”. I’m especially troubled by the great humanist’s
implication that his repeating this particular mantra – which has, after all, supplied the imaginative staging of racist, ultranationalist and anti-immigrant rants for almost three generations – was somehow a difficult thing to do.

Perhaps his difficulty resided not merely in the illiberal act of speaking on behalf of wounded folk outside the ivory tower, but in the specific discomfort of operating across the lines of class and privilege which were quietly being inscribed here. The journalist, Sir Max Hastings, defended Steiner’s remarks in the Daily Mail and supported that interpretation as he spun off into a strange ventriloquism of his sometime cleaning lady who, he explained, felt similarly aggrieved by what she was expected to tolerate at the hands of immigrants: “A heavenly cockney cleaner named Elsie Elmer worked for our family for almost 40 years. Elsie was a widow, a Londoner through and through. When she was 77, she suddenly announced that she could no longer endure life in Hammersmith, where on both sides of her little house Jamaican neighbours played music full-blast through the night, every night. One day, I drove her to the airport to emigrate to Australia, where she had a son living. She hated to go and wept buckets. But she felt that her street, her city, were no longer the places which she knew and loved.” Hastings revealed that he was both more typically and more melancholically English when he presaged his damming, illiberal verdict with the words: “I’m not proud of it but human nature DOES sometimes make us all racist”, an opening that caught my attention for its downbeat admission of shame.

For all of these voices, racial differences may have been given initially by nature but they are subsequently worked over, worked on and worked up in the social and phenomenological patterns of performative, everyday interaction. I understand the complexity and insistent, iterative power of those habits but my point – which needs to be repeated – is that, even when it comes to the “white working class”, it is from those social and historical relations that the groups we call races emerge to make the idea of unbridgeable natural difference powerful and plausible.

All one-way constructionism – in which natural difference precedes, underpins and orchestrates subsequent social divisions – is an inadequate tool with which to make sense of the social life of races and other ethno-political actors. Natural difference does not merely supply source material for social and historical modifications which may be either bad or good. Race has always been the particular, historical product of dense and complex interactive processes rooted in war, conquest, slavery and suffering.

This change of perspective builds upon and hopefully extends the dynamic nominalism identified by Ian Hacking for whom named kinds and things are altered by their interactive historical and social correspondence with the processes and institutions that name them. As far as the history of race, raciality and raciology are concerned, that interplay has involved a range of different institutions of naming: theological, occult, military, economic, commercial, legal, scientific, technological and aesthetic.

These institutional settings and their ways of seeing and acting on the world may be in profound conflict. But idea of race helped to synchronise and focus them. That is why we should be wary of imagining that the particular pragmatic understanding of race associated with the worlds of science and bio-medicine can be sealed off from racial discourse found in other areas of social and political life. If we decide that it is desirable to communicate the findings and practices from those institutions in the contested language of race, the best we can hope for is that the old ambiguities will be maintained. In the current climate, it is more likely that they will be deepened and amplified.

After more than two centuries of scientific mystification, duplicity and bad faith, and against the often hyperbolic rhetoric of the genomic revolution, we do not yet know how nature conditions the social lives, risks and fates of racialised and ethnic groups. It should be obvious that science is not immune to the mysterious psychological appeal of racial truths and racial certainties. There are communities of scientists for whom alterity may still be “phobogenic” and “a stimulus to anxiety” just as there are others for whom the vindication of racial probity and the struggle against racism loom large in their own research.

**SOCIGENETICS**

Some years ago, Fanon tried to specify the limits of the economic and psychological processes that created racialised actors mired in the epidermalising mechanisms of an inferiority which was basically economic in origin. He called this supplementary process “sociogeny”. His conceptual breakthrough has been systematized by the Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter who contrasts the resulting socio-genetic analytics of race and humanity with the emergent genomic perspective that is increasingly familiar to us.

All varieties of racial discourse share some features. It bears repetition that they work best with
a Manichaean script. The forms of political ontology they solicit and promote have, as we have seen, a distinctive psychological appeal. They construct a variety of hyper-similarity that trumps all other ideas of deep association and primal connectedness with all the force of Darwinian nature which was fortuitously and catastrophically articulated together with the power of colonial and imperial history.

The wrongs that racial hierarchy has accomplished may not be unique in character but their scale and their recurrence demand a specific acknowledgement. Hannah Arendt, who was much more interested in the corrosive idea of race than in the workings of racism – which she judged to be normal and understandable where civilized people were confronted with savagery – can help to move our discussion forward. The philosophical influence of Eric Voegelin over Arendt’s thinking in this area was strong. She built upon his insight into the workings of race and the best approach to opposing racial hierarchies and the forms of law and governance that they promoted.

Voegelin had been both early and acute in seeing that a narrow, exclusively epistemological critique of race would always miss the point. This is something we still need to remember. Better, that is more accurate, information about the quality of racial difference may be necessary but will never be sufficient to interrupt the special power of this unique political idea. He continues: “As a matter of fact, the race idea with its implications is not a body of knowledge organized in systematic form, but a political idea in the technical sense of the word. A political idea does not attempt to describe social reality as it is, but it sets up symbols, be they single language units or more elaborate dogmas, which have the function of creating the image of a group as a unit…. A symbolic idea like the race idea is not a theory in the strict sense of the word. And it is beside the mark to criticize a symbol, or a set of dogmas, because they are not empirically verifiable. While such criticism is correct, it is with-out meaning, because it is not the function of an idea to describe social reality, but to assist in its constitution. An idea is always ‘wrong’ in the epistemological sense, but this relation to reality is its very principle.”

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt extended this style of thought and concluded one section of argument with the observation that racism amounts to the death of humanity: “Racism may indeed carry out the doom of the western world and, for that matter, of the whole of human civilization. When Russians have become Slavs, when Frenchmen have assumed the role of commanders of a force noire, when Englishmen have become ‘white men’, as already for a disastrous spell all Germans became Aryans, then this change will itself signify the end of western man. No matter what the learned scientists may say, race is, politically speaking, not the beginning of humanity but its end, not the origin of peoples but their decay, not the natural birth of man but his unnatural death.”

There is something fundamental and significant about Arendt’s formulation when it comes to the relationship between racism and humanity. Modern race-thinking was born from the connection between enlightenment anthropology and the formal declarations of equality that necessitated a new rationalization for growing social and economic inequality. That new system was grounded in nature and incorporated the body. Novel ways of making bodies (which were often reluctant) disclose the inner truths of their racial character were the outcome. Along with skin, skulls, pelvic bones, genitals, beards and blood, cells were components of a semantic economy which fostered progress from race as type to race as genealogy.

Race and racism are still toxic to humanity and they still matter because they afford an opportunity to discover and to contest the boundaries of the human

I have already argued that a history of mass death links colonial government to the later, exceptional spaces in which Europeans industrialised the killing of other racially-unfit Europeans, an event that marked the demise of that same creature: Man.

Race and racism are still toxic to humanity and they still matter because they afford an opportunity to discover and to contest the boundaries of the human. Race and racism tell us now that, once again in the words of Sylvia Wynter, we should be prepared to return to the problem of the human after the death of man. We must hold on tightly to the history of race as a trope and use our familiarity with the damage done by racism to license a new engagement with the human that will be conducted in the interests of those previously relegated to the zone of infra-humanity. Their struggles have provided a way to deepen and enrich our democracy. They are now intrinsic to the important idea of Human Rights.

Nowadays, nobody respectable speaks about class inequality. A consequence of globalisation as Americanisation and related shifts in European academic culture is the novel currency of a language in which racialised concepts provide an avowedly futuristic way to speak about inequality, segregation, social
capital and trust.

Against claims to the contrary made by Barak Obama and Condoleezza Rice, the US does not represent the future of everyone else on earth with regard to race. There are other paths, other possibilities and they are not arranged in a neat sequence in which unsustainable north American standards provide an ethical benchmark.

Today’s postcolonial transition attends the break up of Europe’s old imperial system and sees commercial and governmental power ebbing from the north Atlantic and finding new centres elsewhere. Whether there will be a universalisation of US sourced categories and assumptions about race and nature remains to be seen. My guess is, that even during Obama’s presidency, when the value of African American culture has been changed and so much of the software of negative globalisation and its infotainment telesector has been drawn from African American life, that is very, very unlikely. The end of Euro-American domination of the planet is at hand.

For Europe’s national states, reckoning with the aftershock of a departed imperial prestige that is routinely disavowed and symptomatically unacknowledged, has become an essential precondition for the establishment of the habitable multiculture that will be required to sustain an assault on racism and racialised inequalities (even if the word race is not being used).

That overdue reckoning is being stubbornly obstructed by a civilisationist discourse which is often little more than the global export of the institutional fruits of conflict born inside the US (Huntington and Lewis, for example) where we were told that glimpses of our inevitable racial destination were being mirrored in the exotic celebrity first of Rice and Powell and now of Obama.

These changes cannot plausibly be grasped through the idea of civilisational clash and cultural conflicts between the west and the rest. However, exactly that notion has been consolidated as the primary mechanism of contemporary racialised explanation. It associates the appearance of home grown terrorists with the riots in Paris and the north of England, the Danish cartoons, the murder of Van Gogh, the wars in Afghanistan and Mesopotamia, the war on terror and the geo-politics of a securitocracy which has built upon but surpassed earlier anxieties over immigration.

The clash of civilizations becomes both more believable and more comforting in the contexts of information deficit and manufactured ignorance. This too poses ethical and political challenges. Our alternative, critical standpoint has to move beyond a naïve, quantitative faith in the power of better information. Assuming that racialised knowledge can simply be corrected by more accurate facts will do nothing to undo the distinctive powers it is bound up with.

With regard to securitocracy, racial discourse can be thought as contributing to the tendency to create exceptional spaces and populate them with vulnerable, infra-human beings. It was colonial battlefields that gave birth to the slave plantations which point in turn to the legal regimes of protective custody that generated and generalized the concentration camp as a routine exception.

The governmental dynamics of settler colonialism were also distinctive, especially when colonies provided a laboratory for new ways of governing, killing and judging. In example after example, racial hierarchies and the domination of a large number of people by a much smaller number with a greater measure of force set up particular patterns which were often re-imported into the metropolitan hubs of empire. Police and military powers were merged.

The problems that those states of exception posed for citizenship and the language of political rights had been recognized long before they assumed twentieth-century form and Arendt, casting around to uncover the causality of industrialized genocide in Europe, made them relevant to political theory. Again by following her, we can consider the role of race and ethnic absolutism in securing the modes of inclusive exclusion that characterize what we may one day have to call the age of rendition. Understanding the ways in which invoking race has compromised and corrupted politics can also, counter-intuitively, show that the political actors we have learned to name as races derive from the very racial discourse that appears initially to be their product.

Happily, there are other dynamic traditions dedicated to making race and racism part of the pre-history of humanity. The global, cold war poetics of Ethiopianism is just one example of how the word human was blasted out of its UNESCO context and set to work. A vernacular universality – globalised by the generation of Curtis Mayfield and Bob Marley – began with a transcendental commitment to an alternative order but that is not where it ended.

Profane, demotic appeals to the idea of rights made humanity take on new life especially when it was lodged in the orbit of anti-racist and anti-imperialist thought. Then, just as Fanon had hoped, the human alienation associated with racial divisions could be replaced by non-racial alternatives that suffer, love, act and exercise their will and imagination.
in reshaping the broken world we have inherited. That world corroded by racism cannot be easily repaired and we must learn to suffer the consequences of its fractured condition but as we proceed with our discussion it is good to remember that we always enjoy more power to re-shape it than we often allow ourselves to believe.

Political forms of globalisation are becoming more clearly visible. Eqbal Ahmad warned the US years ago against the lure of double standards, militaristic substitutes for political dialogue, the fantasy of believing that the obvious need for an international judicial order could be overlooked and that the yawning inequalities which divide the overdeveloped countries from the rest can be left to take care of themselves.

That world corroded by racism cannot be easily repaired ... [but] it is good to remember that we always enjoy more power to re-shape it than we often allow ourselves to believe.

The fundamental challenge is to develop a new global standard. It can’t be derived from the liberal piéties that John Berger described as the luxury tourist ethics of the inhabitants of a mythic six star hotel. That system was produced in blissful ignorance of the horrors of colonial administration and imperial power, where, for example the distinction between combatants and non-combatants was never recognised and the rule of law was a mutable force with an essentially permissive relation to the operation of ruthless and unsentimental governmental power.

These matters are now fundamental to the future of Europe. They will only be resolved if we can begin thinking in new ways about multi-culture and cosmopolitan – postcolonial – obligation. Both of those tasks cannot avoid a confrontation with the idea of race.
IS THERE ‘A’ POSTCOLONIAL CONDITION?

Peter Geschiere
(University of Amsterdam, Netherlands)

Peter Geschiere is concerned that the concept of ‘the postcolonial’ is too all-embracing to be analytically useful. How could so many variants of colonialism produce one postcolonial condition? And how long does the postcolonial really last? In many places being in or post something else (like the cold war or neoliberalism) is arguably more defining.

The Johannesburg Salon offers a welcome forum to follow up on my blunt and ill-prepared intervention on ‘the’ postcolonial during the most inspiring Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism, in early July 2009. As I said in my JWTC presentation, emitting some doubts in the setting of this particular workshop concerning the usefulness of a notion like ‘the’ postcolonial felt like ‘swearing in the Lord’s house’. Such *vloeken in de kerk*, as we say in Dutch, often goes together with some vulgarity. After all we are a deeply Protestant nation, so for us it takes some boisterous courage to try and desacralize the Lord’s house. So let me try to elaborate and nuance a bit.

Luckily, after my rash comments, several friends went to some length to try and rescue me from further grossness. My dear colleague Shalini Randeria, good-hearted as she is, gave me a crash course in postcolonial thinking the very same afternoon – in the shopping mall of Rosebank of all places, as postcolonial a setting as one could wish for. She mentioned a series of key-moments that for her had been eye-openers in the unfolding of postcolonial thinking. First of all Edward Said’s *Orientalism*; and subsequently the ideas of the Indian historians known as ‘the subaltern studies group’, on the colonial state as resting on power without hegemony – so that a whole history of the subalterns had to be rescued from being hidden underneath the official history around the state; this approach was coupled with a most effective undermining of Eurocentric history in which capitalism, modernity and such were seen as achievements produced by the West to which non-Western societies only ‘reacted’. Shalini pointed out that it might depend on one’s disciplinary background how exactly postcolonial perspectives had changed one’s understanding of the world in which we live as being a postcolonial one (irrespective of whether it is in formerly colonized countries, Europe, north or south America) – or the way in which this affected one’s view on the politics of knowledge production – by drawing attention to the continuing impact of colonialism and imperialism today. For her, trained as a sociologist/social anthropologist it had been important as a corrective to the Eurocentrism of almost all social theory. Social anthropology had discovered colonialism rather late (with Talal Asad’s 1970s collection). And sociology had yet to realize the importance of the historical and contemporary entanglements that link the West and the Rest. For her it remained astonishing that classical sociologists (Durkheim, Weber and Simmel, for instance) had failed to theorize colonialism, or to recognize it as constitutive of modernity; and even more that all major contemporary theorists (Habermas, Luhmann, Eisenstadt, Giddens, Foucault, Beck) had also failed to theorize its role in the making of the modern world. No doubt this is a very simplistic summary of what Shalini tried to put across – Rosebank’s mall has its diversions (sorry Shalini!). My first reaction was that these were certainly very important moments, but that all this was also a lot to subsume under one notion, the postcolonial.

As an historian, the discipline in which I had my training, I had certainly been confronted with the power of these different moments, but not necessarily under one heading. Said’s momentous attack on Orientalism (1978) -- and the subsequent debates about ‘Othering’ it inspired – was truly innovative, but its importance seemed to surpass the colonial context, at least if ‘colonial’ refers to situations of direct colonial rule. The subaltern studies’ attack on Eurocentrism fell for us, as students of history, under the broader heading of the debate about the limitations of imperial history; and their emphasis on subaltern history fitted in with the broader search for a ‘history from below’. Of course it can be clarifying to broaden notions like ‘colonial’ and in its slip-stream also ‘postcolonial’ so that they can accommodate all these momentous and urgent re-considerations. Yet, for an historian this leads immediately to the question as to how such a broad version of ‘the’ post-colonial can accommodate all the different trajectories involved. Or, to put it differently, when notions are too much stretched they loose their impact and risk becoming panaceas.
Julia Hornberger launched a similar rescue operation. She gently asked me whether postcolonial theory had not meant for me a true moment of reconsidering things (a conversion?). I certainly could remember such a moment of insight. But for me it came a lot earlier when we, as a group of serious but innocent Dutch students, were invited for an official visit to Nasr’s Egypt in 1964. To our surprise we were constantly rushed off to put flowers at all sorts of monuments – I vividly remember a picture in a newspaper (which worried us a bit) of such a solemn moment of flower depositing at the Port Said monument for the victims of the war over the Suez canal. But the real shock came when we were taken to Gaza, then still under Egyptian control. At the time the Netherlands were still staunchly behind the Israelis, invariably depicted as heroes fighting against Arab villains. The shock was for me all the harder: how was it possible that the crying injustice of Gaza did not penetrate in the media and current opinions at home? Was this my postcolonial moment? It seems that there was a lot more at stake – also a generational conflict and my wish to break out of post-world-war-two correctness.

I certainly recognize that ‘the postcolonial’ notion has had great power in breaking through established conventions and ways of thinking and Achille Mbembe’s *On the Postcolony* remains a never-ending source of inspiration and enigmas. Yet, I am worried that the constant stretching of the notion and its increasing popularity, which leads to glib usages ... serves to conceal important variations

Differentiating the colonial remains of great importance to understand present-day issues. In his splendid reaction to my JWTC talk, David Goldberg raised a wide array of very relevant points. He ended with the fatherly advice that I would certainly not wish to deny that the whole of Europe is still in a ‘postcolonial condition’. Of course, I do recognize that Western Europe’s present-day problems with immigrants are directly affected by colonial history. But I am worried that a notion like ‘the postcolonial condition’ serves to hide that these effects are quite different. In the Netherlands, for instance, the Surinamese (who often see themselves now as more or less ‘integrated’) and the Antilleans (clearly less integrated) consider other immigrant groups, notably the Moroccans who increasingly outnumber the other groups, with great unease. For Surinamese and Antilleans it is of great importance that their colonial past gives them a claim to citizenship: after all they were subjects of the Dutch empire, which sets them clearly apart from the Moroccans and the Turks who have no past of Dutch rule and therefore cannot participate in all sorts of commemorations like, for instance, around the slavery monument. Clearly it does matter that some relations are marked by colonial rule in the strict sense of the word and others are not. For the Surinamese and the Antilleans (like for earlier generations of Moluccans) the idea of ‘postcolonial’ expresses a sense of entitlement from which the others are excluded. An incident three years ago showed how easily such differences can explode. A Surinamese woman accidentally killed a young Moroccan – he stole her bag from the back seat of her car and she backed up to get him, with fatal consequences – and immediately tensions flared up. The woman’s court case is still pending and she is still in hiding. For many Surinamese, the continuing rebelliousness of the second (and soon the third) generation of Moroccans is a clear sign that they do not even want to belong in their new country – they are the real ‘allochthons’ in contrast to immigrants from former colonies.
Of course one can multiply such examples. The (North) African youngsters who burn cars in the French banlieues insist on their right to belong in their new country. From a Dutch point of view this could give rise to a certain jealousy: recent comparative research reports that Moroccans of the second generation in the Netherlands show very little interest (especially in comparison with France and Spain) to belong in ‘their’ new country. Germany’s dealings with the Turks seem to be directly affected by the relative novelty of Turkish immigration, not resting on a previous colonial relationship. There are striking contrasts here – both concerning official policies and the immigrants’ perceptions – with the situation in France and the UK.

To sum up: the concept of the postcolonial served to raise most urgent and incisive issues. Yet, it remains important that it leaves scope for studying the highly different trajectories of ‘the’ colonial. ‘The’ postcolonial has different implications when there is, for instance, a heritage of direct colonial rule, or rather of a colonial relationship in a broader sense of the word. A related problem is the linking of truly innovative theoretical breakthroughs to a basically chronological referent, which, for instance, makes it increasingly difficult to dodge the question as to how long ‘the’ postcolonial will last? Notions like ‘Orientalism’ or ‘Imperial History’ indicate certain reflexive distortions through the use of terms that are less bound to a certain time-span. This is not just a terminological quibble. For African studies, for instance, it becomes a valid question how long it will remain useful to speak of ‘the’ postcolonial state. In a forthcoming study on Togo, offering seminal interpretations of present-day uncertainties, Charles Piot suggests that the recent metamorphosis of the state is rather related to a ‘Post-Cold War moment’. Elsewhere in the continent also the state seems to undergo striking transitions under the impact of the neo-liberal tide in the 1990’s. While in the first decades after Independence (for most countries around 1960) the state could be called postcolonial in a most concrete sense (in many respects the new authorities continued indeed the frameworks of colonial rule), it is more difficult to see the recent and often quite surprising avatars the various African states are producing now as continuations of colonial arrangements. Again, the question is whether a certain limitation of the postcolonial might not increase this notion’s relevance and impact.

Are these just some ruminations from the interface between anthropology and history, two disciplines that in the eyes of philosophers and others have always been hampered by a theoretical aporia? Or is a view ‘from below’ also useful for theoretical re-considerations?
RECOVERING THE POSTCOLONIAL: DISPATCHES FROM THE US CLASSROOM

Kerry Bystrom
(University of Connecticut, United States of America)

Of course there is no ‘one’ postcolonial condition, responds Kerry Bystrom. But in literary studies at least, that’s not primarily what matters. The salience of a term like postcolonial resides in its ability to destabilise normative understandings and received perceptions, to ask questions and open up debate.

Peter Geschiere’s provocation – “Is there ‘a’ postcolonial condition?” – calls to mind one of my first experiences teaching. The year was 2007. As a US scholar trained in the field of postcolonial literature, PhD almost in hand, I was thrilled to have a chance to teach at a small liberal arts college not so far from New York City. My teaching post had nothing to do with postcolonial literature; I was hired on a one-year contract to teach a world civilization class that traced concepts of the Enlightenment from Confucius through Kant to the present day. Purely by accident, however, I did get an opportunity to teach a few classes in my chosen discipline. This happened when an esteemed colleague was unable to return to school in the second semester to teach a class on “Middle Eastern Literature and Postcolonial Studies”, because the United States government did not like his (Middle Eastern) country of birth and refused to let him back into the country after he went to England to see his British wife and child for the Christmas holidays. Faced with the blatant racism of the situation, in which a professor with a valid work permit was prevented from entering the country to carry out the terms of his contract simply because he came from a country that speaks Arabic, I felt that the least I could do was teach the first couple of sessions of the course, to tide the students over until the visa issue could be resolved.

Not knowing anything really about Middle Eastern literature, I decided to focus these class sessions on the question of “the postcolonial”. I dutifully assigned two essays that I had read perhaps five or six years earlier in the beginning of my graduate school days: the introduction to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s book *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), and Anne McClintock’s “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism’” (1992). When it came time to discuss these essays with the students, however, I ran into something of a personal crisis. Along with my original enthusiasm for the field of study, all of the doubts about the term that I had experienced, and then managed to self-protectively shelve, came flooding back. Re-reading *The Empire Writes Back*, I found myself re-experiencing the “a-ha” or conversion moment that Peter Geschiere refers to: that glimpse into a whole new order of the world, that proclaims itself other than the one inaugurated through European colonial domination.

Doubts continue as I teach postcolonial literature on a more regular basis. Now, though (and for reasons that should become clear below) I worry less about the term than about two preoccupations that shape scholarship in this field. First, the privileging of the colonial-metropolitan relationship as a lens for understanding the contemporary moment, as though this continues to be the one relationship that most profoundly shapes current lifeworlds. For instance, with regard to South Africa, which falls under the rubric of postcolonial literature in the US academy, is it possible to say that this country’s history as a colony (of England? of the Netherlands?) is its most profound shaping influence? Is apartheid most productively understood as a version of colonialism? How do we parse the importance of Cold War alignments, as Geschiere notes and as Monica Popescu has shown to be integral to understanding recent South African history, which work in a different logic that cannot be reduced to the colonial?
about the contemporary neo-liberal global paradigm that shapes South Africa’s democracy? Does the obsession with the (post)colonial stop us (and by “us” I mean thoughtful individuals interested in understanding contemporary global intersections and their future implications, with all the inequalities and potentialities inherent in them) from taking an accurate reading of the present? Second, and drawing on Sarah Nuttall’s public comments at the JWTC, is the continued emphasis on “difference” in much of postcolonial studies useful? Might it not be time, as Nuttall suggests in her new book *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid*, to move beyond this paradigm towards an acknowledgement and a theorization of how we are all “twisted together or entwined”, if not always willingly and not always on equal terms?

These comments are not meant as a rejection of the term postcolonial, or the work of thinking about the postcolonial condition. To respond directly to Geschiere’s question: of course there is no “one” postcolonial condition. But I’m in the field of literature, where the richness of a theoretical tool like the term postcolonial does not depend on its ability to exhaustively explain every case. Rather, the salience of the term depends on its ability to open up questions of relevance in many different particular circumstances. My task as a young scholar of cultural products that fall under the heading “postcolonial” isn’t one of defining “the (singular) postcolonial,” but of determining what the postcolonial might mean in any given instance, what it intersects with, what it elides, what space for debate it creates. This is why the term retains significance.

With this perspective in mind, looking back to that first class on Middle Eastern Literature and Post-colonial Studies, I wish that I had assigned Jenny Sharpe’s famous essay “Is the United States postcolonial?” (1994). I’m not sure I would answer her question now the way that she did over a decade ago. But it seems to me that posing the question, rather than coming to a consensus about the answer, is the important thing. It might have helped us all think through how the contemporary US (and I mean this into the present and not only in 2007 – unfortunately not everything has changed with Obama) continues to operate on the logics of racism, ideological expansion, and what David Theo Goldberg calls “militarization” that can be clarified by a study of the dynamics of colonialism even if they cannot be reduced to it. More concretely, it might have helped the students and myself work through the entangled histories that led to a situation in which I, a US scholar trained in Latin American and Southern African literature, was sitting there attempting to teach a class on postcolonial studies and the Middle East while the professor of record was (as far as I understand it) being subjected to special background checks to determine his worthiness to enter the United States rather than being turned away by border control guards working at airports with names like Newark Liberty International.
The Salon: Volume One

POSTCOLONIAL WHO?
POSTCOLONIAL WHAT?
SOME THOUGHTS ON THE SUBJECTS OF THE POSTCOLONIAL

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For Yara El-Ghadban the postcolonial still usefully describes much of contemporary life, even if used in different ways. Anyway, obsessing over the definition of terms risks diverting analytical energy away from more important concerns.

Since Peter Geschiere has bravely given us permission to swear in the Lord’s house by doing it himself, allow me my own blasphemy. I am always a bit weary of discussions on the pros and cons, definitions, scopes and limitations of terms and concepts. I don’t mean to undermine their importance. God knows how much they get used and abused, reduced and confused with terrible consequences. However these discussions tend to shift focus from ground-level issues to energy-devouring questions of disciplinarity. In other words, it becomes more about us: meaning scholars, our disciplines, our ideologies, our idioms etc., and less about real people faced with everyday challenges.

Theoretical concepts exist as tools in order to help us think through complex situations. We need to name things if we are to understand them. However, when a certain theoretical concept catches fire, it takes on a life of its own until it somehow goes out of fashion. For individuals who like to critique the commodification of everything, human and social scholars are quite fashion conscious when it comes to the terms they use. ‘Appropriation’ and ‘resistance’? Oh that’s so 1980s! I heard one anthropologist say the other day. We fall prey to buzz-words just as teenage girls fall prey to the latest fashion faux pas. That was the case with postmodernity, globalization, neoliberalism and now the post-colonial.

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Having said this, I do share Peter Geschiere’s inquiétude regarding the ever expanding meaning of ‘the postcolonial’, even though I wouldn’t place my worries quite in the same place. True, the term ‘postcolonial’ like most concepts in fashion, tends to lose part of its soul as it travels from one discipline to another, and from one theoretical framework to another. One of the perverse effects of disciplinarity and the globalization of the ethnographic field is to turn us, anthropologists and other scholars of the social and human sciences, into theoretical scavengers, tearing apart concepts developed by others, keeping only those aspects that suit us and unwittingly participating in the dismemberment of a paradigm. Thus the postcolonial ends up referring to completely different ideas in different contexts while remaining but a shadow of the rich body of literature and thought it originally represented.

In my own research on Western art music, I quickly came across some of the limitations of using postcolonial theories uncritically. First, issues of postcoloniality, when invoked, tend to refer to the ‘non-Western’ Other, but, rarely, if ever, are Western musicians thought of, or characterized as, postcolonial or treated as potential subjects of postcolonial analysis. A good example of this slippage is the literature that Edward Saïd’s Orientalism has spawned. What was retained from his thesis is the various modes of representation and misrepresentation of the Oriental, overshadowing the fact that Saïd dealt first and foremost with European literature. The main object of his study was European literature (fiction and non-fiction) and through it he read European power. In her contribution to Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes a similar critique of the legacy of Saïd’s Orientalism. However she focuses on marginality: “Saïd’s book was not a study of marginality, not even of marginalization. It was a study of the construction of an object, for investigation and control. The study of colonial discourse, directly released by work such as Saïd’s, has, however, blossomed into a garden where the marginal can speak and be spoken, even spoke for. It is an important (and beleaguered) part of the discipline now.”

In other words, Orientalism was never about the Oriental. It is about the West and how it constructed its own identity by imagining an Other to position itself against. Somehow this subtle but important nuance has been drowned out by a flood of literature on the representation of the non-Western Other,
hence going back to the old habit of situating the object of research outside Western boundaries.

When the focus turns to representation, another perversion of the postcolonial takes place. Regarding music, for example, the postcolonial was reduced to its semiological dimension where an imagined non-Western Other becomes the sole object of representation and its dissenting voice within the perceived hegemony of Western musical tradition is muted. But wasn’t the postcolonial supposed to be about “talking back” and hearing that dissenting voice from the beginning?

Another problem with the way the postcolonial has been used or critiqued is the fact that there is a persistent confusion about what exactly we are talking about: Are we talking about the postcolonial condition as a historical moment and continuing process, or about postcolonial discourse, that is, theories looking to de-center Western production of knowledge; or are we talking about postcolonial subjectivities, that is, the individual experiences of the postcolonial? I think that all three dimensions must be taken into consideration separately, then examined in the way they intersect. For example, how can postcolonial theories as an analytical toolkit help us understand the different ways in which the postcolonial (as a shared, yet tension-filled condition that falls on both sides of colonial history) translates into a localized set of experiences with their unique characteristics? In this way, I think, the postcolonial can at the same time remain as open a concept as possible while always being grounded in individual lives, contexts and places.

This is of course all easier said than done. But who said it should be easy? Furthermore, approaching the postcolonial in this manner does not solve some of the other worries I have, one of which Geschiere puts his finger on when he asks: When does Africa stop being postcolonial? That goes back to the one thing that troubles me with the postcolonial: The risk that the long and rich histories of peoples and nations be reduced to one traumatic experience – the colonial experience, and that everything else these peoples and nations produce in terms of culture, knowledge, politics, economics be constantly analyzed as a product of, or as a reaction to, the West, and not first and foremost for themselves.

Even though these issues have not yet been resolved, I have to disagree with Geschiere’s calling into question the usefulness of the term. I still find it extremely inspiring and thought-provoking. It still speaks, in my view, to what much of the contemporary world is still dealing with. So I wouldn’t call it quits on the postcolonial just yet.
IS THERE ‘A’ POST-COLONIAL CONDITION?
A RESPONSE TO
PETER GESCHIERE

Megan Jones
(St. Edmund’s College, Cambridge University, United Kingdom)

A ‘catch-all’ term like postcolonial is a necessary evil, suggests Megan Jones: it provides a political rallying point.

Peter Geschiere’s discussion raises the often asked and vexed question regarding the parameters of the ‘post-colonial’ and its application to the wide variety of historical moments and geographical contexts falling under its aegis. Here I comment briefly on some of Geschiere’s points and contribute a few observations of my own, drawing on work that will be familiar to those in the field of – wait for it – ‘post-colonial’ studies.

It is interesting that Geschiere problematises what he perceives as a lack of attentiveness to difference in the field, when many of its most prominent theorists (the privileged position of diasporic post-colonial critics is a matter I shall simply note here) postulate difference as the preferred site from which to articulate counter-discourses to imperial hegemony. Such arguments are anchored in post-structuralist scepticism (expressed by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard, for example) about the validity of universal notions of rational/coherent subjectivities, and the elision of a marginalised ‘Other’ from rationalist enlightenment discourse. There have been a number of Marxist humanist critiques posited against the emphasis on a thematics of difference (see, for instance Frederic Jameson and Noam Chomsky) as disallowing the formulation of political solidarities based on a shared, universal human nature. A call for a re-engagement with the post-colonial in terms of the political has been made by Laura Chrisman, who argues for a re-thinking of the field in terms of the material rather than simply the textual. Another, quite different, critique works from the supposition that too narrow a focus on difference conceals the points of interconnection and interdependence that mark both the colonial and post-colonial. Hence, Sarah Nuttall’s recent deployment of the term ‘entanglement’ in relation to post-apartheid South Africa stresses the ‘mutual constitution’ of oppressor and oppressed. As far as I can tell, Geschiere’s contention that stretching the term postcolonial, “serves to conceal important variations”, is a call to heed historical specificity, rather than a post-structuralist deconstruction of subjectivity.

Re-calling his conversation with Shalini Randheria, Geschiere notes that Edward Said’s Orientalism was a pivotal text in unveiling and historicising naturalised discourses of power that constructed the ‘Orient’ in terms of the Western ‘Self’ (and I use the term ‘Western’ advisedly). It might be useful to note here that Geschiere’s concern about the monolithic assumption inherent in the term postcolonial has also been a criticism levelled at Said’s work that, some have argued, makes universalised statements about highly variegated colonial and post-colonial experiences. Geschiere goes on to mention the subaltern studies group, the influence of whose work (and indeed of Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” critique of their project), gestures towards the dominance of critical engagements with the South Asian postcolonial. The hegemonic position of South Asian Studies in the field is, I think, entrenched in the academy. In literary studies at least, this dominance is supported by a market that commodifies and consumes fictions produced by South Asian authors as examples of the ‘exotic’ or ‘magical’, thereby perpetuating rather than dismantling the trope of ‘Other’. Thus even within the field, there exist troubling discrepancies in the allocation of resources for the study of certain geographical/historical zones over others.

If I may narrow my focus to a South African perspective: debate over the use of the term postcolonial to describe a country that became a union in 1910, but that only emerged from white minority rule in 1994, has long been fractious. Much of this has to do with the temporal limitations flagged by Geschiere in his analysis: when exactly did South Africa become ‘postcolonial’? Debate has also centred on the country’s ‘exceptionalism’ from the kinds of imperialisms imposed elsewhere in Africa. Anne McKittrick and Mahmood Mamdani, for instance, have argued for and against South Africa as a special case in the European colonisation of Africa. McKittrick’s unease with the ‘flattening out’ effects of postcolonial theorising shares some concerns with Geschiere’s critique, whereas Mamdani’s argument that apartheid was anticipated by indirect rule in British and French Africa is an assertion of the homogeneity of colonial practice. Thus, in turning briefly to South Africa, we see the fractures and dis...
satisfactions that attend the utilisation of colonial and postcolonial nomenclature.

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To answer Geschiere’s question then: there is no such thing as ‘a’ postcolonial condition and indeed, there are many reasons to dispute the term’s widespread (and sometimes indiscriminate) deployment. And yet, from my admittedly unlearned point of view, it seems that in order to compare and interrogate the varying political, economic and social structures that are the legacy of imperialism, and the grossly unequal distribution of resources that continue to define the lives of millions, a ‘catch-all’ term is a necessary evil. We can admit the inadequacies of ‘post-colonial’ and still retain an appreciation for the value of some of its theory. This, I think, lies in the interrogation of ‘naturalised’ forms of knowledge and the insertion of marginalised voices into the normative narratives of hegemonic power. Recognising the diverse and continuing effects of Empire (whether it be British, American or Chinese, state- or corporate-based) in the life-worlds of the marginalised should not blind us from the fact that there are commonalities within and between these worlds, points around which we could and should mobilise as critics and activists. All terms can be accused of reductionism, and yet they can still be useful. It is not without irony that I choose to end with that most bombastic of imperialists, Winston Churchill. To adapt Churchill’s famous remark: ‘Postcolonial’ is the worst form of term, except for all those other forms which have been tried from time to time.
ON POSTCOLONIALISM

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For Rachel Signer the postcolonial is the unavoidable condition of contemporary life for everyone.

Any monolithic descriptive term necessarily emerges as an abstraction of particularities, and in so defining itself, will reduce important complexities to the lowest common denominator. Thus, the concept of “the” postcolonial is indeed problematic, although it fills the unglamorous but functional role of being an umbrella over many ambiguities which characterize life in the world. Some of the troubling aspects of the term might stem from the question of identity, which is constantly being debated in the context of historical understandings of race, class, and gender. Other problems arise with the prefix, “post,” as an indicator of structural change. If independence from colonialism was meant to free the Slave from its Master, then the question remains, why hasn’t this succeeded - and, one might add, what would such success actually look like? For this reason, “the” postcolonial comes to refer, albeit begrudgingly, to an incomplete phase in which spatial and temporal chains have yet to be broken. As time goes on, however, it appears that the chains are not always connected to an obvious target, but rather, they are wound tightly around the activities and dreams we engage with.

In other words, the term “postcolonial” is complicated by the reconfigured shape which Empire has morphed into. No longer is it necessary for Britain to control South Africa’s government in order to continue capital investments and profits, as neoliberalization has ensured flexible labor forces, nearly unrestricted access to environmental resources, and a constant demand from unsatisfied consumers for cheap goods. This is to say that, in our postmodern world, as the nation-state has been increasingly deterritorialized and networks of commerce have stepped in to produce the neoliberal subject, we wonder what it means for a nation to be “postcolonial” and independent - if it means anything at all.

Perhaps these ambiguities have rendered the term “postcolonial” something of a floating signifier, which can make its usage vague and misleading. “Postcolonial” can signify a positive or negative value judgment depending on the predicate it attaches itself to. Thus it is that “postcolonial writers” are seen as revolutionary vanguards who wage intellectual warfare against the structures of injustice which defined their own upbringings. Meanwhile, the “postcolonial condition” is portrayed as one of extreme inequalities, corruption, excessiveness, hybridized identities, and general confusion. Clearly there is a discursive difference here between the “postcolonial” as a site of critique, and as a world in which one lives, struggles, and makes compromises with faulty social contracts. Furthermore, it seems that, if we are to take “postcolonialism” to be a temporal stage following independence from an oppressive and exploitative master, then there are various struggles which have been left out of the discussion of the term. Wouldn’t Olympe de Gouges be a postcolonial writer, then? Was Harvey Milk, the first homosexual mayor of a city in the United States, also a postcolonial politician? If “the” postcolonial can only refer to a formal (past) relationship with a European nation-state, then the term appears to be limited.

In a 2007 volume of the journal Critical Interventions, Senegalese, U.S.-based visual artist Modou Dieng holds the view that “postcolonialism” can be distinguished from “postcoloniality,” the former being the lived-conditions of previously colonized nations, and the latter being those of the colonizing nations. He describes the contemporary American scene as a “collage of cultures,” made of “juxtaposition and superposition.” He writes: “Postcoloniality is by essence a transgression of all that is established, of stereotypes and taboos. It is the acceptance of the multiple. It expresses a clash or constellation of cultures which allows the artist to construct from various materials a hybrid home called Art.” Here, Dieng is articulating another problem with the term “postcolonialism,” which is that it re-creates illusions of binaries in a world which is increasingly defined by networks of power and accompanying regimes of subjectivity. He does, however, suggest a hopefulness that is produced within the postcolonial world, based in the convergence of multiple histories and the creative potential of such meetings.

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One might say that postcolonialism, and the postcolony, cannot be reduced to any one condition, place, or theory. The postcolonial is the world we live in, and

we are it. It is a way of being in this world, a world of fragmented histories swept under the rug, in which each and every one of us dwells in inquietude and confusion. Yet, it is a world which requires, above all, conviviality. And such being-together will only come with a recognition of the inseparability, as it has always been, of the Self and the Other. For “the” postcolonial to take the shape of post-Orientalism, it must first reach post-binarism, which means that critiques of the world must concurrently be critiques of ourselves, the norms we live by, and the institutions we construct through them.
An Interview with Achille Mbembe
(University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa)

Talking to French magazine Esprit in December 2006, Achille Mbembe suggests that postcolonial thought looks original because it developed in a transnational, eclectic vein from the very start. This enabled it to combine the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles on the one hand, and from the heritage of Western philosophy and of the disciplines that constitute the European humanities on the other. It first emerged in the field of literary criticism before it migrated to various disciplines in the social sciences. It is both a protean and a fragmented mode of thought – which is both a strength and a weakness. In spite of its protean and fragmented nature – or maybe thanks to both – it has made a significant contribution to ways of reading our modernity.

Postcolonial thought is known for its critique, not of the West per se, but of the effects of brutality and blindness produced by a certain conception – I’d call it colonial – of reason, of humanism, and of universalism. This critique is different from that once made by the existentialist, phenomenological and post-structuralist movements in post-war France. It is chiefly concerned with the issue of subjectivity and self-creation, autonomy and entanglement, sameness and difference. But its approach has not much to do with the Nietzschean “death of God” or the Sartrian idea of “man without God” taking the place vacated by the “dead God”. It hardly subscribes either to Foucault’s notion that “God being dead, man is dead too”.

On the contrary, it puts its finger on two things. First, it exposes both the violence inherent in a particular concept of reason, and the gulf separating European moral philosophy from its practical, political and symbolic outcomes in the colony. How indeed can the much-trumpeted faith in “man” be reconciled with the way in which colonized people’s life, labor and world of signifiers got sacrificed? That is the question Aimé Césaire poses in his Discourse on Colonialism, for example. Race was the Beast at the heart of European colonial humanism.

Secondly, postcolonial thought deconstructs colonial prose – that is to say the mental infrastructures, the symbolic forms and representations underpinning the imperial project. It also unmasks the power of this prose for falsification – in a word, the stock of falsehoods and the weight of fantasizing functions without which colonialism as a historical power system could not have worked. In this way it reveals how what passed for European humanism manifested itself in the colonies as duplicity, double-talk and a travesty of reality. Indeed, colonial regimes never ceased telling lies about themselves and others. As Frantz Fanon explains so clearly in Black Skin, White Masks, racialization was the driving force behind this economy of duplicity and falsehood. Race was the Beast at the heart of European colonial humanism. Postcolonial thought seeks to document what it was to live or to survive under the sign of the Beast. It shows that there is in European colonial humanism something that has to be called unconscious self-hatred. Indeed racism in general, and colonial racism in particular, represents the transference of this self-hatred to the Other.

There is another level in the postcolonial critique of European humanism and universalism that, if the term had not given rise to so many misunderstand-
The totem that colonized peoples discovered behind the mask of European humanism and universalism was not only deaf and blind most of the time. It was also, above all, characterized by the desire for self-destruction. But insofar as this form of death was necessarily conveyed through that of others, it was a “delegated death”. Once again, it is Fanon who has analyzed, better than anyone else, this kind of necropolitical side of life itself, or else which, in an act of reversion, takes “giving death” for “giving life”. That is why the colonial relationship fluctuated constantly between the desire to extract resources and exploit the natives, and the temptation to exterminate them.

What finally characterizes postcolonial thought is entanglement and concatenation and its critique of essentialism. From this point of view it is opposed to a particular version of Western illusion, that there can be no subject other than in the circular, permanent referral to oneself and one’s own mastery, to an essential and inexhaustible singularity. In countering this illusion, postcolonial thought stresses the fact that identity arises from multiplicity and dispersion, that self-referral is only possible in the in-between, in the gap between mark and demarcation, in co-constitution. Seen from this perspective, colonization no longer appears as mechanical and unilateral domination forcing the subjugated into silence and inaction. Quite the reverse: the colonized person is a living, talking, conscious, active individual whose identity arises from violation, erasure and self-rewriting.

Moreover, the universalization of imperialism cannot be explained by the violence of coercion alone. It was a consequence too of the fact that many colonized people were complicit in a fable that they found attractive in a number of respects. The identity of the colonized was shaped by the intersection between ellipsis, engagement and ambivalence.

This is perhaps the moment to point out that postcolonial thought, the critique of European humanism and imperial forms of universalism, is not an end in itself. It is carried out with the aim of paving the way for an enquiry into the possibility of a politics of the future, of mutuality and of the common. The prerequisite for such a politics is the recognition of the Other as a fellow human. I believe that this enrolment in the future, in the interminable quest for new horizons for the human through the recognition of the Other as fundamentally human, is an aspect of postcolonial thought that is all too often forgotten. It is a constituent part of Fanon’s quest, of Senghor’s in the Poetical Works written during his imprisonment in the German camp Front Stalag 230, of Edward Said’s meditations at the end of his life or, more recently, of Edouard Glissant or Paul Gilroy’s considerations about the possibility of convivial life in a henceforth multi-culture world. (See Gilroy’s book Postcolonial Melancholia).

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One last point. What constitutes the political strength of postcolonial thought is its enrolment in the historic social struggles of colonized societies and especially its re-reading of the theoretical praxis of what we call liberation movements. If postcolonial thought today is the preserve of British and American academia and of English-speaking scholars, it should not be forgotten that this current was largely inspired by French and Afro-French thinking. I have mentioned Fanon, Césaire and Senghor. I could have added Glissant and others too. Added to this is the influence of French thinkers like Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Foucault, Derrida and even Lacan. It is therefore a mode of thinking that in several respects is very close to a peculiarly French approach to reasoning. So it is rather paradoxical that, because of its cultural insularity and the narcissism of its elites, France has cut itself off from these new ventures in world thought.

Esprit: Can a link be established between globalization and postcolonial thought?

Achille Mbembe: It can be said that postcolonial thought is in many respects a critique of worldliness even if initially its practitioners do not use that term. In the first place, it shows how entangled are the histories of colonies and those of the metropoles. The Napoléon of the restoration of slavery and the Tousaint Louverture who represented the revolution of human rights are the dual faces of the same imperial history. Colonialism itself was a global experience that contributed to the universalization of representations, techniques and institutions. Far from being a one-way street, this process of universalization was basically a paradox, fraught with all sorts of ambiguities.

Take the Atlantic. The age of the Atlantic slave trade is also the age of the great forced migrations. It is the age of the forced intermixture of populations, of the creative fission in the course of which there arose the “créole” world of the great contemporary urban cultures. It was also the age of the great plan-
etary experiments; the moment when people, torn from their land, blood and soil, learned to imagine communities that transcended the bonds of immediate kinship, forsook the comfort of repetition and invented new forms of transnational solidarities. Before colonies became the great laboratories of modernity in the nineteenth century, the “plantation” prefigured already a new consciousness of the world and of globalization.

This is one of the reasons why the dialogue between Afro-American, Afro-Caribbean thought and postcolonial thought has been fruitful. Afro-modern thought is about interconnections. It maintains that an appeal to the world that can only be truly made where, by force of circumstances, one has been alongside others, with others. Under these conditions, “returning to oneself” is above all leaving the night of identity and the lacunae of my little world. So here we have a way of imagining worldliness that rests on the radical affirmation of the density of proximity, of displacement, even of dislocation. In other words, consciousness of the world arises from the actualization of what was already possible in me, achieved through my encounter with the lives of others, my responsibility towards the lives of others and towards seemingly distant worlds and, above all, towards people with whom I have apparently no connections: the intruders.

**Esprit**: Is the postcolonial era both the hope of an exit from an inhuman world — with consequences in terms of religion — and a time of necessary reinvention?

**Achille Mbembe**: To my mind it is the time both of the end and of reinvention, starting with the reinvention of what has suffered the most damage — in the case of Afro-modern history, the “commodity-body”.

As is clearly shown by the example of South Africa on its emergence from apartheid, nothing can be reinvented unless one is capable both of glancing backward and of looking forward.

Glancing backward requires to revisit what it meant to be a witness to expropriation, dispossession and destruction. It requires that we keep documenting the apartheid archive: the gaping scars, demolished homes, broken lives; the skeletons, the debris and the rubble; the ruins and the fading memories of that there once was. It forces us to bear witness to pain and radical loss; to the myriad ways in which under racial domination, destruction was aimed at life itself and the senses, including the capacity to remember. But it also demands that we pay attention to black people’s capacity for self-making, self-reference and self-expression and to alternative versions of whiteness that are not primarily constituted around property and privilege, but around an ethics of mutuality and human solidarity.

Looking forward – the politics of possibility, a future-oriented politics – implies a meditation about how to illuminate anew the experience of being human, of human life. It means taking seriously the obligation to answer for one’s right to be; to speak in the first person; to reveal one’s name and one’s face as a condition of emergence in the world of life; to resurrect the possibility of a shared human life: the politics of mutuality.

**to resurrect the possibility of a shared human life: the politics of mutuality**

But the ethics of mutuality and of human proximity forces us to establish a distinction between vulnerability and victimhood, suffering and self-creation. This is how we will confront the violence that comes to us from the Other. This is also how we will make of the irruption of the Other’s face in the phenomenal order of appearance a profoundly human event, the starting point of an ethics of human proximity and mutuality.

From this perspective, South Africa is a fertile ground for critical thought. If what began in blood ends in blood the chances of a new beginning are lessened by the haunting presence of the horrors of the past. Put another way, it is difficult to reinvent anything if one simply repeats against others the violence once inflicted on oneself. There is no “good” violence that can follow on automatically from “bad” violence and be legitimized by it. All violence, “good” or “bad”, always sanctions a disjunction. The reinvention of politics in postcolonial conditions first requires people to depart from the logic of vengeance, above all when vengeance wears the shabby garb of the law or of victimhood.

That said, the struggle to escape from an inhuman order of things cannot do without what may be called the poetic productivity of the sacred. The sacred is to be understood not only in relation to the divine, but also as the therapeutic power of hope in a context in which violence has touched not only the body as such but psychic life and infrastructures too, through the denigration of the Other, through the assertion of the latter’s worthlessness.

It is this discourse – sometimes interiorized – about worthlessness that is challenged by certain forms of the sacred, the ultimate aim being to enable those who were on their knees to arise and walk at last. In these circumstances, the philosophical, po-
Individual and ethical question is how to give support to this “ascent in humanity” (la montée en humanité): an ascent at the end of which personhood and subjecthood are restored, when person-to-person dialogue becomes possible and replaces commands delivered to the object.

Esprit: When you speak of this ability to be oneself, to say “I”, to “arise and walk”, are you thinking in terms of individuals, or of peoples and collective entities?

Achille Mbembe: I am referring to the task of learning again to envisage oneself as a universal source of meaning. Harm has been done to individuals quite as much as to “communities”. Liberation struggles always bring centre stage individuals who emerge from a “community” and who become experts at scrutinizing the Night, keeping a weather-eye open and shouldering on the community’s behalf the question “When?”. They are individuals who probe the Night for a glimpse of the dawn. This was what Martin Luther King did, and Nelson Mandela, and Mahatma Gandhi – heroes for whom revolutionary asceticism began with the drive for self-transformation.

The South African experiment shows clearly that the injunction to “arise and walk” is addressed to all, to the oppressed of yesteryear and to their former enemies. It is pseudo-liberationist to believe that it is enough to kill the colonist, take over his property and sleep with his wife for relationships of equality that merely “pagan”. Black South Africans do not think, either, that in order for their own past suffering to be acknowledged, it is necessary to deny the suffering of others or empty it of all human meaning. The politics of memory in South Africa is not about which human suffering should be de-historicized, sacralised and sanctified and which suffering is basically only of incidental significance, of no value on the scale of lives and deaths that truly matter. What the TRC has taught us is that every human life has a human meaning, as has every death. The TRC has also taught us to free ourselves from the addiction to the memory of our own suffering if we are to achieve the project of freedom. Because freeing oneself from this addiction is the necessary condition for learning to speak a language of human mutuality again and, potentially, to create a new world and a new consciousness.

What is striking is that a considerable part of the work of memorialisation is being carried out with the aim of beginning everything again on the basis of a mutual recognition of the humanity of each and every one, and of the right of everybody to life in Israel. Indeed those states that define themselves mainly as victim-subjects (sujets victimes) often appeal too as subjects that can never stop miming death by sacrifice; subjects that can never stop inflicting on others all the acts of cruelty of which they were once themselves the expiatory victims.
freedom before the law. South Africa is still a long way from becoming an ethical community. But this is the project. The work of memorialisation translates, for instance, as the appropriate burial of the remains of those who died in the struggle, the erection of funeral steles where they fell, the consecration of rituals aiming at curing the survivors of anger and the desire for revenge, the creation of numerous museums and parks devoted to the celebration of people’s common humanity. The work of memory is inseparable from meditation on the ways of interiorizing the presence of those who have been lost and reduced to dust. Meditation on this presence-absence, and on ways of symbolically restoring what has been destroyed, here in large part consists in giving the theme of the sepulchre its full subversive and insurrectionary force. The sepulchre in this instance is not so much the celebration of death as the reference to the extra bit of life that is needed to raise the dead from death itself.

South Africa is still a long way from becoming an ethical community. But this is the project.

So, this is an approach that both embraces the fullness of life and seeks to transcend the question of particularity and singularity. It is not without its tensions and contradictions.

**Esprit:** You have written a book, On the Postcolony. What is the relationship between your work and postcolonial thought?

**Achille Mbembe:** This I have said many times. I am not a postcolonial thinker. There is a difference, to my mind, between a critique of the “postcolony” and a critique of the “postcolonial”. The question running through my book is this: “What is ‘today’, and what are we, today?” What are the lines of fragility and precariousness, the fissures in contemporary African life? And, possibly, how could what is, be no more; or could it give birth to something radically else? And so, if you like, in On the Postcolony, I try to exit the Fanonian cul-de-sac: the dead end of the generalized circulation and exchange of death as the condition for human becoming. I am trying to suggest that a common thread between colonialism and what comes after colonialism is the precariousness of life. In a context of a life that is so precarious, disposing-of-death-itself could be the core of a veritable politics of freedom, of mutuality, of human proximity. A politics of freedom is a politics in which the old practice of human sacrifice is transcended. I am conscious of the fact that this is an unconditional utopia. Such unconditionality can only be expressed in a poetic, even dreamlike form.

A common thread between colonialism and what comes after colonialism is the precariousness of life.

**On the Postcolony** is, on the other hand, concerned with memory but only insofar as the latter is a question, first of all, of responsibility towards oneself and towards an inheritance. I would say that memory is, above all else, a question of responsibility with respect to a name of which one is not the author. I believe that one only truly becomes a human being to the degree that one is capable of answering to what one is not the direct author of, to the person with whom one has, seemingly, nothing in common.

So there is no memory except in the assignation to responsibility.

**Esprit:** What is postcolonial thinking’s position with regard to Europe? Is it an anti-European current of thought or does it adopt European values? Shouldn’t postcolonial thought also be understood as reflections on the de-centering of European thought?

**Achille Mbembe:** Postcolonial thought is not anti-European. On the contrary, it is the product of the encounter between Europe and the world it once made into its distant possessions. It invites us to undertake an alternative reading of our common modernity. It calls upon Europe to live what it declares to be its origins, its future and its promise, and to live all of that responsibly. If, as Europe has always claimed, this promise has truly as its object the future of humanity as a whole, then postcolonial thought calls upon Europe to open and continually relaunch that future in a singular fashion, responsible for itself and before the Other.

But postcolonial thought is also a dream: the dream of a new form of critical humanism. It is the dream of a polis that is truly universal because it is ecumenical. It is what, in his poetical writings, Senghor hoped for: the “rebirth of the world” (la renais-sance du monde), which he spoke of in his “Prayer to the Masks”.

Postcolonial thought, on the other hand, is a critique of history and responsibility. It is a critique of responsibility in terms of the obligation to answer for oneself, to be the guarantor of one’s own actions. The ethics underlying this critique of responsibility is the future.
**Esprit:** And the United States?

**Achille Mbembe:** As far as I am concerned, the *différant* is about the way in which, historically, successive US governments have claimed to promote democracy and represent the “human” on the basis of crimes that are presented as so many earthly fulfilsments of God’s Law and Divine Providence.

So, it is the political theology of the American State that is what many have a problem with insofar as the god it invokes is a melancholic and nostalgic god, irascible and vengeful. Mercy has no part in his laws and precepts. He is a jealous and unforgiving god, swift to destroy and forever requiring human sacrifice.

The critique of the political theology underpinning American power politics (hyper-hegemony) is absolutely necessary in the current climate. And in any case, the best critiques of this theology come from the United States itself. So, it is not the United States as such that people have a problem with, but an idea of politics and of the world that is closely associated with the history of the enemy – the enemy as an ontological, even theological category in the sense that the United States’ enemies are, as a matter of principle, always the enemies of God, and the hatred the United States feels for them is, necessarily, a divine hatred.

I do not think one can remake the world and “spread democracy” on that basis. The global politics of the United States often seeks to free itself from morality precisely when morality is constantly being invoked while immoral acts are being carried out. In the name of security, the US today seeks exemption from all responsibility. This politics of boundless irresponsibility must be subjected to a firm, intelligent and sustained critique.

This interview was translated into Italian by Tatiana Silla and published in the critical journal *Aut Aut* in September 2008. It was also translated into Spanish by Autrey Torrecilla and Raul Rodriguez Freire, and it appeared in the Chilean journal *Indice* in 2008. The current English translation was done by John Fletcher for *Eurozine* (January 2008). The English version was reviewed by the Achille Mbembe for *The Johannesburg Salon* in July 2009.
POLITICS AND THE GRAMMAR OF MUTUALITY

Thomas Cousins
(Johns Hopkins University, United States of America)

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 collectively, 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.

the necessity of redeeming the human from ... the capacity of capitalism to waste human life

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 conversation. 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 brutal 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 commo-
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 experimentality 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.

**the political as somewhere between the singularity of event and the everyday coexistence that is always already political**

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 Work/shop. Promise indeed.
OBAMA IN EGYPT: APPEALING TO ISLAM

Faisal Devji
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Obama breaks ranks with international statesmanship and global institutional politics and appeals to personal ethics in the name of a common humanity. That’s why he interests ordinary people.

Delivered to a full house at Cairo University on the 4th of June 2009, Barack Obama’s much heralded address to the Muslim world received the kind of global exposure that was matched only by his inaugural speech. Indeed it is difficult to think of any other occasion when the words of an American president have received such close attention around the world. The only precedent that comes to mind is John F. Kennedy’s famous speech of June 26th, 1963, in Berlin, given at the height of the Cold War on the very threshold of the Soviet Union. And if Kennedy’s words were about the hemispheric struggle between a pair of superpowers, his successor spoke about the hostility of two very different actors that are by no means equivalents. How can a global religion like Islam, lacking any representative authority or institution, be related to a country like the United States, which operates within the framework of international politics?

I would like to suggest that by forcing these incommensurable entities into a conversation, President Obama broke with the language of institutional politics altogether to conceive of global interactions among actors of many different and even indeterminate kinds. For if his invocations of dialogue and respect were treated by many in the press as an exercise in public relations, their massive audience tells us that it was precisely such a move away from the grammar of international politics that men and women around the world found interesting. But what after all was so novel about the speech? Certainly not the oft-repeated stereotypes about the entwined histories of “Abrahamic religions”, the tolerance of Muslim Spain or the Arab transmission of Greek learning to Christian Europe. Radical instead was Obama’s effort to be true to the following statement made early on in his speech: “I am convinced that in order to move forward, we must say openly to each other the things we hold in our hearts, and that too often are said only behind closed doors”. With this sentence the President not only opened the door to a remarkable confession of America’s history of wrongful deeds in the Muslim world, he also abandoned the circumscribed categories of statesmanship to deal with the kind of popular prejudices and theories that proliferate in blogs, web forums, talk radio and everyday conversations.

appealing to Islam in a way that brought the limits of conventional politics to light

At the same time, therefore, as he spoke about laying to rest the “crude stereotypes” that some Americans and Muslims have of one another, Barack Obama took much greater ones on board. Such for example was the anthropomorphic conception of Islam as one kind of political agent that could be set against the West as another. However much the President tried to qualify this view by rejecting notions like that of a clash of civilizations, his whole speech depended upon the possibility of its truth. And since so many people take these conceptions seriously, Obama’s engagement with them cannot be dismissed as ignorant, particularly in light of the fact that he departed from the language and therefore the criteria of conventional politics by entertaining them. After all “Islam” does not fit into the structure of international politics because in its
current incarnation, as a threat animating terrorists who are dedicated to an undefined global cause, it cannot be confined to states or even would-be states, which happen to be the only legitimate actors in the world’s political order as presently constituted. Indeed Islam is seen as a threat today precisely because the terrorists who use its name are not for the most part likely to take over states or even to be supported by them.

Yet by appealing to Islam in a way that brought the limits of conventional politics to light, Barack Obama was only following the lead of statesmen who had in the past done much the same. From Napoleon to Kaiser Wilhelm II, to say nothing of Ronald Reagan, European and American heads of state have quite regularly appealed to Islam in order to bring about world-historical changes that moved outside the bounds of normative politics. Such at least was the fantasy that allowed the Emperor of All the French to spread rumours about his conversion to Islam while conquering Egypt, or the German Emperor to rely upon similar stories while attempting to rouse an anti-British jihad during the First World War. And then of course there was the American president who did in fact promote a jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan by encouraging Muslims from around the world to support it. Naturally these projects can all be seen as attempts to use Muslim passions for the purposes of realpolitik, though I would argue that the fantasy underlying them had long outstripped such aims, depending as it did on the vision of a world-wide uprising motivated by a specifically religious sensibility, one that Christianity could no longer provide. Whatever accounts for the relative absence of Christian movements in the West, it is certain that Islam has for some time now provided an important model for imagining the limits of international politics there.

Obama’s appeal to Islam, however, unlike that of his predecessors, was not meant to encourage a holy war in order to go beyond the limits of conventional politics. Its function was in fact more analytical than political or even rhetorical in character. For once he had interrupted the institutional narrative of everyday statecraft by pairing the United States with Islam, the President was able to acknowledge the impossibility of such a politics in the global arena from which the religion of Muhammad takes its meaning. As a supposedly planetary actor, after all, Islam could not be confined to any particular place or interest, thus forcing Obama to speak of any engagement with it only in the terms of a common humanity. From here he went on to speak about other issues, including pandemics, financial crises and atomic war that also affected the whole of the human race and so could not be engaged in the name of any political interest but only that of humanity itself: “This is a difficult responsibility to embrace. For human history has often been a record of nations and

tribes – and yes, religions – subjugating one another to serve their own interests. Yet in this new age, such attitudes are self-defeating. Given our interdependence, any world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will inevitably fail.”

As if to mitigate the radical implications of this statement, the President smugly appealed to a mutual interest in by the back door, appealing for Americans and Muslims to deal with each other on the basis of “mutual interest and mutual respect”. But in doing so he fell in with the reasoning, down to their very words, of al-Qaeda’s founders, who routinely speak of mankind’s interdependence and the consequent impossibility of interest-driven politics, recommending instead an ethics of sacrifice in which global problems are dealt with precisely by mutual interest and respect. And indeed Barack Obama’s speech marks the first time that the United States has engaged al-Qaeda in a conversation, not simply in crossing any number of red lines by acknowledging American mistakes in places like Iraq or Iran, but more importantly by putting aside the principles of statecraft to invoke the world outside, all made possible by the President’s reference to Islam as a global agent. Despite the language of partnership and mutual benefit, then, at issue in the speech was the decay of political realism in the face of humanity as a new kind of interconnected reality, one threatened by our actions in a way that was never before possible. Unlike his immediate predecessor, George W. Bush, who spoke the language of traditional politics while rejecting a number of its accepted practices having to do with torture, indefinite detention and the like, Obama has restored these practices but speaks a language different from theirs, as if realizing that the authority of such a politics can never be reinstated.
While it is clear that “Islam” is not a category amenable to the tradition of political realism, the absence of a non-realist political order means that Obama, like his alter ego Osama bin Laden, is only able to deploy it by drawing upon his own background and offering himself up as the model of a global leader. So the well known and even trite references to his parents, race, childhood and the like, quite unlike the attitude of previous American presidents, who had aimed for a kind of generic universality. Yet the naming of his particularity by no means prevents Barack Obama from laying claim to the universal, because exactly these particularities are what connect him to the rest of the globe: as a product of mixture and migration, a Christian with a Muslim family background, etc. Whereas presidents in the past had seen their universality in national terms, Obama situates his within a global arena. And in fact the President does nothing more than represent in his person the planetary influence that his country exercises. If Kenyans, for example, claim Obama as if he were their representative in America, it is because they realize how much of their destiny is determined by that country. So with Obama’s election many feel as if they have somehow voted someone to power in the state that decides their future. And by representing this obscure vision of a global democracy, in which people from everywhere can claim to be represented by an American president, Barack Obama has transformed the language of international politics more than Kennedy had done as his country’s first Irish and Catholic head of state. For with him the old feminist slogan of “the personal is the political” has moved from the particularity of gender and race to a planetary universality, but only by leaving behind the lexicon of states, institutions and international fact and had therefore no geographical centre, something that he emphasized again when mentioning widely dispersed countries like Indonesia, Egypt, Morocco, Iraq Afghanistan and Pakistan in the same breath. Moreover by stressing the higher than average economic and educational status of Muslims in the United States, Barack Obama also made it evident that this minority could on no account be viewed as posing a problem for the state on old-fashioned socio-economic grounds. In such ways as this Islam has managed to undo the inherited categories of American as much as international politics, since it refuses to be confined to the discourse of immigration, discrimination and deprivation, not least because Muslims in the US include a large proportion of local converts, Black and White, as much as immigrants from every part of the world.

But it was not violence that won full and equal rights .... That is not how moral authority is claimed; that is how it is surrendered.

Whether it is the struggle with radical Islam that is at issue, or that against global warming and atomic war, the international order’s inability to deal with such threats is both highlighted and hidden by the President of the United States, who can only speak to these issues in his personal capacity, which is to say as the product of a mixed marriage, the son of an African immigrant with a childhood spent in Indonesia, etc. And despite the entirely predictable statements of policy scattered in his Cairo speech, crumbs eagerly swept up by the press as providing the only recognizably “political” elements in an address that was otherwise puzzling in the inordinate length of its rhetorical flourishes, Obama’s only solution to these problems is also purely personal in nature. But this is where he is truly radical, as the following quotation on abjuring violence demonstrates: “Resistance through violence and killing is wrong and does not succeed. For centuries, black people in America suffered the lash of the whip as slaves and the humiliation of segregation. But it was not violence that won full and equal rights. It was a peaceful and determined insistence upon the ideals at the centre of America’s founding. This same story can be told by people from South Africa to South Asia; from Eastern Europe to Indonesia. It’s a story with a simple truth: violence is a dead end. It is a sign of neither courage nor power to shoot rockets at sleeping children, or to blow up old women on a bus. That is not how moral authority is claimed; that is how it is surrendered”.

TRANSLATIONS
Invoking the great movements against colonialism, segregation and apartheid led by Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, as well as the colour revolutions of Eastern Europe and the rejection of dictatorship in South-East Asia, the President not only re-drew the map of our political geography, by putting together Asian, African, American and European struggles, he also did so by foregoing the institutional jargon of our political tradition. For in all these cases non-violence meant breaking the law while being willing to take the consequences in acts of sacrifice, suffering and martyrdom. Furthermore non-violence here was conceived of in purely moral and individual terms, and precisely not political ones having to do with states. Indeed such movements have always appealed to ordinary people rather than institutions. As among its great spokesmen in the past, this kind of non-violence was also meant to foster a certain kind of moral subject instead of simply achieving some predetermined goal. And in all these ways it serves as the exact obverse of Osama bin Laden’s theory of violent sacrifice and martyrdom, addressing and refuting it on its own terms. This the Bush administration had never been able to do because, despite its rhetoric of ideological purity, it was deeply mired in the language of instrumental action and social engineering that has come to constitute the substance of realpolitik in a way that was previously true only of Soviet communism. But this is not the first time that a movement, neo-conservatism in this case, has ended up hijacked by the very opponent it has fought for so long.

When Barack Obama ended his speech saying that he had come to Cairo because he had faith in other people, he was doing nothing more than acknowledging the limits of political realism in the global arena where we all live. Since these limits were brought to light by Islamic militancy as a planetary movement divested of traditional institutional forms, the President could only address them by speaking from a standpoint that was set, as it were, outside his own office; thus the constant references to his race and background as entirely non-political factors. But by turning in the end to the language of faith, Obama proved himself to be the most Christian of American presidents, certainly more faithful to the possibility of human virtue than George W. Bush with all his religious supporters. Is it possible, then, that the appeal to Islam is at the same time a call to Christianity in the new world that confronts us today – the planetary dimension of whose problems have rendered so much of our interest-based politics obsolete?
THE END OF NEOLIBERALISM?

John Comaroff
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International capital immune from most legal challenge; corporates that continue to take profit withoutshouldering loss; governments that are business: If the Left thinks neoliberalism is dead, it’s time for a radical process of thought-decolonisation.

Marks, I believe, never the Twain did meet. I refer, of course, to Mark Twain, who, notwithstanding his towering literary legacy, has become an American cliché for his famous one-liner about untimely obituaries and deaths-prematurely-pronounced— in particular, the deaths of people who evince distinctly unconscious man’s wrist in his hand, puts his time—pressed to the wrong pulse, drawing our attention to lies prostrate? Or are our fingers.

The analogy is rich. Is neoliberalism dead? Or have our watches stopped? More to the point, are we watching for the right symptoms as Homo economicus capitalis lies prostrate? Or are our fingers pressed to the wrong pulse, drawing our attention to an entirely false unconsciousness, thus to mistake it for mortality? Pardon the play here. It is intended to underscore the deadly seriousness of the question.

That question has been posed in a number of ways. Here we are asked to reflect on whether neoliberalism has reached its “ultimate limits” – and with what implications for the future of politics, culture, the Left. Are we really witnessing the “demise of capitalism” as we currently know it? Interestingly, this last phrase, “the demise of capitalism”, appeared thrice in the op ed pages of the The Guardian in England on one day in late June 2009 – in each instance as a provocation, a call to make sense, more broadly, of the current moment in the unfolding history of capital.

Let me begin with a caveat. For all the fact that Jean Comaroff and I have written a great deal about neoliberalism, I am uncomfortable talking, in this conversation, about the term in its noun form. Why? Because, thus reified, it takes on the denotation of a concrete abstraction, an accomplished object, a totalizing ideological formation; even, in its temporal dimension, an epoch, one that may be deemed present or past. For me, the adjective, “neoliberal”, is much easier to grasp discursively and politically, since it may be taken to describe a tendency, a more-or-less realized, more-or-less articulated, unevenly distributed ensemble of attributes discernible in the world; in the active voice, as adverb, it connotes an aspiration, a species of practice, a process of becoming – however unbecoming that process may be to our eyes. It is on the basis of this understanding of “the neoliberal”, at once adjectival and adverbial, that I seek to parse the history of the present: In what measure have recent tendencies in that history run their course? Are they still with us? If so, in what proportions and in what guises? Or are we seeing unfold before us a tectonic shift of the long run?

My own reading, uncharacteristically, is cautious. It runs sharply against the grain of what is being whispered in some nooks and crannies of the Left in the US academy – of which, sadly, there is not much left. It also runs against my deepest well of political desire: I want to see millennial hope in this moment; I want to see radical change emerge from some of the more egregious contradictions of neoliberal capitalism come visibly home to roost; I want to see the so-called “masters of the universe” punished for their grotesque excesses, their self-serving, often venal practices, their structural crimes against humanity; I want, also, to see neocon scholar-ideologues, among them those of my Chicago colleagues who put the con in modern economics, finally having to admit to the error of their ways. There is also some grim satisfaction, having written about millennial capitalism a decade ago, in seeing the processes that we identified then coming to full fruition – although when life begins to imitate anthropology, know that the world really is in deep distress, that the faeces really have hit the air-conditioner. But desires and satisfactions are one thing, diagnostics quite another.

While the world economic crisis of 2008-9 might well kill off neoliberalism as a global ideological project – here, patently, in the noun form – it could well leave the capillaries of the beast, less Leviathan than Great White Shark, largely intact. Indeed, the “meltdown” and its aftermath may see the planet less, not more, open to alternatives to the neoliberal tendency – albeit with significant “corrections”, as some economists are already calling it. I am reminded here, simultaneously, of Reinhart Koselleck and
the Manchester School of Anthropology in Central Africa: Koselleck, because, in his study of the enlightenment and the pathogenesis of modern society, he drew attention to the dialectics of crisis, critique, and correction; the Manchester School, because it demonstrated the capacity of cycles of rupture and their repair to reproduce social systems and the order of values on which they are predicated (see, for example, Max Gluckman’s Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa and Victor Turner’s Schism and Continuity in an African Society). Crisis, self-evidently, is not always reproductive. But it frequently is. As Mike Davis noted in his much-quoted “Los Angeles after the Storm” (Antipode, 1995), “apocalypse” is often absorbed quickly into the history of the everyday, a process he describes as the “dialectic of ordinary disaster”.

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Already, as talk grows of “green shoots” sprouting in the wake of the economic devastation of the past year or so, there are signs of both: of both crisis-driven critique in pursuit of “correction”, and of a return to the “ordinary”. In the respect of the first, discourses of correction have come both from liberal and conservative sources. Thus, for example, the now-celebrated edition of Harper’s Magazine of November 2008, which bore a feature on “How to Save Capitalism: Fundamental Fixes for a Collapsing System”. In it, the likes of James Galbraith, Joseph Stiglitz, and others, most of them with impeccable liberal credentials, suggested a range of strategies by means of which to ensure that capitalism might re-emerge relatively unscathed. They prescribed such cures as reforming the tax system, banning stock options as incentives, bringing into line the self-interest of the banking sector with those of the economy and society at large, finding regulatory means to harness both the risk-laden excesses of the finance industry and the tendency to favor short-run profiteering over longer-term wealth production. Only one contributor to the debate, Eric Janszen – ironically, a venture capitalist – took a more radical line: he argued for a return to industrial capitalism, pointing out that all recent bubbles-and-busts are owed to government creating conditions for mammoth, “metastaz[ing]” markets in financial speculation.

Janszen apart, these efforts to “save capitalism” are symptomatic of a rush of similar liberal writings on the topic. Few of them – the notable exception being Gillian Tett’s extraordinary Fool’s Gold (2009) – delve very deeply into the archaeology of the crisis itself or, more generally, into the inner workings of a global political economy whose complexity has increased exponentially over the past couple of decades. As a result, most seek solutions along its outer surfaces. They posit adjustments that might limit the material excesses of the neoliberal tendency, and, in particular, the market instabilities and conflicts of interest to which those excesses give rise. This, itself, is a function of the pervasive practice of explaining all economic processes these days by recourse to one or another kind of utilitarian theory; which is why the four Causes of the Apocalypse, as John Lanchester has pointed out (The New Yorker, June 1, 2009), are almost invariably taken to be “greed, stupidity, government, and the banks”. Not anything in the structure of contemporary capitalism itself. The pursuit of explanations and panaceas in such terms, as we might expect, has its parallel on the right, most notably perhaps in Richard Posner’s A Failure of Capitalism, a salvo from the Halls of Friedmania. Note, not The Failure, definite article, but merely A Failure. Posner, predictably – and, in light of Tett’s account, spuriously – argues that individuals in the finance industry acted perfectly rationally in the years before the crisis. That crisis, in his view a fully-fledged “depression”, is blamed, as predictably, on bad government – and, much less predictably, on ill-considered, perfectible forms of deregulation. His “corrections”, though, belong to the same genus as those proffered by liberal economists: establish new forms of regulation that reduce the conflict between the rational self-interest of economic actors and the commonweal – the invisible old hand here, of course, being the economist of invisible hands, Adam Smith. In the final analysis, from this vantage, the point is to perfect free market economies by establishing the regulatory environment most conducive to a successfully deregulated world.

In the meantime – and this where the second thing, the “dialectic of the ordinary” becomes salient – for all the talk of the urgent need for “correction”, signs are that we are seeing a tangible return to business-as-usual, even bad-faith business. This is in spite of the fact that, without new forms of regulation, yet worse crises appear inevitable, in spite of worsening employment statistics, of rapidly rising poverty, and much more besides. The current buzz word in the City of London, in late June 2009, was “BAB”: “bonuses are back”. And, with them, the forms of finance capital from which they emanate. Listen to Jonathan Freedland, writing in The Guardian (June 24, 2009), also of Britain: “Nine months ago, the financial crisis seemed certain to bring a revolution in
our economy .... Change had to be on the way”. The ghost of Keynes was rising. But now “look what’s happened ... [Just] when the world seemed ready to bury the neoliberal regime ... we have returned to [its ways and means]”. With a vengeance.

The point is to perfect free market economies by establishing the regulatory environment most conducive to a successfully deregulated world.

In sum, despite the stream of assertions over the past year that the crisis would have deep transformative effects, putting an end to the “neoliberal regime”, most indicators suggest otherwise. For one thing, the massive infusions of money into the banking industry and mega-business on the part of national governments have occurred without any of the regulatory initiatives that were promised to follow. Yet again, public funds are being diverted into the private sector, underscoring the fact that capital continues to take its profits but not shoulder its concomitant losses; a curious denouement, this, to the rise of Ulrich Beck’s Risk Society. To be sure, state intervention into the economy is not currently pointed in the direction of a “New New Deal”, but away from it. It has been intended to “save” the corporate world, not secure civil society or ordinary citizens from the predations of the market; the pledge of measures might protect those citizens immiserated by the crash, never substantial to begin with, have gone largely unrealized. We are plainly not witnessing a return to social democracy, let alone the genesis of a new age of nationalization; note, in this respect, that many of the nation-states of the global north – the USA aside, due in major part to the singularity of the Obama “moment” – are moving (further) to the right. Which may be why there have been so few legislative enactments anywhere promulgated to curb the practices that sparked the meltdown in the first place: per contra, while market forces have made it harder to negotiate toxic assets and to take some of the more extravagant gambles in the business of finance, the investment industry is widely reported not merely to have returned to its old ways, but to be inventing new “products” without any palpable constraint. The derivatives trade, it seems, is rising again. So, too, are the ramparts around “economic liberalism”. A leader in The Economist on July 18, 2009, argues that, notwithstanding “the biggest economic calamity in 80 years ... the free-market paradigm ... deserves a robust defense”.

Nor are these the only signs that the capillaries of the neoliberal tendency, and the “free-market paradigm”, continue to embrace us. There are many others. Some are obvious, like the continuing dominance of the corporate sector: its relative immunity from most legal challenge, even when its enterprises violate the being, bodies, belongings, or bio-environment of ordinary citizens; its enjoyment of favorable taxation regimes and, increasingly, the use of laws of eminent domain to expand its horizons; the protection of its physical, financial, and intellectual property, sometimes by recourse to police violence, as an ostensible function of the collective good; its capacity to influence the disposition of the public treasury and public policy and, reciprocally, to have insurgent action directed against it prosecuted as common crime – like, for example, in mass protests against the privatization of such “natural” assets as water and land. Other signs are less obvious, like the growing hegemony of legal orders, founded on constitutions of distinctly neoliberal design, that favour individual rights over collective well-being; that limit the responsibility of government to protect or provision its citizens; that tend to criminalize race, poverty, and counter-politics, in part by outlawing the salience of social cause or consequence; that subject what were once everyday democratic processes to the finality of judicial action, thereby juridifying politics to the exclusion of other forms of social action; that displace the “hot” sovereignty of the people into the “cold” sovereignty of the law; that treat all citizens as rational, self-interested, rights-bearing actors – and the world as a community of contract. (For more on neoliberal constitutionalism, see, for example, David Schneiderman’s “Constitutional Approaches to Privatization: An Inquiry into the Magnitude of Neo-Liberal Constitutionalism”, in the journal Law and Contemporary Problems, 2000; also the introduction to Law and Disorder in the Postcolony, Jean and John Comaroff.)

I could go on in this vein. To do so, however, would be to risk stating the obvious. But allow me one observation. Perhaps the most significant capillaries of the neoliberal that remain with us have to do with the state and governance. Foucauldians would prefer “governmentality” here; they have a point. Broadly speaking, neoliberal etatism seems to be surviving well, even strengthening, in most places. As Foucault himself explained in The Birth of Biopolitics, the rise of neoliberalism – his use of the noun – marked a radical transformation: whereas before the state, amongst its various bureaucratic operations, “monitored” the workings of the economy, its “organizing principle” is now the market. Government actually has become business. And nation-states have become holding companies in and
for themselves. In the upshot, the categorical distinction between politics and economics, that classical liberal fiction, is largely erased. Effective governance, in turn, is measured with reference to asset management, to the attraction of enterprise, to the facilitation of the entrepreneurial activities of the citizen as *homo economicus*, and to the capacity to foster the accumulation (but not the redistribution) of wealth.

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Under these conditions, heads of state begin to resemble, and often actually are, CEOs who treat the population as a body of shareholders; *vide* Silvio Berlusconi, who explicitly speaks of Italy as a company, or Dmitri Medvedev, head of Gazprom, Russia’s mightiest business and a major instrument of its foreign policy. There is a more profound point here. Once upon a time, anti-neoliberal theory posited an opposition between state and the free market, arguing that the antidote to the latter lay in the active intervention of the former. But the opposition is false, just another piece of the detritus of the modern history of capital. As states become megacorporations (Kremlin, Inc.; Britain, PLC; South Africa, Pty Ltd.; Dubai, Inc.) all of them, incidentally, branded and legally incorporated – they become inextricably part of the workings of the market and, hence, no longer an “outside”, an antidote or an antithesis, from which to rethink or reconstruct “the neoliberal paradigm”. Which, in part, is why government is increasingly reduced to an exercise in the technical management of capital, why ideologically-founded politics appear dead, replaced by the politics of interest and entitlement and identity, three counterpoints of a single triangle. And why the capillaries of neoliberal governance seem so firmly entrenched in the cartography of our everyday lives, there to remain for the foreseeable future. To the degree that any future is foreseeable.

None of this is to suggest that neoliberal economics will persist unchanged. It is quite possible that we will see some minor re-regulation of the finance industry, especially in favor of long-term wealth-generation against short-term profiteering; marginally greater citizen protection against the cons of corporate world, particular in the domain of credit; adjustments to regimes of taxation; and further state intervention into the market under the guise of public-private initiatives. Anything more? Hard to say. But it is not highly likely. Not unless a counter-politics, a praxis of deep insurgency, impels us toward a history of the future distinctly different from the one we are living in the continuous present. Only time will tell whether, and whence, that might arise.

In this respect, a final thought.

History has taught us repeatedly to be humble before it, a lesson as apposite today as it has ever been. If we are to seek out possible alternatives to the neoliberal tendency, if we are to fashion other futures, it is critical to grasp fully the nature of the beast, of its capillaries and their effects not just on our lives but on our thought processes. After all, those forces covered by the adjective “neoliberal”, not to mention its adverbs of practice, are no less colonizing than the forms of empire to which the global south has been subjected before now. As Frantz Fanon might have insisted, decolonizing our habits of thinking – sometimes by a violent reconsideration of its most foundational assumptions – is the first step to decolonizing the world into which history has interpolated us.

*This piece was originally drafted as an opening comment for a roundtable discussion at the Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism on “The End of Neoliberalism? What is Left of the Left?” The division of labor among the speakers allocated to me the propositional question, “The End of Neoliberalism?” The other speakers undertook to discuss the future of the left and the application of the question/s to contemporary South Africa. JLC*
THAT MELANCHOLIC OBJECT OF DESIRE: WORK AND OFFICIAL DISCOURSE BEFORE AND AFTER POLOKWANE

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Where is the dignity in what work? Franco Barchiesi examines the impossible disconnect between official discourses valorizing work as the precondition for social inclusion and citizenship, and the frail, exploitative, precarious reality of waged employment.

In its simultaneous move towards political liberation and economic liberalization South Africa is facing a peculiar paradox: the more waged employment becomes a frail, exploitative, precarious reality for workers directly involved in it, the more central waged employment becomes in the views of social inclusion and citizenship advanced by the left, the labour movement and the government.

South Africa’s crisis of wage employment, in fact, is not just a matter of joblessness. Two thirds of waged workers can be categorized as “working poor”, according to Miriam Altman’s 2007 report for the Human Sciences Research Council: job creation tends to be more and more pronounced in casual, informal, unstable occupations. The share of wages on the national income is now at its lowest level since 1960, and the share of profits is at its highest (these South African Reserve Bank statistics are quoted in the 2008 Bargaining Indicators of the Labour Research Service). Since 1990 there has been a particularly steep redistribution of resources from wages to profits.

Precariousness is not, of course, a new reality for the majority of South African workers. It has rather been the ordinary way in which black workers have experienced the labour market for much of South Africa’s history as a capitalist society, especially under conditions of racial segregation, managerial despotism, coercive migration and contract work.

To this the union movement, especially from the 1970s on, opposed a redemptive image of waged work to address the indignities and vulnerabilities of the past and place waged employment and labour rights at the core of the social citizenship provisions seen as a necessary complement of a new democracy. The rhetoric of anti-apartheid struggles saw the formally employed as a major, if not the main, protagonist of liberation. At the same time, however, post-1973 labour movements did not merely accept to confine their claims to the workplace, or to what was deemed feasible by productivity requirements. Labour struggles in fact combined ambitions of redemption of wage labour with powerful themes like the living wage and decommodification, that is, access to universal social provisions (welfare, retirement, housing, health care) funded through redistributive policies. At the dawn of democracy, the rights and entitlements workers had won seemed to announce a new generation of social rights for employed and unemployed alike, and throughout the life course.

It could be questioned, nonetheless, to what extent organized labour’s triumphs, and its official discourse glorifying the formal working class resonated in the lives of the majority of the working class that was not in formal employment, or of those living in impoverished rural areas. The trade unions’ heroic imagery of work also replaced a long, glorious history of African resistance to working for wages, which played a decisive role in social struggles in South Africa as well as in the rest of the continent. Far from seeing formal employment as the necessary ingredient of oppositional consciousness, and precarious jobs as a reality of disempowerment, African workers have often chosen to be casual and “precarious” as this enabled them to resist capitalist work discipline and manage multiple modes of subsistence. For references one can look at Fred Cooper’s discussion of dockworkers in colonial Mombasa and their defiant attachment to casual work in response to the colonial state’s attempt to turn them into waged workers; or Paul Lubeck’s discussion of the “gardawas” in independent Northern Nigeria, itinerant preachers with a strong working class identity but rooted in casual work to which they tenaciously clung as permanent wage employment would have undermined their religious practices and violated their spiritual integrity; or, closer to South Africa, Hoyt Alverson’s discussion of how Tswana migrants distinguished between tiro (work as purposeful human activity producing meaningful social interactions) and mmereko (alienated wage labour whose meaning Tswana workers saw “as the very opposite of ‘doing’”).
African workers have largely resisted capitalism by refusing to become waged working classes, rather than by seeing wage labour as the vehicle of their desire for liberation. A rich tradition of refusal of work surfaces time and again in South Africa as well, a theme emphasized by Yann Moulier-Boutang’s comparative analysis of proletarianization and in some early work by Deborah Posel. Governmental and expert discourse recursively resonated with such themes, during and after apartheid: The 1962 Botha Commission complained of the “work-shyness” of township youth; the 1979 Rieker Commission noted with concern that employers were “forced” to recruit migrant workers from the homelands as township youth refused factory jobs; a 2007 report on the “state of entrepreneurship in South Africa” by the University of Cape Town’s Unilever institute, finally, raised the alarm that African workforce entrants prefer social grants to work. But this tradition of subversion of waged work was somehow missed in 1970s and 1980s trade unions’ view of a working class essentially defined by its permanent location in capitalist production, which later provided crucial impetus to the ANC-led liberation movement in what scholars such as Gay Seidman and Eddie Webster have termed “social movement unionism”.

The 1990s conjunction of liberation and liberalization emphasized, however, the limitation of earlier redemptive discourses of waged work. As work proved clearly unable to guarantee decent life and meaningful social citizenship for the vast majority of those directly employed, let alone for society at large, waged employment and decommodified social provisions were no longer seen by the ANC – now in power – as complementary, but as mutually excluding. Social programs were intended for specific categories of vulnerability and claims (children, the elderly, the disabled) and the government fiercely opposed any idea of universal, non-work related redistributive program, as seen in the, by now defunct, debates on the Basic Income Grant. In line with Western emphases on “welfare reform”, work, and work only, was supposed to be the vehicle of social inclusion for the “working age able-bodied”.

As the government’s emphasis on waged employment justified the limitation of redistributive programs, the Left and trade unions remained, nonetheless, stuck in an imagination that glorified wage labour as the cumulatively, linearly, mechanically necessary vehicle of advanced forms of solidarity, consciousness, and citizenship. Marxist or Marxian arguments in this case did not, singularly, echo Marx’s own deeply felt horror at wage labour, which Marx evoked in dramatic images of the “stocks, whips and gallows” (Grundrisse) initially required to turn human beings into working classes before the “labour market” could take its normal course.

At the same time we are witnessing a further paradox: poverty levels in South Africa are such that social grants initially intended as a means-tested and selective to cover specific conditions (Child Support Grant, Old Age Pensions, disability grants) ended up being claimed by a large share of the population: social grants are now claimed by almost 13 million people, one quarter of all South Africans, 2.5 times the number of people paying income taxes.

On one hand, this should caution those, like Patrick Bond and Naomi Klein, who see post-apartheid South Africa as a textbook case of take-no-prisoner neoliberalism, akin to Pinochet’s Chile. Neoliberal governments, in fact, usually don’t put 25% of their population on non-contributory social grants.

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But the current situation, on the other hand, hardly confirms Jeremy Seekings’ and Nicoli Nattrass’ view of South Africa as an “exceptionally generous” social welfare system, a sort of Scandinavia of the southern hemisphere. More useful would be rather to see social grants as a specific biopolitical intervention. Taken individually, they are in fact so meagre that even receiving more than one in a single household is no guarantee of a life out of poverty. Not destitute, but not even “included” as the dominant parlance of the day would want them, households relying on social grants are compelled to see in the labour market, in whatever low-wage, insecure, exploitative job available out there, their only hope of salvation. The 2002 Taylor Committee put it clearly: it saw social grants, even a possible Basic Income Grant, which it
supported, as inducements for productive economic activity, not as an alternative to depending on the labour market. By making its target population active and ready for low-wage employment, the South African system of social grants has therefore the effect of generalizing, institutionalizing, and perpetuating social precariousness.

Throughout these processes, powerful imaginative and ideological forces were at work, which cannot be merely reduced to the impact of globalization or, as many in the disappointed left want it, to the ANC’s neoliberal “sell-out”. Rather, as Mark Gevisser shows in his biography of Thabo Mbeki, political liberation happened at the culmination of a very long process of resignification of one of the ANC’s historically cherished themes, that of self-reliance. Once used to define social formations and practices essentially averse to working for wages (peasant agriculture, cooperative production), the idea of self-reliance came increasingly to praise, in the ANC’s discourse, access to waged employment, a line the left endorsed as the working class was finally recognized as the driving force of the “national democratic revolution”. The more recent neoliberal vicissitudes of the ANC in power only confirmed the centrality of waged work in its imagination of the democratic social order. This time, however, such a centrality meant a value that precedes and stands above market exchange. In South African official discourse, instead, the labour market and the wage relation stand simultaneously as measure and reward of human dignity.

Whereby past proletarian struggles had actively subverted waged work, both through direct refusal or through workers’ unwillingness to confine their claims to productivity requirements, a powerful disciplinary narrative has now emerged to celebrate the “dignity of work” as a disciplinary construct that marginalizes, stigmatizes and criminalizes specific social categories identified as disruptive of wage labour discipline. Now “dignity of work” is a commonly used term in ANC parlance, but the term is of straightforward colonial origins. The first time I have found it used is in Cecil Rhodes’ endorsement of the Glen Grey Act of 1894. Under pre-apartheid segregation governments it was part of what Saul Dubow terms a “South Africanist” ideological discourse where, through hard work for wages, the “native” could become a modern “worker”, possibly even a “citizen”. Under apartheid there was of course no talk of equal citizenship for the “natives”, but the National Party government praised work discipline over resource redistribution for whites and blacks alike. As a normative construct, the imperative to work operated across the board. The South African state imagination of work, before and after 1994, reversed Immanuel Kant’s line that “every thing has either a price or a dignity”, where by dignity he meant a value that precedes and stands above market exchange. In South African official discourse, instead, the labour market and the wage relation stand simultaneously as measure and reward of human dignity.

After apartheid, the revived parlance of “dignity of work” and individual labour market initiative also, as Ivor Chipkin shows in his book *Do South Africans Exist?*, came to depict a virtuous condition of active citizenship rightfully enabling the full, practical enjoyment of formal, on-paper constitutional rights. As work becomes the normative premise of virtuous citizenship, it provides an epistemic device with which South African society can be “known” as an objective, socially ascertainable hierarchy ordered according to the seemingly natural, immutable laws of the labour market. (This view is clearly expressed in Thabo Mbeki’s “two economies” scenario.) At the pinnacle of such a hierarchical order stands a, by now largely imaginary, patriotic, respectable, hard working, socially moderate, conflict-averse, de-racialized worker as the virtuous citizen of democratic South Africa. Precisely as a creation of official imagination, however, such a subject indicates the practical conducts the poor have to follow, as workers-in-waiting, on their path to actual citizenship: avoid complaining, stay away from social conflicts, and actively seek the “employment opportunities” available in poverty-wage schemes of mass precariousness like the Expanded Public Works Programme. A work-centered citizenship discourse also marginalizes and stigmatizes the, conversely, all too real subjectivities that try to navigate their way in conditions of precariousness, social duress, and the systematic violence of market relations: yesterday it was “work-shy” township youth, women devoted to “immoral” activities, peasants recalcitrant to the market; today is the “tsotsi” element, the “girls” claiming child support grants, and those who “illegally” reconnect water and electricity.

**What is Left of the Left?**
African citizenship discourse that in no way most experiences of work resemble the exalted social condition imagined in governmental pronouncements. What matters is that, by making social conditions, if not what it means to be human, orbit around labour market participation, the citizens of democratic South Africa are educated to position themselves within prevailing social and economic power relations.

In the interviews with workers I have conducted, wage labour clearly emerges as a place of insecurity, exploitation, unfair and racialized treatment, and inadequacy in relation to household needs. More than that, it is a reality of, as Felix Guattari called it, “systematic endangering”, or continuous exposure to unpredictable, potentially catastrophic labour market contingencies. As wage labour’s early promise of liberation and redemption went unfulfilled, workers tended to characterize waged employment as a place that they have to endure, but from which they would happily escape. Escape could be either material or symbolic, most often a combination of both. Sometimes it has to do with fantasies of self-entrepreneurship, often nurtured in the ascending religious language of individual empowerment of born-again Christianity. In this regard, workers may even be available to accept layoffs to cash benefits and buy a bakkie for a transport business, or the tools for a small electric repair shop, even if such money most often goes into the repayment of debts and school fees. Sometimes respondents idealize rural life – despite the grinding poverty many of their relatives’ experience in rural areas – as a symbolic, desirable counterbalance to the chaos and unpredictability of the city as regular employment and male “breadwinning” authority decline and collapse. Ruralism becomes therefore an imagined space where masculine power and age authority continue to structure social life. Another theme surfacing in my interviews are xenophobic feelings of blaming non-South African migrants’ acceptance of low-wage jobs as responsible for turning work from “what it is supposed to be” to “what it is”.

Yet, even if they see their actual jobs as “elsewhere” from what they would consider a dignified life, most respondents remain attached to work and “job creation” as the solution to the country’s social problems. Such apparent paradox is reflected in their approach to the ANC, seen simultaneously as cause of the current social crisis and the imagined deliverer from it.

It would, however, be wrong to conclude that, as many conservative commentators and government consultants try to reassure us, despite all odds all South Africa’s poor want is “work, not handouts”. When I probed the meanings of “work” in workers’ discourse of “job creation”, I found that it is not “work” as a mere economic transaction that such narratives are primarily about, and surely not about the work such workers actually have. They are rather about a whole imagined social order ideally premised on an equally imagined idea of respectable work. Work regains its centrality in these narratives not so much for its economic importance, but as the repository of an imaginary that tries to find validation by harking back to the state’s and the unions’ work-centered citizenship discourse. As such, it tends to be a conservative workers’ imaginary too: for most of my respondents, images of decent work, what is left of past promises of redemption of wage labour, are deeply linked with ideas of family respectability, strict gendered division of household tasks, masculine power and national purity, where “disrespectful”, crime-prone youth are kept out of the streets and under control, women are confined to domesticity, reproduction and care, and migrants don’t “steal” national jobs.

If actual work is a place to escape from, such an escape is, however, expressed, in the absence of a political alternative to the hegemonic work-centered citizenship discourse, in conservative, when not overtly reactionary and authoritarian forms of what I call worker melancholia. Contrary to the nostalgic, who yearns for an idealized past, the melancholic yearns for the imagined yet unrealized possibilities. As Ranjana Khanna defines it: “Melancholia is not only a crippling attachment to a past that acts like a drain of energy on the present .... Rather, the melan-
cholic’s critical agency, and its peculiar temporality that drags it back and forth at the same time, acts towards the future”.

What I identify as the emerging politics of worker melancholia provides some insights into the rise of Jacob Zuma and the post-Polokwane phase of ANC rule. Zuma’s rise has a lot to do with the country’s crisis of waged employment, manifested in organized labour’s resentment at Mbeki’s betrayal of the democratic promise of working class power and proletarian redemption. Zuma’s self-consciously masculine persona and his message of family values, social discipline, subservient womanhood, toughness on crime, and border control respond to the anxieties generated by employment precariousness by abetting the melancholic fantasies of a working class embittered by decades of disappointments and by the inadequacies of its putative political representatives. Under such conditions, the continuous glorification of work as the foundation of citizenship is at serious risk of contributing to an authoritarian, chauvinist social order presiding over the continuous brutality of the market.

Three lessons emerge from this discussion. First, precariousness of work is not just produced by labour market dynamics but by the intersection of wage labour transformations, institutional dynamics and official imagination. Claus Offe puts it nicely in defining precariousness as “harmful unpredictability” arising from a condition where work declines as a foundation for a decent, meaningful life and yet it is maintained by the state’s policy discourse as the foundation of the social order. Second, precariousness is not, however, just a condition of domination and disempowerment, but can also open spaces to imagine strategies of liberation from the compulsion to work for wages. The history of proletarian struggles in South Africa and Africa shows that the crises of waged work are the result not only of the unfettered power of capital but also of everyday strategies of refusal, confirming indeed Mario Tronti’s point that “wage labour is the provider of capital; the refusal of wage labour means the destruction of capital”. Finally, social research needs to move beyond a purely normative understanding of citizenship as a desirable ideal of “inclusion” and focus instead on the paradoxes, contradictions and quandaries of what Cruikshank terms citizenship as a “technology” of empowerment based on specific disciplining of conducts and hierarchical stratifications where divides between inclusion and exclusion become blurred and uncertain.

Gilles Deleuze wrote: “If you get caught in someone else’s dreams, you are lost”. Over and over again, before, during, and after apartheid, South Africa’s poor have been caught in the State’s unsettling biopolitical dream of ordering populations according to the hierarchies defined by a labour market that can enable decent lives only for a small minority. To avoid getting lost in the rulers’ dream, maybe it is time, in these crepuscular times of decline of neoliberalism, for everyday desires recalcitrant to wage labour no longer to be seen as harbingers of chaos and ungovernability but as constitutive elements of a new grammar of autonomy and liberation.

This article was first presented at the 2009 Congress of the South African Sociological Association, and the Johannesburg Workshop for Theory and Criticism. Its content is included in a book manuscript on workers, the state, and the contested imagination of social citizenship in postapartheid South Africa.
THE FUTURE(S) OF (COLONIAL) NOSTALGIA OR RUMINATIONS ON RUINS

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Why is there a global boom in colonial nostalgia? And what, exactly, is it about colonialism that we are nostalgic for? Pamila Gupta ruminates on the possibilities nostalgia might offer for a future-oriented politics, utopian or otherwise.

Nostalgia (from nostos—return home and algia—longing)

A four hundred and fifty year old decaying corpse of a Roman Catholic missionary-turned-saint lies in Goa, India (a former Portuguese colony from 1510-1961), its future uncertain. What is the future postcoloniality of a colonial corpse? Should it be quietly buried in the face of its increasing material fragility, as the Jesuits who proclaim his corpse as (one of) theirs suggest time and time again? Or should it be propped up as it is every ten years for his Exposition (1964, 1974, 1984, 1994, 2004), during which Catholic pilgrims (local and diasporic), Goans, and international tourists flock to Goa? Or rather, does the holy body of St. Francis Xavier merely serve as an archaic reminder of the anachronistic history of the Estado da Índia, including its increasing relic status over time? Is there such a thing as a future to colonial nostalgia, and should it be sustained by such ritualized events as this one? What is the future of valorizing, sentimentalizing, or indulging the colonial past? And are we becoming even more nostalgic about colonialism the further we are historically from its demise (and particularly to the peculiar lateness of Portuguese decolonization, my area of interest)?

What is the future postcoloniality of a colonial corpse?

If in fact there is a striking “boom in colonial nostalgia” the world over, as Richard Werbner suggests in the 1998 volume Memory and the Postcolony, then what does this suggest about the troubled times we live in now? And what is it about colonialism that we are nostalgic for exactly? Is it merely its materiality, its ability to be consumed via objects, manifest in design, décor, and dress (a lâ colonial chic as Bissell reveals in his 2005 article in the journal Cultural Anthropology)? Or does its nostalgic power rest elsewhere, in its remembered (or rather forgotten) way of life in the past (its “order” and “rules” as opposed to the “chaos” of today), as I have heard lamented (by many a Goan) on many an occasion. Such expressions, however unsettling they may be, need to be reckoned with, not simply in relation to “poor” or “fictitious” history but rather, as Bissell argues, “as a social practice that mobilizes various signs of the past (colonial and otherwise) in the context of contemporary struggles”. Finally, how much can we think of nostalgia as a cultural practice operating in historical time, as depending on “where the speaker stands in the landscape of the present”, as Kathleen Stewart puts it. I want to use this case study to open up a critical space to think about future tenses of nostalgia (including its different discourses, not only colonial), the power of material ruins for invoking nostalgia, and for conceptualizing nostalgia as an affect with political potentialities. What follows are a few ruminations on these topics.

As Svetlana Boym notes in The Future of Nostalgia, “It would not occur to us to demand a prescription for nostalgia. Yet in the seventeenth century, nostalgia was considered to be a curable disease, akin to the common cold. Swiss doctors believed
that opium, leeches and a journey to the Swiss Alps would take care of nostalgic symptoms. By the twenty-first century, the passing ailment turned into the incurable modern condition. The twentieth century began with a futuristic utopia and ended with nostalgia. Optimistic belief in the future was discarded like an outmoded spaceship sometime in the 1960s. Nostalgia itself has a utopian dimension, only it is no longer directed toward the future. Sometimes nostalgia is not directed toward the past either, but rather sideways. The nostalgic feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space.”

Can we take Boym’s ruminations on nostalgia as a starting point for thinking through, around (and perhaps even sideways) its relation to utopian futures? In other words, where do we locate nostalgia, not only temporally and spatially, but historically as well, and can we think through this analytic more thoroughly? Is nostalgia wholly produced in relation to the past, or is there, a theory of the future implicit in each evocation of nostalgia? Do we, in fact, only turn to nostalgia when the future (and by implication, the present) looks increasingly bleak, as if a return to or a revisiting of the past from this particular perspective of longing, loss or desire will somehow stand in for or at least explain how we got to this future point? And, finally, if nostalgia is the “incurable modern condition” then what does this say about the moment we live in here and now? And what does it say about the power of nostalgia to make us perceive the future in such stark terms? Are we then becoming increasingly more nostalgic (for what we perceive as what was) as we experience the long-ness of the twenty first century ahead of us?

As Susan Buck-Morss argues in her book Dreamworld and Catastrophe: “We would do well to bring the ruins up close and work our way through the rubble in order to rescue the utopian hopes that modernity engendered, because we cannot afford to let them disappear.”

Next I want to explore why ruins are so evocative of the nostalgic. In what ways do the material ruins (of not only colonialism, but also socialism, and communism) occupy particular temporal and spatial matrices today (as sites of pilgrimage, commemoration, memorialization, heritage tourism, and/or aesthetic wonderment) that in turn, help us to reconcile and/or recover our senses of self in relation to larger pasts, presents, and futures? And what can ruins tell us about the power of nostalgia as a tool for forgetting (rather than remembering) the conditions of possibility of history? I also want to ask whose forgetting exactly is taking place in the process of contemplating (colonial) ruins: can nostalgia then be understood as a form of both collective (national) and individual amnesia? As a sign of excess for some and not for others? Is there ever a theological (or existential for that matter) element to nostalgia? Finally, if we take up the call to work through the rubble of ruins that continue to pile up around us, then perhaps we can think about nostalgia more closely in relation to possible futures.
Lastly, I want to pose a question that came up in the Future Tense study group based at WISER in 2008: whether engagement in nostalgia is a conservative or liberatory exercise? In other words, how can we understand nostalgia in relation to (utopian) politics? And more specifically, how can we understand it in relation to thinking through the (radical) politics of the future and future futurisms? If nostalgia (for something lost) produces utopian longings (for change, for hope, for possibility), can we think about this (ordinary) affect as a catalyst for individual and collective action that is not always reductively conservative (war, genocide, xenophobia), but rather as potentially liberatory through its articulation of the sensory, the sublime, and the sloppily sentimental, all at once? And as Morss notes, through its ability to “surprise” the present rather than explain it? If radicality “lies in the constant effort to keep things open”, as Achille Mbembe puts it, can nostalgia serve as the (future) basis for political organization, agency, peace, justice, reason, and love?

This article was first published in French as, “Le futur de la nostalgie, ou ruminations sur les ruines,” in Écologie & Politique, 37: 2008, 87-90. I thank Estienne Rodary for taking an interest in my writings on this topic, and for his thoughtful translation.
Lakshmi Subramanian relates the pleasures of going down with archival fever in South Africa.

*Dust* by Carolyn Steedman, captured for many of us the magic and ineffability of working in archives – a place where senses and sensibilities were unexpectedly aroused – when one suddenly experienced a sense of euphoria when documents seemed to jump up to demonstrate exactly the story that you were conjuring up unconsciously. As a practicing historian who was trained in the best tradition of empirical research which taught you to invest in the archive the definitive, magisterial voice that thereafter guided you through the labyrinth of confusion and theoretical formulation, I was used to working the archive, and in the archives, and lamenting its limits, all simultaneously. No one archive was the same – despite the ordering principle that structured its contents and their arrangement – the idiosyncrasies of location always ensured that as a user you ran into the unexpected that was not always easy to circumvent. Working out of India you could not always be certain that the documents you wanted were there: the rationale of space and authority dealt with paper, dead paper at that, in a manner that you could not always comprehend. On the other hand, you also stood a fair chance of encountering that bibliophile clerk who knew every document and who gave you access to his private knowledge in a way that no public index could.

Consequently, as I came to work in the archives in South Africa, I was not entirely sure of what to expect. My confusion was worse confounded as I debated with colleagues and friends about methodology, the difficulties of working with testimonies and oral depositions, and the challenges thrown to methodological issues by politics and academic concerns in a post apartheid era. My own research interests remained strongly grounded within the first half of the twentieth century and Indian journalistic initiatives, and I was fairly confident that I would be able to access more than what I needed for the moment.

My confidence was partly bolstered by the splendid on-line catalogue that was available, but what made the experience even more memorable was the attitude of the archival staff. Not only did they respond to emails, they were especially prompt in giving you what you wanted and at extraordinary reasonable rates.

The novelty of such an interactive attitude got me thinking and I went back to the mission statement that accompanied the setting up of the National Archives and Record Services of South Africa in 1996. As I had come to expect by now, the mission statement was framed competently, but more impressive was its conceptual amplification, namely, that in its intention to preserve a national archival heritage resource for use by the government and its citizen subjects, was a recognition of the actual importance of allowing an individual and a collective social memory to be made available as best as possible. A postscript to that was ensuring wide and extensive accessibility to all – a feature that made my visit to the archives (and I visited and worked in several) more than just productive but intellectually and socially engaging. As I worked along with other researchers...
– some working on their doctoral theses, others retrieving their family histories – the sense that here was a space that mattered was palpable, leaving me to recall Michel Foucault’s musings on the magical qualities of archives, their ability to function as a reflection that shows us quite simply, and in shadows, what all those in the foreground are looking at.

I am happy to have had this intimate experience – to have been once more a patient of archival fever, and particularly to have experienced it in South Africa.
‘What do you want here?’
‘The white man whose power you know too well has ordered this meeting to stop.’

In a flash Okokwo drew his matchet. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okokwo’s matchet descended twice and the man’s head lay beside his uniformed body.

The waiting backcloth jumped into tumultuous life and the meeting stopped. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in the tumult. He heard voices asking: ‘Why did he do it?’

He wiped his matchet on the sand and went away.

The salience of this momentous event is not so much in the evidence it provides of Okokwo’s final severance from his society, as in the peculiar contrast suggested in his “knowing” that the tribe will not go to war that is set against their bewildered question: ‘Why did he do it?’ The question itself marks the distance that the tribe has travelled from the unshakeable certainties of its own belief system to a sense of confusion about what constitutes a heroic action. The descent of Okonkwo’s matchet represents the uncanny moment when the affirmation of the warrior ethic for which he has clearly been rewarded throughout his life is counterpoised to the disclosure that his clan’s mórës have undergone a subtle yet significant change from what he had assumed them to have been before. He had been in exile for seven years, and in the interim many things had changed. The contrast between his knowledge and their bewilderment amounts in the final instance to the difference between what may be described in a Aristotelian terms as the tragic protagonist’s moment of recognition (anagnorisis) and the unbearable collective impasse of understanding for a society that has suddenly been called upon to bear reluctant witness to their hero’s error of judgment. If the hero’s recognition is deeply personal it is equally and precisely balanced against the epistemological impasse and communal burden that his act announces for the people. The pregnant moment also serves to focalize in miniaturized form the entire process by which the community of Umoufia expresses ambiguity with regard to its own past. In the past conveyed in the novel the messenger’s decapitation could have meant only one thing, namely, a call to arms against the disrespectful invading culture of the colonizer. Now, however, the military heroic ethic is subject to doubt at the very least if not disavowal. It is to Achebe’s credit that he bifurcates the response to the decapitation, thus making it impossible even for us readers to settle on an easy conclusion.

The ambiguity of response to the past, whether collective or personal, is a key marker of modernity and is represented thematically in European literature particularly prominently from the late 19th century onwards. When Eliot Prufrock laments that he has “measured out his life in coffee spoons” the coffee spoons also serve as a symbol of the transitive measures by which the banal ritual accoutrements of bourgeois life are connected to his growing sense of inauthenticity. To describe the coffee spoons as transitive measures is to borrow something from the study of the grammatical features of language. Whereas the verbs to “lie”, or “sleep”, or “laugh” require no object, the verbs to “kick” or “eat”, or “hold”...
do require an object for the completion of the trajectory of action which they describe. Prufrock’s coffee spoons are no ordinary metonyms for the long-established teatime rituals well-known to commentators on English social life. Rather, in the poem they represent instruments both of measurement and of the relation between the transitory and the profound. They link uneasy recognition with wry sentiment. For despite his desire to ‘push the moment to its crisis’ Prufrock also recognizes the inescapable compromise wrought by his thorough assimilation to the rituals of the social group he ponders unsettling. In this existential conundrum he joins a long tradition in Western literature, marked pre-eminently by Shakespeare’s Hamlet and followed by memorable characters in Ibsen, Chekov, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Conrad Beckett, and several others for whom the possibility of authentic action is usurped by the surrounding banality of the social lifeworld.

[Prufrock’s] coffee spoons also serve as a symbol of the transitive measures by which the banal ritual accoutrements of bourgeois life are connected to his growing sense of inauthenticity.

Dread, boredom, alienation, absurdity, nothingness, and dissolusion are conventionally taken as central to existentialist writing. Prufrock’s enervating malaise and Hedda Gabler’s anguished boredom find their counterparts within African literature in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, Wole Soyinka’s *Season of Anomy*, Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *A Grain of Wheat*, Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*, Nagib Mahfouz’s *Midaq Alley*, Cheik Hamidou Kane’s *Ambiguous Adventure*, Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, Dambudzo Marechera’s *The House of Hunger*, Yvonne Vera’s *Without a Name*, and in almost every novel written by J M Coetzee. And yet it is the implications of the ambiguation of attitudes towards the past that give us the best entry into the problematic of existentialism for African literary writing. In this literature the problematic response to the past and to history is to be discerned at three interrelated levels.

First is what is represented as pertaining to the transition between one historical phase and another. The transition is often taken to proliferate gaps in understanding and to generate problems of interpretation regarding the status of the past and its significance for the present.

Second is the ambivalence that comes to bear upon the status of moral judgment and how this relates to action, whether of an epic or quotidian kind. Whereas moral judgment may in the past have appeared apposite and the epic code secure, the process of transition progressively puts these in serious doubt in the minds of individuals and of entire communities. The effect of the collective or individual ambivalence is that it renders the underlying cultural codes no longer entirely relevant to ideas of self-fashioning. They are also criticized as ultimately subserving the interests of a self-serving elite or ruling class. Other sites and cultural modalities seem equally pertinent to moral judgment and heroic action, and the apparent attractiveness of contrasting models of praxis engenders confusion in the minds of those contemplating any form of pursuit, from war, to marriage, to even falling in love.

The third aspect of the response to the past lies exclusively within the consciousness of the individual, where the uncertainty with respect to the past must be felt first and foremost as a problem for the constitution of an authentic self. Often the problem of authentic self-constitution lies at an interface with the broader question of narrative, that is, with the terms and instruments available for the narration of a coherent account within which the self and its relationship to its social interlocutors may be understood. The impossibility of separating truth from falsehood and action from moral judgment is then seen as interposing insurmountable questions in the mind of the individual.

It is only when all three aspects come together – epistemological impasse or gaps in understanding, the historical ambiguity that engenders ambivalence, and the crisis in individual consciousness – that a text can truly be said to be representing a thematic of existentialism. Much has been said in studies of Africa about the crises that the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial and from the rural to the urban have provoked for its populations, yet the precise ways in which such transitions divulge elements of existentialism (as opposed to say crises of social adjustment) has not been much attended to.

It would be a mistake, however, to settle upon *Things Fall Apart* as the exemplar of literary existentialism in African literature. There are certain details in the text that do not allow for this. The fact of Umoufian society’s inherent unanimism disqualifies the novel at a fundamental level from such a definition. Even when, as in the case of Obierika and his meditation on the sad exile of his friend Okonkwo from the clan for the inadvertent killing of the son of a clansman, the interrogation of the blind codes of justice that the tribe enforces is short-circuited in
his mind when he turns in his reflections penultimately to a proverb: ‘As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others’. This then allows Obierika to retreat from a conclusion that would condemn the contradictory moral norms of his society once and for all. But perhaps the most pertinent disqualification is provided in the character of Okonkwo himself. Throughout the novel he is represented as someone for whom the changes in his society do not register in his consciousness either explicitly or subliminally as transitions that need to be negotiated, but only as signs of the reprehensible departure from masculine and heroic norms that must be upheld at all costs. In other words he has no ambivalence towards either his own past or that of the clan’s. Rather, he is defeated by the certainty of his own interpretations.

Indeed, Things Fall Apart raises a more complex question, which is whether given the largely urban, bourgeois, or sub-aristocratic settings in which existentialism has hitherto been explored in both Western and in much of African literature, a rural setting such as we see in the novel allows for the proper representation of the existentialist thematic as such. Can a rural dweller, brought up on assured ritual practices and a predictable diurnal round also feel existential alienation? One can handily point to Thomas Hardy’s Return of the Native or Tess of the D’Urbervilles as giving the lie to this question. And yet it is in fact Achebe himself who provides the best answer from an African perspective in Arrow of God, the third offering to his trilogy (the second novel, No Longer at Ease, is set in the city) and the true sequel to Things Fall Apart. Arrow of God also has a largely rural setting, and the story is placed in a period of earlier colonial encounters among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria than that of Achebe’s first novel. And yet nothing could be more different than the earlier offering. To Umuofia’s unanimism is set Umuaro’s lack of communal consensus. In place of Okonkwo, “a man who was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond” is Ezeulu, chief priest of Ulu who, though also well-known throughout the six tribes that make up Umuaro, is from the start met with a mixture of reluctant respect and uncomprehending revulsion by his own people. The compliment is mutual. It is the way in which Arrow of God thematizes transition and assimilates its vagaries to the consciousness of Ezeulu that registers the novel as a supreme example of existentialist literature in the terms we have described above.

Can a rural dweller, brought up on assured ritual practices and a predictable diurnal round also feel existential alienation?

A deceptively innocent level at which the novel displays the theme of historical ambiguation is that of the intersection between rumors, gossip, and foundational narratives. The novel literally swirls with rumors and gossip and these give us insights into the surreptitious perceptions that people have of Ezeulu, that his wives have of each other, and that the folk in the tribe have of the white man and vice versa. The novel suggests that rumors and gossip are first and foremost disciplinary instruments, in the sense that the characters use these to devise a moral cartography of others’ behavior, and, more consequentially, that such rumors and gossip are prefaces to various courses of action. Intersecting with rumors and gossip are a number of foundational narratives. Though these narratives are also ultimately disciplinary, they are analytically distinct from rumors and gossip in that they appear to require specific forms of assent with regard to their truth value. The latter, as we see from the novel, is tied to notions of heroic action. And yet, whereas the elusive veracity of rumors and gossip do not seem to generate any difficulty in procuring assent towards the opinions they express or the actions deriving from them, the foundational narratives we are presented with are responded to
with a debilitating skepticism.

The most crucial of these narratives is without a doubt the one that is the subject of the elders’ meeting early in the novel. The male elders of Umuaro meet to debate whether to go to war with the people of Okperi, who have mischievously in their eyes come to lay claim to a piece of land bordering the two communities that had hitherto not been the object of any disagreement. At this meeting Ezeulu recounts the story that his father had told him as a child about how the six tribes had come together to collectively create the god Ulu, with the weakest tribe among them nominated by the others to be the custodian of this new synthetic deity. As the descendant of the priests of Ulu and its spokesperson, Ezeulu cautions that his god is not one to fight an unjust war. His father had told him that the disputed land had always belonged to Okperi.

To this piece of historical interpretation and measured rhetoric is counterpoised that of Nwaka, a lord of the land who has taken the highest title Eru ‘which was called after the lord of wealth himself’. Nwaka opens his speech with a proverb, that, unlike what the proverbial discourse that Achebe made famous with Things Fall Apart, is designed not to affirm unanimity but to inscribe difference: ‘Wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own.

Knowledge of the land is like that. Ezeulu has told us what his father told him about the olden days. We know that a father does not speak falsely to his son. But we also know that the lore of the land is beyond the knowledge of many fathers’.

This extraordinary opening is only the preamble for a story that is in every detail opposed to the one that Ezeulu has just recounted. In Nwaka’s account the people of Okperi could not possibly have owned the land in question since historically they were driven away first from Umuofia, then from Abame, and subsequently from Aninta. It is only after many upheavals that they came to settle near Umuaro. By insisting that Okperi had been driven from not one but several locations Nwaka raises a dramatic distinction between nomadic and sedentary peoples. In his account as nomadic peoples the Okperi are nothing but wandering “strangers” and thus cannot have any claim to a land settled by a sedentary people such as their own clan. The only reason they now make bold to claim the disputed land, Nwaka adds, is because the white man has established his administrative headquarters at Okperi. This last point is also a salient historical interpolation introducing the presence of colonialism that Ezeulu’s foundational story does not reflect. Since each account is a “goatskin bag” and therefore incapable of objective verification, the only means of ascertaining their truth content is through the horizon of ideology.

Wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own.

The binary distinctions that undergird the differences between the two men – priest versus self-made man; tradition versus individual talent – should not conceal the fact that the two of them are actually proffering mutually exclusive stories about their collective past. This radical ambiguity regarding the past, here located in two contrasting narratives about the foundations of the tribe, gains further ramification at different levels of the novel. That gossip and rumour gain reader assent as actionable value as opposed to the foundational narratives of the tribe hints at the fact that the transition produced by the colonial encounter has succeeded also in reconfiguring epistemological categories. In the terms first set out by Raymond Williams in Marxism and Literature we see how Achebe is giving free play to both dominant and residual cultural categories. He does this in such a way as simultaneously to suggest a discursive inversion (the dominant foundational tales appear dubious while rumors and gossip retain believability) and an affirmation of the order of things (it is the foundational tales that are the subject of deliberative exchange for the lords of the clan, while gossip and rumor retain their salience largely at the level of the domestic sphere). The simultaneity of inversion and affirmation then encapsulates the ambiguity of transition located at the intersection of both content and form.

When Ezeulu’s people ignore his advice and send out an irascible emissary who provokes a war with Okperi the white man steps in, collects all their guns and destroys them, thus earning for himself the redoubtable epithet of “Breaker of Guns”. When Captain Wintabota (Winterbottom) calls a big meeting and tries to ascertain the cause of the war between the two people it is only Ezeulu who emerges as a truthsayer, telling Captain Wintabota the facts of the matter according to his perspective. Ezeulu’s testimony is responsible for Wintabota deciding the case in favor of Okperi. Rumors after that are that Ezeulu has become the white man’s “friend”, and his people progressively distance themselves from him to the point where towards the end of the novel when he is invited by Wintabota to Okperi for a consultation his elders can barely conceal their disgust: “Now it is not clear to me whether it is wrong for a man to ask his friend to visit him. When we have a feast do we not send for our friends in other clans to come and
share it with us, and do they not also ask us to their own celebrations?... Or does Ezeulu think that their friendship should stop short of entering each other’s houses?” These are the questions that Nwaka asks on this second occasion.

However, it is in the mind of Ezeulu himself that the historical transition and the existential nexus generated by it find their most profound articulation. For his resentment of the clan is balanced by his absolute dedication to the service of their collective god, Ulu. And his admiration of the white man’s mission school, to which he sends his youngest son Uduche as his “eyes and ears”, is a purely pragmatic measure of counter-surveillance so as to be able to know and anticipate what the white man is bringing into his world. When at Okperi he is offered the opportunity to be crowned chief of his traditionally acephalous people as part of the well-known and highly controversial British colonial policy of Indirect Rule in Africa, Ezeulu’s response is quick and unequivocal: he does not serve anyone but Ulu. He is promptly thrown in jail to teach him a lesson. While shunning the profane incredulity of the white man, Ezelu preoccupies himself in jail with planning a terrible punishment for his people in reaction to their derisive and skeptical response when he had called the elders of Umuaro to generalize the fate of all his people, something for which he is made to suffer at the end of the novel.

However, from the beginning Ezeulu has been shown to be an anchorite, alone with the burden of comprehending the highly complex nature of his sacred mission. As the novel unfolds the recognition registers in his own consciousness that his solitude is not a mere necessity enjoined by his priestly vocation but that limitations have been set on the actions and judgments of the priesthood of Ulu due to historical changes in his society. Ezeulu recognizes that the power of instituting social reform that had been the purview of his grandfather and father before him had contracted to the point where the chief priest was now merely the one that tendered to the rituals of Ulu, an intolerable abbreviation of the priestly vocation in his view. The historical diminution in the social role of the priesthood for Ezeulu is registered in his consciousness as a psychosomatic re-ordering of his very being. Thus when he reflects upon the unsettled position he now seems to occupy he is frequently stung by anger, as though by a ‘black ant’. His reaction is simultaneously mental and physical. Thus the ambit of moral judgment (is it right to go to war, to inform on his people to the white man, or to respond to the white man’s invitation to become a chief) is intrinsically tied to questions of action, but in such a way as to ensure that any action that he might undertake will, while seeming authentic in his own eyes, remain decidedly inauthentic in the eyes of his own people. His existential condition is that of being the victim of an alienating world at the same time as being a central and indispensable part of it.

any action that he might undertake will, while seeming authentic in his own eyes, remain decidedly inauthentic in the eyes of his own people

So far we have been operating on the assumption that the past is ultimately retrievable even if our attitude to such retrieval is inherently ambivalent. But what if, under the force and impact of historic events such as slavery, colonialism, or trauma, the past is obliterated to the degree that the only way of retrieving it is through a form of laboured assemblage? More pressingly, what happens to consciousness when the retrieval of the past takes on the force of a historical imperative precisely because of its obliteration? Does consciousness itself survive intact with the acknowledgement of an obliterated history?

The metaphor of transitive measures, which we raised with regard to Prufrock, becomes additionally pertinent to the next phase of this enquiry. As we noted earlier, the coffee spoons that measure out his life are transitive measures first in the sense of allowing him to link a banal object to an entire life-world, and also in relation to the fact of their being invested with an emotional charge that transcends their banality and converts them into metonyms of larger processes of social alienation. Entangled in the transitive measures provided by banal objects is the intensification the perception of alienation. This intensification is not pathological; far from it. On the contrary it marks the heightened state of awareness that is required for the epic task of historical retrieval in the face of its obliteration.

African existentialist texts such as Tayeb Salih’s Season of Migration to the North, Yvonne Vera’s Without a Name and Dambudzo Marechera’s House of Hunger provide us with useful cues towards understanding this conundrum. But in truth the absolute starting point for such an enquiry has to be sought in the work of Frantz Fanon, especially his Black Skin, White Masks. Fanon is a poet of the psychoexistential complex, one whose every sentence is a charged indictment of the historical obliterations of colonialism and the necessity of struggle enjoined...
for its retrieval. It is to Fanon that we will turn next (in *The Johannesburg Salon*, Volume 2) in reflecting upon existentialism in African writing.
PHOTOGRAPHY AND POLITICS

Politics and photography – does it work? If so, why and how? Israeli philosopher and visual theorist Ariella Azoulay curated a photographic exhibition on the occupation of Palestine Israel in a notorious apartheid prison, now the grounds of South Africa’s Constitutional Court. Juan Orrantia and Ravinder Kaur respond.

What is the political role of photography? Or what can it be? What are the implications for aesthetics in political photography, and where do sensual and emotional reactions come into play?

As part of the Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism, Israeli philosopher and visual theorist Ariella Azoulay presented a photographic exhibition on 40 years of occupation of Palestine by the state of Israel.

In an attempt to capture some of the dialogue these events generated in South Africa, we present some photographs with their accompanying narratives from Azoulay’s exhibition Act of State: A photographic history of the Occupation with responses to the exhibition by Juan Orrantia and Ravinder Kaur.

Together these pieces ask questions about the photograph as event, the relationships between photography and citizenship; the dis- and con-junctures between political philosophy and (or as) cultural theory; resonances between South Africa’s past and the Israeli-Palestinian present; and the political visualization of the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

The following four photographs and accompanying texts formed part of an exhibition staged in The Old Fort, a notorious colonial and apartheid prison in Johannesburg, now a museum and the site of South Africa’s Constitutional Court.

ACTS OF STATE: A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION

Ariella Azoulay
(Bar Ilan University, Israel)

The Old City of Jerusalem. Crowds, streaming to the spot where, days after the war ended, bulldozers razed what then became the Wailing Wall plaza, gaze beyond the rubble of the Maghrabia Quarter just in front of them. Army generals, who decided in one fell blow to demolish this neighborhood without any official sanction, supposed that the Jews’ enthrallment with the Wall would prevent them from noticing the rubble. One of the generals visiting the place a few days earlier with the Jerusalem Mayor and the General in charge of the Central Regional Command, while the houses were still intact, described it as follows: “We concluded that the entire area facing the Wailing Wall must be cleared. This is a one-time historical opportunity. We knew that June 14th is the Eve of the Feast of Pentecost and multitudes will come to pray at the Wall. We resolved to bring in the bulldozers and act as soon as the Sabbath was out.”
Hebron. Before the army denied Palestinians the right to move about large parts of the city of Hebron, this street was a bustling commercial center. The silence it has been fated to has turned it into an ideal atelier for the artist wishing to draw the portrait of an Israeli soldier. The soldier revels in the tourist’s interest in him and stands facing her, erect, his weapon crossing his body closely, his right hand resting on its butt.

Huwwara Checkpoint. When the second man on the left presents his ID to the photographer, some meters before reaching the soldier at the checkpoint, he presents to her – and to us – the automatism of this gesture, as well as its absurdity. Each of the other three men seen with him in the same frame expresses a different attitude towards his gesture. The first smiles, the second is not amused, the third is suspicious.

Lod. Arrest of ‘illegal aliens’ within the Green Line. A plainclothesman cuffs the hands of an elderly man whose presence in Israel, after years of working for his Israeli employer, has been declared illegal. In order not to risk daily delays at the checkpoints and get to their jobs on time, these men have stayed away from their homes in the Occupied Territories all weekdays, slept in dire conditions in shanties and basements, and been restricted to their sleeping quarters at night.
A LAYERED RESPONSE

Photographer and visual anthropologist Juan Orrantia went to the opening of Acts of State.

Juan Orrantia
(University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa)

Visiting this exhibition is a multilayered experience: an encounter, as curator Ariella Azoulay puts it. A series of affective moments crafted in the interaction of gazes addressing each other in multiple temporalities. Different trajectories coalesce, with the intention of sparking the numbing of the history of the Israeli occupation. The silence here takes a stance through color and in black in white, in strong faces and desolate spaces, in blood and tears, in flames and water spilled over pavement, under dust and rocks full of meaning -- even if only for some. But it is this same multiplicity that sometimes makes this a difficult space to travel through. There are many things going on at various levels and registers -- even in the quantity of images themselves -- that the visitor has to deal with.

First of all there is the political implication of the photograph as a mode of creating citizenship for those who are constantly denied it. The visibility of the invisible subject is a stance that is taken directly and sets forth the possibilities of the image for the filling of voids. Voids that are, as Azoulay noted in her opening talk, the effects of state acts that otherwise would be crimes. And still this filling of the voids of citizenship is an act that walks along the line of the victim as subject. However plausible this thin line is, I do want to take a step back from the critiques of visual representations of violence, and recall what Alan Klima writes about this critique of the visual in The Funeral Casino. That despite the colonial and violent history of photography, we should also ask ourselves why, even if one can never do justice to the act of true witnessing through technologies of image reproduction, “if one was not there, then why are the flecks of the unaccountable political murders one has witnessed still ’sticking to the heart?’ Just look.”

Other aspects of this multiplicity that sparks reflection are those regarding the politics of taking photographs, presented not only in the image as image, but in also the act of the photographer as part of the context. I am thinking of an image of a photographer being attacked and photographed, in an encounter with colonist-settlers, under the gaze of both the soldier and the Palestinian – while others snap the moment. I am thinking also of the politics of the image as seen in the series of Israeli soldier’s giving out water, and the captions that warn us of the invention – of its humanitarianism – through the crafting of the photographic moment itself.

There is also the moment of reflection of the public (by public here I refer to the visitor to the exhibition), which in this case is much more of a private experience that takes the viewer deep into her own personal memories. This moment can be a sensual form of memory in becoming, as a sensual form of memory making and experiencing the past in the present (see Nadia Seremetakis’ 1996 book, The Senses Still). Experiencing the effects of the images, and in this case of their location, implies a relationship with the space itself. Walking under the old prison’s barbed wire to see images of more barbed wired moments, or engaging the colors of decay on the walls where panels hang, and of the images hung amongst this decay, is part of a series of inter-
actions that add layers to the experience of traversing silence and invisibility in multiple forms. These are moments in which such visual imagery demonstrates potential to generate sensual reactions that can unsettle, delimit, excite, activate, and even resuscitate.

This brings to the fore the role of the personal through the sensual and the aesthetic to the grounds of politics. I thus want to end this reflection by returning to the personal. A personal that guides these reactions and thoughts, and that in recent discussions is wanting to be disciplined – both in academic and in Foucauldian meanings of the term. Something that actually it was never intended to be. The personal – whether through the medium of photography itself as form of writing, in the encounter, or in the represented being – comes to this stage of the political as a vehicle for the practice of poetics, imagination and the affective as politico-theoretical projects. Why should we limit its potential?

**LIFE OF THE IMAGE**

Ravinder Kaur  
(University of Copenhagen, Denmark)

In this project of “re-thinking” the political in late capital, complex visual assemblages of material, symbolic and virtual elements – photography, film, graphics, animation – mediated in multiple forms and consumed every day present a challenging point of entry. How do images inform, shape and contest our political imaginaries? How are desires, fears, im/possibilities and hopes imagined, projected and produced in the political sphere; and how do image worlds and life worlds translate from one to another and back in everyday life? These questions become particularly urgent when ‘digital translation’ of life to its image is easily obtained through enhanced technological capabilities, and when imagery of distant events becomes more intimate and immediate through incessant viewing. Consider the spectacular images of 9/11 twin towers in the act of destruction, images of faceless bare-bodies of Iraqi prisoners arranged in piles in Abu Ghraib, and the orange-suited handcuffed silhouettes of WoT detainees behind imposing fences in Guantanamo that have become vital signs of the age of terror – the unsettling spectre that continues to horrify and fascinate the spectator. It is this unsettling quality of images that Ariella Azoulay concerned herself with at the Workshop in her rich and evocative presentation on ‘civil contract of citizenship’ seeking to narrate the history of Israeli occupation of Palestine since 1947-8. Through an archive of photographs amassed from as different sources as Israeli news agencies, Israeli defence forces (IDF) and Israeli and Palestine photographers, Azoulay constructs a visual history of the occupation on the one hand, and on the other locates the event of photography as an encounter that makes the invisible (‘non-citizens’ mainly Palestinians) visible (‘citizens’ of disaster). The photographic encounter creates an ensemble of people who are initiated into citizenship through a common recognition of disaster as unbearable (distinct from those who may chose to ignore the signs of disaster). The event of photography, for Azoulay, then, opens up a political space that is not subjugated to any sovereign power, and where it is possible to imagine new possibilities and creative modes of thinking about citizenship.

What Azoulay offers us here is a rich weave of ideas that provoke us to reopen the themes of citizenship, political imagination, visibility, subjectivity, sovereignty and photography in our quest to re-think the political.

The photographic encounter creates an ensemble of people who are initiated into citizenship through a common recognition of disaster as unbearable.

At the heart of Azoulay’s compelling political project is the idea of ‘archive’ that appears not only in its material form but also as a sign of resistance. Here the archive (described by Agamben in *The Remnants of Auschwitz* as the system of relations between what is ‘said’ and ‘unsaid’) of photographs represents a collective testimony to the spectacular and the everyday oppression that non-citizens (Palestinians)
live under the Israeli occupation. The photographs of Israeli soldiers smiling into the camera against a backdrop of Palestinian detainees, destroyed homes, bodily injuries, and terrified faces that often gaze away from the camera (reminiscent of the images of Holocaust in some ways) constitute the visual archive through which the spectators ‘see’ and ‘show’ the horror of the regime. The act of photography, in fact, seems to become an act of witness, (or in its double meanings Shahadat (martyrdom): to bear testimony to be revealed on the Day of Judgement; and self-sacrifice in pursuit of truth where the photographer and the photographed subject risk dangers and reprisals in order to record the truth. (Primo Levi, an Auschwitz survivor, in his memoirs linked the very idea of survival to the idea of bearing witness – to survive in order to tell the outside world what had happened inside the camps.) The camera, in this case, becomes the mediator that brings the inside outside in a way that language and memory often struggle with. The very art of photography has historically been associated with the imperative of truth-telling, or as Susan Sontag puts it in her essay “On Photography,” “to unmask hypocrisy and combat ignorance”. This seems to be the purpose of Azoulay’s archive too: to constitute a visual documentation of reality, and even a pedagogical tool that will inform and educate spectators about life lived under occupation.

How are we to make sense of the “unsaid” - all that cannot be reduced to a photo-image?

As photography and truth-telling appear to be almost synonymised in this project, might one address the moment of photographic encounter itself to understand the limits of photography? The very formulation of a photographic encounter to describe the making of a photograph suggests an element of surprise, an unexpected assemblage, even a confrontation between the photographer and the photographed subject. Yet photographs are mostly an outcome of ‘proper moments’ that occur once the photographer is satisfied with the camera’s angle, availability of light and the desired position of the subject (aesthetics is the other imperative of photography, often in conflict with truth-telling). Can the rectangular fragment of ‘reality’ called photograph, then, be considered outside the conditions of its own production? One might ask: who or what are the proper subjects of photography? How is the photographed subject framed, and how do we understand the relationship between what is inside the frame and what is left outside? The very privilege of the photographer to set the focus (zoom in and out of objects, body parts, locales) means that the same event may not generate two same sets of photographic images. What we see in a photograph are, then, fragmentary moments that merely hint at life where a lot is left “unsaid”. How are we to make sense of the “unsaid” - all that cannot be reduced to a photo-image?

The shadow of the “unsaid” appears within the ordering of the archive itself. The photographs and the accompanying text in Azoulay’s exhibition and lecture create a palpable narrative of repression and dehumanisation in Palestine, and in this tight packing leave little contingent space for photos that could interrupt the narrative. One is struck by the absence of photos that might show Israelis and Palestinians in intimate settings outside the frames of victims/oppressors. How do we relate photographs in the archive to the moments of mutuality that are yet to become photographic subjects? The absence of such photos, and/or the absence of the possibility of such photos, open a difficult uncharted terrain if politics of contention was ever to give way to politics of mutuality.

Finally, let us revert to the life of the photographed subject itself who is liberated, or citizen-ized in the new political space opened through photography. The event of photography is a moment when life assumes its image form – a moment rich in possibilities where image is poised to transcend over life itself in some ways (making life visible, and even memorable in a collective sense). The emancipatory potential of photography is seductively double edged: liberating the subject while locking it in that particular moment too. The life after the photographic encounter is, thus, potentially foreshadowed by the image that may continue to live, as W.T.J. Mitchell claims, long after the actual photograph is destroyed. This suggested durability (rather than fickleness) of the image hints towards the power as well as the limits of the creative political space Azoulay imaginatively opens for us. What possibilities of self-making, erasing and re-making exist for the photographed subject in this political space? Can the subjects liberate themselves from their own images if they so desire? And finally, how does the political space initiated through images translate back into the life-world? The entanglements between life and its image and the fertile political space therein deserves consideration if we are to think along the “possibility of the event” as Mbembe suggested in the Workshop: To keep the potentialities alive and to imagine what seems improbable.
ON A KNIFE EDGE

Penny Siopis in conversation with Sarah Nuttall
(University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa)

Form and formlessness; violence and eroticism; horror and ecstasy: the precarious slip and a split of making art at the knife edge.

I start simply by being struck by an image. Something odd, curious, dramatic. The image might come from newspapers, books, movies, magazines, other art, my imagination or direct experiences. Many of these images are at once violent, erotic, tragic and beautiful. They are atavistic and elemental as well as social and analytical at the same time. Many allegorise deep human experiences like collapse, disorder, decay and formlessness. Some images emerge out of the vicissitudes of the medium itself. What happens when ink and glue act on a surface is unpredictable and exciting. This unpredictability creates a vital tension or energy between form and formlessness, balancing them on a knife edge.

(Penny Siopis, 2009.)

Sarah Nuttall: Your show is titled Paintings, but apart from a small section of the background of Twins, there is no oil or acrylic paint in this body of work. Your medium is ink and glue. Why this change?

Penny Siopis: The mix of liquid ink and viscous glue involves processes of radical flux and flow that excite me. The fact that these mediums literally have an unpredictable life of their own makes them perfect for the radically contingent way I want to work.

Nuttall: So how do you work these mediums?

Siopis: The process involves the mix of ink and glue and sometimes water through splashing, dripping and moving the canvas to direct the flow. These materials then congeal into different configurations on the surface. I work with the canvas flat on the ground and then on the wall – horizontal to vertical – and work more. Back and forth, up on the wall and down on the floor. Sometimes I try to direct these configurations into recognisable images, other times I just let the medium have its way. I also throw ink or glue on to the surface in a way which emphatically registers the energy of my gesture. The openness, experimentality and risk this involves is something I love. And the ‘accidents’ that happen as a consequence. What occurs in one work can’t be repeated in another.

The drying time of the glue depends on the thickness of the layer. There is a strong element of surprise in this, partly because the glue is white and opaque when wet and only becomes transparent when dry. Only then can I see what has actually happened to the painting. It’s not all chance, of course. I have long experience with manipulating material, and this experience becomes a kind of second nature that pushes and directs me when I can’t see how the opaque surface is going to settle down. You could say that I set up the conditions for chance to operate along certain lines. I have always been intensely interested in materiality as idea and sensation, as something more than merely a means to make an image.

Nuttall: You assert your strong interest in form and so I wonder: what aspects of modernism continue to offer you critical resources for the practice of painting?

Siopis: Modernism’s struggle for form against reference is still alive to me today – despite the radical critiques that have followed in its wake. Modernism’s emphasis on the relation between form and materiality also remains compelling for me. There are tensions here that still offer critical possibilities for painting. I must stress, though, that my interest in form involves the other side of form, formlessness. In pursuit of purity, modernist formalism recognised that if you push purity of form too far, it risks tipping into its other: formlessness (chaos) or
mere decoration (uniformity).

More generally I suspect that the persistence of painting has something to do with being humane – a human, embodied trace in a time of hyper-mediation, of excessive remediation, for example.

Bodily, the gesture – acts of dripping, splashing, manipulating – is also arrested. And, as happens in the photographic process, there are two kinds of iconographic arrest. One is when you take the shot, and the other when the image emerges in the developer and is then fixed. The shot registers a world in a moment which passes and is forever lost, but remains in the fixed image of the photograph itself. Actually the shot is also reminiscent of the moment when I am struck by an image I see in the world.

I am less interested in fixity than in a kind of unsettled arrest. My interest in painting is to hold on to and to show the signs of its becoming.

Nuttall: In an interview with you in ‘Art South Africa’ in 2005 I asked you about your frustrations with painting and you replied that you never seem to be able to keep the formlessness in your paintings that corresponds to what Georges Bataille called ‘in-forme’. Does this interest in the informe still drive you?

Siopis: Yes, it does. Bataille’s informe is an operation, neither theory nor product, and in this I see something of my process. My desire is to go as far as I can in pulling the form (or materiality) away from the subject, to drag form and figuration to the verge of formlessness, to bring form down. But I don’t get to the extreme of what I think Bataille’s informe suggests. It’s more like an impulse that drives me to a formlessness that can disrupt the coherence of form as it seeks to usurp content for itself alone, as in the idea that form is content, a major tenet of modernism.

Bataille’s informe points to the formlessness of the world, implying its intrinsic worthlessness and the irredeemable futility of our thinking about it. His informe is philosophical and only obliquely related to visual form, or art. Yet his constant use of dramatic visual metaphors in his writing suggests its richness for visual art. In The Tears of Eros he does actually use visual images from a variety of sources.

Nuttall: Your psychic and painterly interest, in these works, relates to balancing on a knife edge. The knife edge seems to be the concatenation between the beautiful and the cruel, the violent and the erotic. Why is this such an interesting, exciting place for you?

Siopis: The space, friction and energy between contending, even irreconcilable, desires are critical for me. The beautiful and the cruel, or the violent and the erotic, are not such odd bedfellows really. Each is tied to the other. And in art, the aesthetic is all
but constituted though the play of contraries. The knife edge is a precarious condition where a slip and a split can happen. I want to hold this condition in a state of suspended animation rather than resolve or settle it, one way or another.

**Nuttall:** Your recent work has been almost exclusively in the registers of red and pink. You have long described yourself as drawn to the passions and traumas of ‘redness’ (the hot red of the candles of Catholicism) rather than to the cool colours (the blues of the Virgin’s robes). And then we walk in to this new work and we see great swathes of blue and green, and some brown. Are your internal chromatic landscapes shifting? Might it have to do in part with the fact that this new work developed from your recent sojourn in Greece?

**Siopis:** It’s true. I love red for all sorts of reasons. But blue, and water, have come on stage of late. I have an ancient feeling for water, as far back as I can remember. I would rather drown (almost did) than burn. Fluid and flow are my métier. I suppose it is also linked to an abiding interest in Sigmund Freud’s ‘oceanic’, to the openness of life before language, an openness we imagine, seek, but never really know.

But this recent turn to blueness might well have a great deal to do with my time in Greece last year. It was a kind of interruption in my life and being so close to the sea marked this. I found myself just staring at the sea, stunned at its expanse, intensity, beauty. That the Aegean is so very blue is a shock. Blue seems so foreign to the reds of the body.

The Aegean was not without its traumas, of course. My mind was often filled with the horrific stories I heard at the time of African migrants drowning – thrown overboard by traffickers in their bid to get to Europe. I made work which tried to give form to my feelings here. Mostly they were small works, but the influence of these mental images is also manifest in *Still Waters*.

But the idea of the sea reaches beyond trauma. Perhaps it’s the indeterminacy of water. Things float and sink. In a way, water approaches perfect formlessness. I have always liked what that old flux-philosopher Heraclites said about water, that you never step into the same water of a river twice.

**Nuttall:** What made you want to paint such huge canvases this time? Compared, for instance, to the miniatures of your earlier Shame series?

**Siopis:** I needed an expanded field to act in, and to register energy. Ironically, while the larger field offers more scope for the expansive gesture, it also allows for intense intimacy. You can be both distant and close up; you can stand back and see the whole scene and come close and engage the body, the surface, the matter of the scene.

**Nuttall:** Many – though not all – of these works are violent, sometimes traumatic. In many ways, these emotional registers are signal in your work. But the physical deposits of emotion which accrue in these paintings also suggest a deep life force.

**Siopis:** My imagery is often violent, and the materiality itself often suggestive of violence. But at the same time you can see a vitality that is buoyant and libidinal. I like Bataille here when he sees art as entranced by horror and links this to the idea of sacrifice. In *The Cruel Practice of Art* he writes: ‘Yet it is in this double bind that the very meaning of art emerges – for art, which puts us on the path of complete destruction and suspends us there for a time, offers us ravishment without death.’

**Nuttall:** I’d like to ask you now about some specific works on the show, and the kinds of references from which you have drawn. Miracle shows a tiny baby falling through space and a great twisted column of fire, which also has something of the look of an umbilical cord seen in colour on a medical scanner. What were you looking for in the making of this image?

**Siopis:** This work came from two separate stories I read in newspapers. One happened in a small town in Germany in 2008, the other in downtown Johannesburg in 2006. Both occurred in places where migrant workers live. They are uncannily similar. In each a mother is faced with a dilemma as she is trapped on a floor high in an apartment block which has caught fire. Should she hang on to her baby in...
the hope that the blaze will be extinguished? Or should she throw the baby out of the window in the hope that someone will catch the baby down below? Both mothers chose the latter. The babies were both caught and miraculously survived. I was struck by the elemental quality of these almost identical stories; like Sophie’s choice, or King Solomon’s threat to cut the baby in half to settle a dispute between two mothers claiming the same child. In this work the fire is entirely gestural, while the baby is more or less illusionistically depicted.

**Nuttall:** *Three Trees* is an overwhelmingly violent and emotional rape scene and yet you mentioned that it was based partly on a Japanese woodblock print. These woodblock prints, though, contrary to your work, seem to contain or disavow, or perhaps even infer by excluding, intense emotion or the kind of knife-edge places you’re pursuing in this collection.

**Siopis:** Yes – the primary image is a rape of a woman by two men; and yes, it references a Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock print I found in a book on erotic art. It is perhaps one of the works that pits materiality against representation most strongly. You can see something of what is going on, but the materiality disrupts the scene. In this work the materiality is quite beautiful, a physical deposit of emotion. Even the trees seem to be shedding their bark in the pull towards the main ‘action’.

I am intrigued by Japanese prints of this period – especially how they portrayed sexuality in such crisp, clear linear form. To me their form seems highly conventionalised, and so contrary to the sexual violence they depict. They don’t reveal process, and look like elaborate diagrams of experience. They are strange to me and I can’t stop looking at them. Because of this they offer me an affective and literal structure for painting, bare bones to give body to.

In drawing on Japanese prints or other historical sources, I am less concerned with history and specific pictorial traditions and more with how they resonate now, in our contemporary moment.

**Nuttall:** By choosing Hundred Pieces as the title of this work, you point us towards Bataille. What is the association you were making here?

**Siopis:** Here I have drawn on a photograph Bataille writes about in *The Tears of Eros*. The photograph is of a hideous Chinese torture purported to have happened around 1905 in which a criminal’s body is cut off bit by bit. Bataille could not take his eyes off this image. The reason for this, he says, is that the photograph reveals the conjoining of two apparently opposite experiences – religious horror of sacrifice and the abyss of eroticism. These two apparently opposite experiences have something in common in how we read an ‘image’. Both seem ecstatic.

I too was struck by this photograph, but there is scant evidence of it in my *Hundred Pieces*. The title gives a clue for those who know Bataille’s text. There is also the very schematic shape of the body, red marks where eyes and nipples might be, and the form that resembles the pole onto which the criminal is tied. But it’s the feel, the sensation of how Bataille’s words and the image resonate for painting that concerns me here, more than anything literal. ‘Ecstasy’ figures in perhaps more obscure or open ways for me than the photograph suggests. In my work the figure melts downward, against an upward...
movement. In terms of painting itself, the figure came from a single gesture. For me this was closer to capturing the sensation of what Bataille was talking about than the actual pictorial reference.

**Nuttall:** How did you make Floating World?

**Siopis:** Here the source is another Japanese print, *Awabi Fishergirl Ravished by Water-spirits* (c1788) by Utamaro. The splash in the painting is important as it both breaks up and gives shape to the girl who is splashed. It also draws attention to the forms and force of water. There is no splash in the original print. Here I did two things with water. First, I flung ink on to the surface where it left its residue. I then applied ink marks to give body to this residue. These marks resemble conventional depictions of water – the wavy lines which have become almost symbols of water. The girl who is splashed sits in an arrested pose and looks to the lower left part of the painting. Here, another, smaller girl is submerged, struggling sexually with two murky male creatures.

**Nuttall:** In *Still Waters* the surface is made up of a mass of shapes vaguely suggesting a mix of jellyfish and water lilies. In the midst of these emerges a face, and the expression on this face is almost unreadable – it could be agony, bliss, near-death or raw survival.

**Siopis:** Yes, the forms veer in a vortex towards the head of a person who seems to be either swamped by the mass or emerging from it. It looks like the person might be coming up for breath. The image condenses three visions that came to me simultaneously as I was struck by seeing an infestation of jellyfish pulsating in the harbour in Thessaloniki. The three visions were Shakespeare’s Ophelia, an imagined scene of a migrant drowning in the Aegean, and, finally, Monet’s water lilies. The condensation of images was similar to what happens in a dream. Trauma mixes with other, quite different, sensations.

**Nuttall:** *Pine* was surely painted in Greece. The embrace of the couple is not entirely a gentle one, is it?

**Siopis:** Yes. At the time I was thinking about the expressive possibilities of the visual field in painting, how repetition of shapes and physicality of surface could trigger emotion. I began by dropping ink and glue randomly on to the surface. The resulting forms brought an image of a forest to mind. This might have been because I was living in a building swathed in a thicket of pine trees. Greece is the only place I’ve been where pine trees grow so near to the sea! But I was also reading about the Greek civil war and how forests were places of both terror and refuge at the time. I then looked for a visual reference of the civil war and came upon a photograph of two comrades-in-arms. The couple reminded me of an old photo of my father and mother. I made a clearing in the forest, so to speak, and positioned them as if spot-lit in that clearing. Yes, they are locked in an ambiguous embrace; aggression or love? I then dripped hot coloured ink from the top of the canvas. The drips ran around the raised dollops of glue simulating pine cones and needles, animating and binding the surface and the whole visual field.

**Nuttall:** *Ambush* is included in this catalogue because it prefigures many of the works in the exhibition.

**Siopis:** This work was the first large piece I made with ink and glue and in which chance really mattered. The source is Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai’s woodblock print *The Dream of a Fisherman’s Wife* (1820). It shows a huge octopus performing oral sex on a reclining woman. A smaller octopus kisses her lips, with one tentacle around her nipple. The woman seems relaxed – in another world. Another world is, of course, where she is – octopus sex is a fantasy. The powerful way Hokusai works with this fantasy makes this print so erotic. There is also a kind of wild informality in the octopus; it can change shape radically, disturbing any sense of equilibrium or stability.

The liquidity of the ink and viscosity of the glue curdle into forms reminiscent of Hokusai’s image. But the forms are bloody, liquid, energetic. They congeal on the edge of formlessness in an unsettling organic process of becoming.

Apparently westerners have interpreted Hokusai’s...
image as a rape scene. Others have seen the octopus as a kind of Zeus who disguised himself as an animal to ravish unsuspecting young women.

As a clever, sexual creature the octopus has stimulated many sexual fantasies. Some are hinted at in the text that structures the ‘ground’ of the image, what would otherwise have been the white of the canvas. The text strings myriad expressions of sexual transgression together. These are culled from high literature, poetry, technical documents, psychosexual narratives, pornography; from Bataille, Freud, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Antonin Artaud, Anaïs Nin, Angela Carter and Jeffrey Eugenides. Some are anonymous, demotic texts from much trashier sources. While these words replace the original text in the Hokusai image, I have also included a translation of this text (as silly as it actually is). Strung together these texts tie up (loosely) to create another story. It is hard to read every line, not least because you need to tilt your head in an unnatural and uncomfortable position to do so.

Nuttall: In what sense, if at all, are these South African paintings?

Siopis: The times seem to have made me hypersensitive to all sorts of imagery, especially that which marks ambivalence and the imponderable. In South Africa now we are confronted with the estrangement and dislocation that come with deep uncertainty about the stability of what we might call the social contract. At the same time, this instability can be an occasion for exhilarating change. It’s a time of flux; a time which can congeal into sheer horror or open up to sheer ecstasy.
THE PAUL SMITH
SHOP, JOBURG.
CULTURE OF
DISPLAY, CULTURE
OF CONCEALMENT

Sarah Calburn
(Sarah Calburn architects)

Fear and Clothing in Johannesburg:
Sarah Calburn takes on the city’s
addiction to the dislocated dream world of
ultra capitalism, the mall, and prescribes
an exclusive, excluding, floating, opaque
pink glass box

I see one of my more crucial roles as an architect as
that of engagement with the city: I consider the at-
ttempt to identify, to play with, to extrapolate con-
cepts built around conditions I see operating in this
city as central to my occupation. Paul Smith is the
story of one such attempt.

Joburg seems beset by ‘mall culture’. I find this most
odd in a city with the most livable climate in the
world: we are blessed with clear blue skies most days
of the year, we have many leafy avenues and pave-
ments and parks, and we are not subject to dracon-
ian Australian-variety parking regulations ... yet. We
are generally free to park anywhere, eat outside in
the sunshine, wander from shop to gallery to office
to shop to restaurant .... In short, we are theoretically
free to conduct a street and park life. We have
the ever-present option of enacting and creating a
vibrant urban terrain.

Instead, and in the face of the perceived threat of
the ‘public’ - often, it seems to me, conflated in the
most paranoid manner with ‘crime’ - most shops
have retreated into the quasi-public ‘safe zones’ of
homogeneous blind box malls. And most citizens
seem content to wander these endless maze-like
circuits, confounded by artificial light, blinded by
decoration and highly coloured signage, bewildered
by the appearance of choice ...

Inside the mall, you have ‘everything under one
roof’, and no urban poor to confront. Your status as
‘citizen’ is reduced to one of ‘shopper’. Condemned
to the franchise, the brain is bulleted to quick shop-
ning death. In the most optimistic view, that frantic
eye is glazed and anaesthetised by the comfort of the
already known, the recognisable .... All roads lead
to Pick ‘n’ Pay, to Shoprite, to Mr. Price. There is
no danger to confront, nothing new to explore, no
unexpected discovery to make, except the delayed
toll on your credit card.

Your status as ‘citizen’ is reduced to one of
‘shopper’

You have lost your rights as a flâneur - that foot sol-
dier, that wanderer, that poet, that pleasure-seeker
and pavement-philosopher who negotiates at will
and at risk the complexities, the vagaries, the filth
and the joys of the nefarious, multiplicitous and un-
predictable urban jungle. In the mall and on its pe-
ripheries, the eroticism and enchantment and un-
predictability of public life, as Achille Mbembe has
put it, has gone missing. Presumed dead.

As for those actively excluded from the mall, the
extent of what constitutes an urban domain is re-
duced to narrow pavements, traffic islands and the
parking lot. Here you have every possibility of be-
ing arrested for “loitering”. Loitering is not allowed
in this “world-class city”, I discovered the other day.
There is, amazingly enough, a law against loitering
that requires active enforcement. Apartheid has
morphed seamlessly into a ruthless private/public
divide.

Joburg has stated its aim to project itself as a
‘world-class African city’. What is a ‘world-class
city’, I would ask? Is it a ‘cultural destination’ — as
cities appear to market themselves nowadays — and
if so, what exactly does Joburg have to offer, cultur-
ally speaking? Is it African? Is it a city? And what is its destination value? What are its destinations, for a visitor?

A multiple choice exercise ensues: Which of the following might constitute the term ‘destination’?

a. A continually unrolling car-bound landscape of malls, traffic islands, beggars and gated Tuscan villages?

b. A neglected and abused downtown offering tantalising glimpses (if you can risk it) into the ‘exotic’ and/or ‘dangerous’ lives of others?

c. Townships you can look at on an organized tour through a bus window? (More lives of the ‘others’.)

d. Museums to the multiple tragedies of our apartheid past, all of which more or less look alike? (Identify the differences between museums? An extra 10 points to be gained here.)

e. The joy of travel: Views of intensely ramshackle slums while flying in to land, or from high speed highways? A rapid road side view of an RDP housing scheme?

f. Your luxury Sandton hotel?

g. A small shopping street in one of the older suburbs, containing restaurants, galleries, shops, offices?

h. The home of a friend – heavily fortified, a cultural opportunity to learn the complexities of the alarm system before a late night out?

i. The Sandton City complex / Rosebank Mall / Melrose Arch / Montecasino?

Please note that the above is a trick question. Most of the choices involve being in transit.

Only four choices are ‘destinations’: places that you can negotiate and occupy for more than two hours by walking, by sitting, by talking, watching at leisure. By partaking.

Three of these destinations are made up of the sumptuous displays contained in malls, and the safe and luxurious hotels and homes all hyped up and isolated by the thrill of danger lurking beyond. What is culturally noteworthy about any of these destinations? These, too, are all exclusive interiors. The gated mixed use complex of Melrose Arch, significantly, is an exclusive interior, its back resolutely turned to the city and its lesser citizens. Are we really just that – a ‘world-class interior’? What of the city, then, beyond its vicarious existence as an ‘outside’ to be looked at from the window of a car, a tour bus?

The interior of the Paul Smith Boutique, Parkhurst. Photo: Adriaan Louw

Are we really just that - a ‘world-class interior’?

There is only one destination listed above which might [deserve] the term ‘cultural destination’ beyond a two hour museum visit, and that is option g). Only this destination might have a feel of ‘community’ from which nothing except your time constraints would exclude you. Only this one has what might be called an accessible ‘local flavour’ in which you could make – as a visitor – a temporary home in the exterior of the city.

Joburg is going to have to re-conceive itself in terms of ‘cultural destination’ if it is to be perceived as a city that is ‘world-class’. ‘World-class’ must imply a peculiarly local consciousness that would act to distinguish Joburg both in and from the world.
Joburg is going to have to decide who, and what, it is made up of, and which of these are capable of projecting exteriors that can be read by visitors as ‘city’, as ‘destination’. Joburg is going to have to pay itself some serious attention, pay itself some serious respect, both in relation to its pasts, and in relation to its future imaginations. It is going to have to excavate, and then play with/expand/extrapolate its ‘local consciousness’. In order to build on itself, to read itself into a noteworthy future, it is going to have to seriously and creatively interrogate the width and breadth of its ‘cultures’.

This article represents a small attempt. This building – Paul Smith – represents a small attempt to read a culture of this city, and to play it at its own game.

Joburg’s not short on history. It’s not short on character. It’s not short on change. It’s not short on cultures. It’s not short on re-invention, which is a dangerous proposition in itself. It has demolished and rebuilt itself several times. It has changed its native savannah into the largest artificial forest in the world. It’s never been short on wealth display. It is not shy. It is, rather, ‘knowing’, in that it presents a convoluted twinning of both display and concealment. These are not either/or conditions – they are conditions of both/and.

Joburg has many different cultural enclaves, many of which deal in both display and concealment. Chinatown, Eritrea, Mozambique, Forest Town, Soweto, Sandton. This is a historic and contemporary situation. Private meetings, private rebellions have found their homes in private villas behind walls. Parties in the insides, away from the prying apartheid eye …. Parties in the insides, away from the poverty stricken public. Parties in the insides, away from the xenophobic attack. Basements, hostels, yards, boomed off blocks, walled villas, private gardens, eagles on the gateposts …

Joburg has always been a kind of underground city: its surface hard and glittering, tuned to ostentatious display, its cultures hidden and/or fortified. Devil-may-care, fuck you, lock-down. The extraction of gold kilometers beneath the surface, come what may, no cost, no lives spared. Man-made mountains dominate the skyline, toxic. A paradox: this city is fearless, and yet consumed by fear.

This city requires navigation, a knowledge of routes and entry points. You have to know where to find things in the unreliable city. Much of the suburban fabric looks the same, and much of it has become boomed off, exclusive, or perceived as dangerous, non-navigable except to those in the know. In both the inner city and the larger suburbs, Joburg requires of its citizens an ‘insider knowledge’. Its visitors are stumped.

Could we call this a culture? This recognition of both ‘display’ and the ‘hidden’ – this necessity for ‘insider’ knowledge? Joburg’s surfaces are not particularly codified. In many ways, the surfaces of this city are unreadable. The innards are really what slowly give recognition to the surfaces .... You have
IN THE MAKE

Paul Smith is an internationally celebrated British clothes designer. His first two shops in South Africa were opened by Anthony Keyworth and Richard Shaw in Johannesburg and Cape Town in 2007. The Johannesburg shop took the singular decision to exist outside of a mall environment, on the premise that – internationally – the Paul Smith brand has always occupied ‘urban’ premises. Its shops exist on the street, often re-using buildings to create a somewhat eccentric urban image which contributes to the culture of the ‘street’. The Paul Smith LA shop – on the contrary, is a new build, and carries an extreme architectural image, as it forms part and parcel of LA’s drive-by culture.

The site chosen for Paul Smith Joburg is on the corner of 4th Avenue and 7th Street in Parkhurst - a prominent position on the busy little shopping street. The building that occupied this site was a nondescript, many times altered house dating from the post-war mass build of Parkhurst, now sporting a fake Georgian portico and colonnade.

I was asked, one Friday afternoon, to do a sketch design that Anthony and Richard could take to Paul Smith in London two days later. My visceral design response, that Friday afternoon, was to take the roof off, leave the portico as a small scale gesture to the street, and to cantilever a large and uncompromising glass container over the top, partially visible through the trees. Originally the idea for the flush jointed glass box was that various decorative stick-ers (the trademark Paul Smith stripe / various decals appropriate to the collection of the moment, full colour textile type signage etc.) could come and go in time across the glass façade.

As we proceeded, the glass became solid pink in...
reference to the giant pink box of the LA shop, the older cousin of Joburg’s drive-by culture. The structure was resolved as a singular system that kills all birds with one stone, allowing the pink glass box to cantilever off the original shell, floating free.

Several years previously, I designed the Gallery Momo – nearby on 7th Avenue. Being an architect concerned with thematic conceptual development through my body of work, I’d like to draw some parallels between Gallery Momo and Paul Smith. Apart from the fact that the buildings are near each other, and both derive from houses in commercialized suburban shopping strips, what interests me is the way that each messes with the word “container”, and with the words ‘display’ and ‘concealment’.

Momo, to some extents, is a suburban house turned inside out, its most prime contents turned to drive-by high speed display. A container, decipherable at speed.


I thought about Paul Smith in terms of the “imaginary of shopping for clothes”: the potential of the “new you”, the dislocation of that moment ... mall blindness. Inside the shop you’ll find men’s wear at the ground level, a more prosaic space of belts and ties and shirts , and upstairs, the women’s wear hovers in a sort of ethereal pink glow ... there is the possibility of a new world, a new me, a new you ... all at vast expense of course. Exclusionary.

This is mall-ification – the myth, the dream world of the mall, the dislocated cyberspace of ultra capitalism. The language of the outer suburbs comes to town, comes to a small street, one where it is still possible to walk, to talk, to shop, to eat, to watch, to live. This building is not a solution – it is a game, played on an idea of Joburg culture.

This culture of Joburg: its knowingness, its insider knowledge, its mystique, its twin desires: display and concealment .... Its glittering, hard surfaces .... Its controlled entries .... Its paranoia .... Its hidden, and lush interiors .... Its mania for branding .... This building treats these things. But it treats them critically. It treats them in a way which does not threat-

a largely blank billboard. Paul Smith has landed.
Religious and racial misunderstanding and intolerance continue to mark the South African experience asserts Mike van Graan’s new theatre work.

Mike van Graan’s new theatre work takes place against the backdrop of the PAGAD marches in Cape Town during 1999. In the writer’s own words, the play: “makes a very simple plea: for human beings, for people in the city to cross religious and racial boundaries”. Thus the work is framed from the outset by pedagogical intent; it seeks to make its audience aware of the fractures — political, racial, religious — that persist in South African society, and to force its members into confrontation with their own prejudices vis-à-vis the shadowy spectre of the ‘Other’. Each of the five characters embody individual traumas that are mapped onto broader questions of social conflict, their lives intersecting in ways that reveal fault lines of misunderstanding and intolerance that continue to mark the South African experience.

Abubaker Abrahams (a convincing David Dennis) is a Muslim headmaster living with his daughter Leila (vibrantly portrayed by Kim Cloete), in the gangster-ridden Penlyn Estate. Abrahams’ hope is to move to a safer neighbourhood, and it is while looking for a house in Sea Point that he is stopped and questioned by Brian Cohen (Murray Todd), a Jewish doctor and neighbourhood watch patroller. Interestingly Leila’s body, at work and in love, operates as the site through which the other male characters are introduced into the narrative. The polemical Reverend Fredericks (Dale Abrahams) employs her as his secretary after some misgivings about her religious affiliation, while Fadiel Suleiman (well-played by Karabo Kgokong) is a Sudanese refugee with whom she becomes romantically involved. The rendering of the female body as a space of male contestation interlinks with other themes; the interface between religious moralities and notions of secular legality, the location of authority within populist movements and questions of belonging and displacement in a post-apartheid city that remains shaped by segregation and inequality.

Brothers in Blood continues an established tradition in South African theatre that seeks to bring the audience into social and political consciousness, and there are definite traces of the protest theatre of the seventies and eighties in its presentation. The play’s formal choices re-engage with some of the questions faced by that particular genre, namely, how can the aesthetic be utilised in service of the socio-political? From the beginning, the play’s form is instrumentalised as message bearer. Director Greg Homann deploys markedly Brechtian techniques in his staging; multi-media images projected onto the back of the set and an invasive, even brutal, soundtrack are clearly intended to force the audience out of passive spectatorship and into engagement. The performances too, register strongly on the level of the didactic. At times this is powerful, at others overstat ed. Indeed, the urgency of the message means that subtlety of form is sacrificed, and consequently the play is overly schematic, with characters deployed as types of persons locked into social discord rather than as persons in themselves. Granted, the play’s objective is to startle rather than to invoke empathy in the viewer, but one leaves the theatre feeling bludgeoned by the spectacle of the performance, rather than moved into recognition of the everyday tragedies and braveries of those for whom it is meant to speak. This is a shame, because Brothers in Blood offers several trenchant and persuasive insights into the South African psyche, as well as mo-
ments of thoughtfully-rendered encounter between ‘Self’ and ‘Other’.

One has to admire the spirit of activism that inhabits the work, but in writing and producing plays that seek to address the political from the realm of the artistic, one must also ask what new literary modes can be drawn forth from the South African imaginary that are attentive both to the continuing presence of (historical) difference and that gesture towards a more nuanced understanding of what Achille Mbembe has called, ‘the ethics of mutuality’. It is a difficult and challenging question from which to proceed, and one that this reviewer does not presume to answer!
SOUTH AFRICANS ARE PROUD, CONSERVATIVE AND UNEQUAL

Annie Leatt
(University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa)

South Africans identify by race, language group and nation, and are fundamentally conservative and traditional. At least that’s what public opinion showed six years ago. What might a more recent survey reveal?

How do opinions matter to politics? According to a public opinion survey published by the South African Human Sciences Research Council in 2006 (South African Social Attitudes: Changing Times, Diverse Voices) they matter because elites are most likely to influence public policy through formal mechanisms of public participation. The editors argue that opinion surveys such as this can give voice to a broader range of people, overcoming the shortfalls of participatory democracy.

This entire volume, with its thirteen quite different chapters, debates the prospects for consolidating democracy in South Africa. According to Editor Udesh Pillay, this depends on government’s ability to make good decisions, the determination of the ‘stakeholder community’ (everyone other than government in other words) to provide checks and balances, and the capacity of the ‘research community’ to provide an account of society.

The questions in this inaugural South African Social Attitudes survey were asked of its 4980 participants in 2003. This 2006 publication gives various analyses of this material and promised to be the first of a series of annual surveys. Only findings on attitudes to work and social security have been published from the subsequent 2006 survey.

The chapters chart a fascinating tour through South African opinions about race, class and politics (democracy, voting, and the determinants of party political support), poverty, inequality and service delivery (with discussions on the digital divide, water services, health and education) and societal values (including questions on capital punishment, abortion, homosexuality and premarital sex).

87% thought incomes too unequal in South Africa

A few snippets: national identity was found to be strong in South Africa, and co-exists with other identities based on race and language. In 2003, there was growing trust in public institutions including courts, the Independent Electoral Commission, South African Broadcasting Corporation, national government and Parliament. Local Government and police are significantly less trusted, and there was broad dissatisfaction with crime prevention and job creation. Nearly 45% of adults considered their income insufficient to meet basic household needs, and 87% thought incomes too unequal in South Africa. But there were low levels of support for practical policies of redress such as Black Economic Empowerment, land reform, and affirmative action, particularly amongst the wealthy and white.

On what the authors called the “moral questions”, “South Africans are ‘still’ deeply conservative – racist, homophobic, sexist, xenophobic and hypocritical.” The rather strange ‘morals index’ shows South Africa to be ‘traditional’ in its orientation, condemning pre-marital sex, abortion, homosexuality and supporting the death penalty. This chapter exhorts policy-makers to “internalize the extent to which South Africans hold traditionalist views,” although to what policy end it is not clear.

South Africans are ... racist, homophobic, sexist, xenophobic and hypocritical

There is a very good chapter by Benjamin Roberts on poverty and inequality, and an excellent one on interruptions and cut-offs in water services by David Hemson and Kwame Owusa-Ampomah. This attempts to quantify the extent of the problem of water cut-offs for non payment – nearly 1.2 million people over the course of the year preceding the survey. The domestic violence chapter by Andrew Dawes and colleagues includes a good review of evidence, and the first attempts to quantify the extent of domestic violence from a nationally representative sample in South Africa. They find that 10% of women in relationships are abused each year. Neither of these chapters is really about public opinion, except in their confirmation that the opinions about poor water services and high levels of domestic violence are entirely congruent with events.

Sometimes there are unlikely results. “Black African residents of the poorer provinces” recorded the highest levels of satisfaction with democracy, for example, and some 62% of adult South Africans report...
never having an alcoholic drink. Some of the early chapters are overly-sympathetic of government – suggesting that government would be quite right to be disappointed with some public opinions given their impressive record of services for example.

It’s a volume filled with sometimes intriguing insights into what South Africans think of themselves and others, and is a contribution to understanding some of the country’s contradictions. It is weakened by regular comparisons with American public opinion data and small sample numbers for some of the modules. Published four years after the data was collected, six years from the present, and in light of the leadership race, attacks on public institutions, meltdown at the SABC, service delivery protests and public debates around crime, it would be very interesting to know how South African democracy is opinioned to be faring now.
IVOR CHIPKIN ON NATIONALISM, DEMOCRACY AND THE IDENTITY OF ‘THE PEOPLE’ IN SOUTH AFRICA

Maria Frahm-Arp
(St. Augustine College of South Africa)

South Africa is peopled by subjects not fully democratic citizens, argues Ivor Chipkin. For the latter occurs only when fraternity, equality and liberty are exercised with ethical responsibility, in line with the principles universal human rights, and this has not been achieved in theory or practice.

Do South Africans exist? asks Ivor Chipkin in a powerful and evocative book published by Wits University Press in 2007, which masterfully deals with some of the most difficult political issues facing contemporary South Africa. Chipkin has a lively, engaging style which makes it possible to follow his detailed argument. He explores what nationalism, nation and democracy mean in the South African context. Ultimately he suggests that in order for democracy truly to work South Africans’ universal imaging of the democratic still has to struggle to accept that every “state is in itself cosmopolitan, indistinct and contingent because its borders never coincide with any one ethnic or cultural or religious group and because its particular social character is not the expression of some or other pre-given identity”.

In this detail political-historical-social study Chipkin suggests that the people of South Africa are still in the process of becoming citizens and should be referred to as “authentic national subject(s)”. He argues that the “citizen is hailed through democratic institutions and acts according to democratic norms — (what he calls) ‘ethical values’. The (authentic) national subject is produced in and through the nationalist movement, supplemented by state bodies if it comes to power”. A Democracy made up of citizens only emerges when fraternity, equality and liberty, are exercised with ethical responsibility, in line with universal human rights principles, by all members of that state. South Africa has not yet established this ideal in practice or theory.

By analyzing the history and meaning of African Nationalism Chipkin shows that ‘true democracy’ – its ethics, institutions and ideals – have not been the driving force in the creation of the New South African Nation. Under apartheid African nationalism was about protest and struggle in which Marxist and Leninist ideas of class consciousness, worker-led revolutions and socialism were central; democracy, capitalism and the bourgeois were either considered unimportant or evil. In his chapter on African Nationalism in South Africa, Chipkin argues that while Black Consciousness was weak as a movement, “it strongly informed the nationalist imaginary”. Biko’s ideals of a ‘Man-centered society’ (of community, communication and clan, in which patriarchy was pivotal) informed the peoples’ understanding of the African nationalism and liberation they were fighting for.

Chipkin also analyzes the social imagining that seems to have guided President Thabo Mbeki’s governing style and policies. Here he clearly shows how radical ideas of African Nationalism changed in the South African Nation of that era. By unpacking some of Mbeki’s rhetoric (his ‘I am an African’ speech for example) Chipkin shows that while “being an African” was located by Mbeki in the context of the struggle against colonialism, freedom was associated with individualism, democracy, the black bourgeoisie, the English language, and breaks with tribal or clan links.

Through the remainder of the book Chipkin argues that this democratic, capitalist, middle-class, national ideal is impossible because it is conscious-
ly or unconsciously based on a Schmittian idea of friend versus enemy: Us and the negative Other who cannot be trusted. To establish this argument Chipkin explores the hostel violence in the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging area, and the violence between the ANC-UDF alliance and KwaZuluNatal-based Inkatha in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as the impact of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He concludes that the violence during the late 1980s and 1990s was about them and us – the perpetrator and the victim who cannot, or do not want, to live together as one community. The TRC, instead of bringing about one coherent South African Nation, was based on the premise of human rights and Christian universalistic ideas of reconciliation, which argued that the victims and the perpetrators were both black and white, African and non-African, and were all part of the universal human society. Thus the TRC did not give a clear demarcation of who was and was not South African.

For Chipkin the building of a national community of citizens in South Africa is impossible until South Africans collectively comprehend that democracy is built on ethical values and the ability to hold difference within the imaging of a specific community. He cites the rebuilding of Manenberg in the Cape after 1994 as an example of the power of ethical citizenship to bring about true re-formation of a community that was divided by violence, race, religion and gangs and, now functions as a stable democracy.

This is an insightful, well researched book, but coming to the end of it I was left asking two questions. First, what about women and their role in the building of the nation? Chipkin is not unaware of gender issues, but the text would have been so much richer if he had been able to weave a deeper account of the experience of women into the debate. Further, he uses a fresh lens through which to discuss issues of identity and politics in South Africa, but fails to take into account the role of religion in the structuring and re-structuring of South African identities. Nevertheless, together with readers like Colin Bundy and Adam Habib, I would recommend that anyone interested in understanding South Africa should engage with this book, for I am sure this will lead to fruitful conversation.
The historian and cultural critic Carol Breckenridge (b. 1942) passed away on the 4th of October, 2009 in New York. She and her husband, Arjun Appadurai, founded the field-defining academic journal Public Culture in 1988. In her death we lost someone deeply special, for she was rare in her desire and striving to relate academic research to issues of public life, whether in the United States (her native country) or in India (her second home) or anywhere else. The very title of the journal was expressive of this concern. One may or may not find antecedent uses of the expression “public culture” before Breckenridge and Appadurai used it, but it would not be wrong to say that it was only after they gave it the novel and political sense it carries today and launched their journal by that name, that “public culture” acquired a conceptual status in the social sciences.

Beginning thus in South Asian studies, Breckenridge and Appadurai opened up their scholarly vistas in the eighties to actively embrace new intellectual winds blowing through American universities as the global process of decolonization came to a climactic end with the dramatic defeat of the United States in Vietnam in 1975. One of the most critical academic events influencing their choices would have been the publication of Edward Said’s insurgent text Orientalism in 1978. The History of Consciousness program at the University of California, Santa Cruz, heralding the coming of postcolonial studies in the US got going in the same year – and it does not seem accidental that the first issue of Public Culture should carry sentiments of solidarity for the journal Inscriptions, a periodical brought out by “His Con” students and academics from Santa Cruz. Inscriptions started what came to be known – and sometimes vilified – as “colonial discourse analysis.” The third important event would have been the publication of Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities in 1982, a text that inaugurated a post-nationalist era of criticism. But the two most important categories inflecting Breckenridge and Appadurai’s projects in the 1980s were globalization and cosmopolitanism, concepts they helped to both define and popularize by what they were to do in that decade and after.

However, the idea of “public culture” as developed by Breckenridge and Appadurai maintained its own distinctive trajectory in the discourse on globalization that has developed since. The emphasis, from early on, was on global cultural flows, underwritten by an assertive feeling that the older categories like “folk,” “popular,” or “mass” did not quite capture the way cultural artifacts and icons - and their bearers, peoples - were now in circulation through the globe, pulled and pushed by the ever-changing forces of the marketplace and coming into constant proximity and contact with that which was once considered “strange” and “unfamiliar.” The resultant cultural formations, while never homogeneous, were so mediatized, commodified, and global as to break down any local/global distinction. They called for some radically new paths of thinking. Breckenridge and Appadurai developed this idea first with regard to...

It is instructive to go back and read that introduction, for it makes clear how all of Breckenridge’s projects in later life would be shaped by this vision. For more than a decade she remained the guiding spirit behind the journal, seeking out new and young authors and projects in different parts of the world. At the same time, she also retained a deep professional and emotional interest in India and tried to bring Indian material into a larger, global conversation around issues that concerned her. As an educator, she initiated the on-site India quarter of the South Asian Civilizations course for undergraduate students at the University of Chicago. As an intellectual, she engaged postcolonial theories in the book she edited with Peter van der Veer in 1993, *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); returned to the question of consumption in *Consuming Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) that she edited in 1995; and continued to address cosmopolitanism in the book of that name that she co-edited with Homi Bhabha, Sheldon Pollock, and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002). In all of these books and in her other writings, South Asian studies retain a strong presence while the analytical impulse is global. The volume on cosmopolitanism came as the last of the “millennium quartet” she planned as special issues (edited by Arjun Appadurai, Dilip Gaonkar, and John and Jean Comaroff) of the Journal to mark the passing on the last millennium.

I first met Carol at a conference in Brighton, England, around 1989. But I really got to know her as a person from 1994 when I visited the University of Chicago where she was then teaching in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations. I had the privilege and honor of becoming her colleague in 1995 when I became a member of the same department where Appadurai and Pollock also taught. Bhaba was our close friend and colleague in the English department. By the time I came into her life, she had already begun treatment for cancer. All I saw in Carol in these years was courage in the face of a trying illness and the indomitable and generous spirit with which she edited the journal and associated projects. I never saw her miss a class because of her illness. Never did she complain either about the pain or discomfort of her condition. Instead, she was always ready to discuss the disease in an academic and inquisitive spirit, as if her body had opened up a new text to be read and shared. Most remarkable was her capacity to weave friends into projects that also gave meanings to their collective lives. The person in her easily elicited warm affection from others – she was always ready for a joke, always ready to listen to a new idea, to argue about it, and to accept friends for what they were. Arjun and Carol moved to the east coast around 2000 and Carol soon began to teach at the New School. They founded Pukar, an organization for urban knowledge, research, and action in Mumbai in 2001 and would spend part of every year in that city. I would see her less frequently in these years. But the search for new projects that could combine the active and the contemplative went on throughout her life, down, I am sure, to the very last day.

Carol’s battle with the disease intensified in the recent past but it never took away her spirit. The last time I saw her was in November 2008 in Lisbon. We took a walk together in the gardens of the mansion that houses the Gulbenkian Foundation. Carol needed the help of a stick in walking. But she showed me around the garden and talked about life - hers, theirs, and mine. She was all about life. All about the art of living in this confused, globalized world and making sense of it all the same. For me, she was indeed the spirit of our shared and troubled times.