

DIFFICULT LIBERATION: READING LEVINAS IN AFRICA

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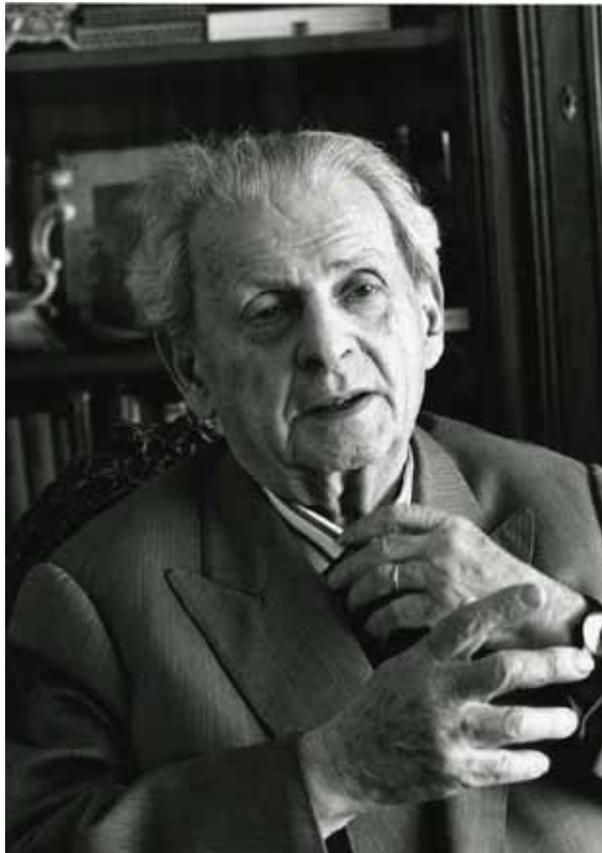
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Violence, justice, peace. The challenge faced by post-apartheid South Africans to reconstruct and reconcile rather than give in to fear, hate and despair is underpinned, suggests Helen Douglas, by the challenge of finding the courage to understand what we know and draw conclusions. Extending Levinas beyond Levinas, Douglas reveals a Moebius loop between his call to find the basic goodness at the beginning of every social relation and the South African concept of ubuntu.

Let Jews be Jews. Let Christians be Christians. Let Africans be Africans and Europeans Europeans. Let white people and black people be. Let those with many flags be. Let those with none be.

In a raging tempest, people do what they can with whatever they have, just to survive. It's very immediate and real. Unhinged from our normal routine, we may well be surprised to discover what we are capable of. After the storm, stunned by sudden calm, we begin to look around again, to clear away the wreckage, to discover and to mourn for what has been lost. We start to think about rebuilding and going on with our lives.

After centuries of the violence that Africa has weathered at the hands of Europe, how are black people and white people to live together now? What are we to trust in? How to begin again?



Portrait of Levinas

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In South Africa, the first democratic government introduced a set of socio-economic policies called the Reconstruction and Development Programme. Its premise was that the work of social inclusion and reconstruction – building what Desmond Tutu called “the rainbow nation of God” – could itself be the engine of economic development. At the same time, the moral legacy of apartheid (although not of colonialism and slavery; a line was drawn) was referred to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

It was the right idea. But fifteen years later, we sit with stupid levels of inequality, unemployment, poverty, corruption and violence. Good people are working to analyse, explain and address these conditions, and South Africans characteristically have a deep confidence in their own capacity to “make a plan” and find a way. No doubt everything necessary for democratic development is available to the powers that be – if they (and we) are skilful and daring and lucky enough. If there is the will.

But there is also an injury at the level of the heart, to our humanness, that comes from a fractured history and the memory and the experience of brutality. If it were just a storm that had hit us, bad weather, a natural disaster, there would be no real problem. We'd be getting on with it, as people do. That there is such a problem indicates the difference between the violence of nature and the violence of man. After human violence, there is the question of justice.

For justice, it is important to determine what was done by whom to whom and what happened then, to tell our stories of force and resistance, to hear and record the endless catalogue of harm. But even if we could gather every bit of evidence, it would not be sufficient. “It is not knowledge we lack; what is missing is the courage to understand what we know and draw conclusions.” This is the central message of Sven Lindquist's book *Exterminate the Brutes*, which follows the logic of extermination behind Europe's 19th-century imperial “adventures” in Africa that lead directly to the gates of Auschwitz.

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If we are going to reconstruct and reconcile, we need the courage to dig down to the roots of our experience, to understand what we know and to draw conclusions. It takes courage because we are terribly frightened of what we will find. Sometimes we are close to despair. What are we, that this could have happened? Is it violence all the way down, with us? Fear and hatred: as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be? Is it world without end, amen?

We read Levinas, in Africa and elsewhere, because he says *No, look closer*. The world is always being interrupted. By what? By the powerless Face of an other that calls us to our responsibility. Look closer, look carefully. There is a basic goodness to be found at the beginning of every social relation. “Every social relation”, he says in *Totality and Infinity*, “leads like a shunt ... back to the presentation of the other to the same without the intermediary of any image or sign, solely by the expression of the face.” He’s not saying they *should*. He claims they *do*. *Every* social relation. And that philosophy’s job is to trace these forms back to proximity.

This is encouraging.

There is a basic scene of historical injustice that we post-colonials in Africa continue to live with. It has two antagonists: those who were generally oppressors and those who were generally oppressed.

Consider first the situation of the oppressors, the Europeans, from the strangers who started all the trouble to we who continue to benefit from race-based privilege. Beyond our intention, beyond our choice, we whites find ourselves in the wrong, simply because we were born into a certain history, implicated on arrival, already five hundred pages into the book. And also, of course, to the extent that this is none of our doing, as innocent and blameless as infants. It’s not fair.

To realise our own freedom, we need a way to escape this inexorable history and so, first, we have to face it. Raised on Christian beliefs about the wages of sin, this also scares us half to death. But there is also a genuine desire to make things right, to live together in freedom. A variety of strategies are in play. One is simply to declare history finished or irrelevant, a wishful thought that we could just reset to zero and begin afresh. Another is to succumb to history in shame and white guilt, perhaps to withdraw from the present in order to make amends for the past, or at least to minimise the continuing privilege of whiteness. But there is no freedom there. Plus it’s not very useful, and it’s not what black people are asking for. There’s also something tricky about confession, especially confessing for what one has not done: it can be taken as an invitation to more violence by both the perpetrators and their victims. Nor does it seem that we can effectively settle our account. Reparation is beyond reckoning, although it must somehow be made. Could we declare bankruptcy and ask for our debt to be forgiven? We are certainly not bankrupt, and I think there is work for us to do.

The problem with all these strategies is that we whites still think we can choose and decide for our-

selves and by ourselves: that sense of primacy, taking charge of our destiny by the force of our will. We think that is where our freedom resides. But it may be precisely what keeps us trapped.

Gayatri Spivak has a suggestion: “What we are asking is that the holders of the hegemonic discourse should de-hegemonise their position and themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other.” Does that mean just turning the tables, so the master becomes the slave? On the contrary. Reading Levinas, we begin to learn the possibilities of a certain passivity, of a “relaxation of virility without cowardice”.

As the historically oppressed, Africans have a different challenge: to establish a place in the world on their own terms, and to take up a position vis-à-vis Europe. At one level, in community, to find solace and to express the beauty of scorned cultural ways and traditions. At another, as the injured party, to navigate the terrain of a moral high ground, to avoid the temptations of victimhood or vengeance. Like Jews after the Holocaust, Africans need to resolve their “national question” and enter into history on their own terms.

But they bear an even greater vocation to the extent that it falls largely to them to establish the peace in whose name we all went to war. Writing in the *Mail and Guardian* on 24 September, 2009, Njabulo Ndebele remarked: “it is vital to recognise that ... South Africans may not hold the same quantum of responsibility and accountability. If you are black at this historic juncture, you hold the greater share ... because we told ourselves that ... we had the mission

not only to free ourselves from oppression, but also to free the oppressor. We deeply believed this. What ... is our assessment of how we have carried out this task and this responsibility?"

Faced with such a daunting assignment, black Africans are also reading Levinas. In the first *Wiser Review* in 2004, Achille Mbembe refers to Jewish and black thought as "two of the most powerful traditions that have taken to its deepest philosophical consequences our understanding of bondage, captivity, exile and death – and therefore of freedom". He brings Levinas and other Jewish writers together with Fanon and other black writers in order to examine "the relationship between freedom and ethics – a freedom that is aware of itself as an ethical practice."

Europeans who want to escape history; Africans who want to enter into it. As Levinas found with Jews and Christians, our antagonistic fates may also prove complementary. And so we are reading Levinas to see how that might work out.

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I am guided here by the plan Levinas sets out in the Foreword to his *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. It is perceptibly written with the same sensibility one finds in his writing on subjectivity, where opening to the other in responsibility for the other's suffering produces within the subject (or produces the subject as) an alignment of the two realms of be-

ing and ethics. What describes the *I* in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* here also describes Judaism.

Levinas says that the essays, compiled over the years following the Second World War, bear witness to: "a living sense of tradition, one nourished by stern texts that are more alive than life itself" that require "a keen ear" and the work of "difficult exegesis". Then, in four paragraphs, he sketches a path of rapprochement between Jews and Christians in Europe, after great violence:

1. After the war, Jews turned inward, going back to their roots to once again take up a position vis-à-vis Christian Europe.
2. The "polemic" is "immediately" interrupted and raised (Levinas's readers will recognise that this "immediate interruption" and the dimension of height signals *proximity*, the *Face*) ... by the memory of Christian "open-heartedness" and "fraternal acts" ... in which the two "antagonistic fates are shown to be complementary".
3. But this neighbourly state is in turn interrupted by, and gains meaning from, the rise of the starving masses of the Third World (*the third party*, other others), which reminds Jews and Christians of the sacred responsibility to nourish.
4. This "inversion" – within the pursuit of identity, with no change of direction – defines Judaism ... and gives rise to Jewish ritual, and Jewish service without thought of reward – its deep meaning shared with Christian liturgy.

If Levinas is right about social relations, we should similarly be able to take *any* social aspect of our identity – race, nationality, language, religion, class,

our ideologies and our philosophies – and follow it back to its earliest origins, to see where a movement towards interiority and separation is redirected back into the world and called to service by the weird gravity of ethical alterity – and also where it hardens itself against that call or is moved to violence. Throughout his writing we find Levinas doing this, as a Jew, as a European, and as a philosopher. "How good it is to be a Jew!" he exclaims in *Difficult Freedom*.

Nevertheless, it is odd to read Levinas in Africa. He routinely dismisses as "underdeveloped" or "exotic" any nations that are not "people of the Book" – not monotheists descended from good Greek and Hebrew lines. For example, in this Foreword to *Difficult Freedom*, the "third party" Third World appears like a *deus ex machina*, entering from the wings to bond the two real protagonists: European Jews and European Christians. Why is it that they arise as "ravaged by hunger" rather than ravaged by centuries of European greed and inhumanity? What has happened to justice?

Levinas has mistaken the Third World, but the corrective is surely to carry on testing his universal claim of ethical interrelatedness beyond Europe's borders. Extend Levinas beyond Levinas: why not?

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We could consider, just for example, black South African subjects who similarly turned inward after apartheid ended, looking to their origins in order to

take up a position in freedom. Their work was not an exegesis of ancient texts, but of a long-lived communal tradition that rests on a particular understanding of humanness called *ubuntu*. This is usually rendered in English as “I am because we are”.

Appeals to *ubuntu* are ubiquitous in South African life, from law courts to boardrooms to daily newspapers. In a Heritage Day opinion piece in the *Cape Times* on 28 September, 2009, Simphiwe Sesanti wrote of the need to educate children to be “true Africans” so that they “will know from an early age that it is culturally offensive when one child eats bread ... without offering it to the one who is without.” How good it is to be an African!

The “we are” of *ubuntu* is profoundly open to third parties, to the Face of the Other, to strangers and the indigent. And its “I am” is also overburdened by boundless responsibility. But it is not identical to Levinas’s analysis of ethical subjectivity. Levinas’s “ethics as first philosophy” and African *ubuntu* are more like mirror images on a Moebius strip. Levinas deconstructs and challenges the excesses of a European notion of individual freedom, but African readers of Levinas have a different starting place. It follows that the questions they bring to philosophy – and their phenomenological analyses – are bound to be different than his. It will be interesting to see how they proceed.

If we white and black Africans are all caught up in an intrigue of proximity and responsibility: what new understanding do we get from reading Levinas?

First, he provides a different understanding of the way that liberation from violent oppression must



Dance 1
Flickr: John Curley

pass through the demands of Justice. What has been done to call apartheid to account is correct, but a deeper signification is missing. Justice, like the subject and the Face, is a portal between the realms of being and ethics. As subjectivity expiates for the violence of presence, Justice can expiate the violence of history. Justice here is not a *concept* but a *work* that, as Levinas suggests in the essay “The I and the Totality”, “consists of introducing equality into a world turned over to the interplay and the mortal strife of freedoms.”

That phrase is found at the end of a typically dense paragraph that could itself provide a schema of sorts for our difficult liberation; that is, for both disengaging from history and entering into it, for justice:

We are we because, commanding from identity to identity, we are disengaged from the totality and from history. But we are *we* in that we command

each other to a work through which we recognise each other. To be disengaged from the totality while at the same time accomplishing a work in it is not to stand against the totality, but for it – that is, in its service. To serve the totality is to fight for justice. The totality is constituted by violence and corruption. The work consists in introducing equality into a world turned over to the interplay and the mortal strife of freedoms.

The totality here could be anything we identify ourselves with, such as ethnicity, religion, nationality: all the structures of interest which are constituted in violence, but which are nevertheless necessary for the material work of justice.

Second, reading Levinas also might show us a way out of the quagmire of identity politics that liberal multiculturalism – which remains suspicious of difference – cannot. How do you resist racism (or encompass diversity), without perpetuating the myths of race? In the private sphere, how can one acknowledge and observe a communal identity without it congealing into essentialism or fundamentalism? In the public sphere, how do you create a non-racial society that attends to the claims of people oppressed as black? How, for instance, can you track the progress of black university students or other affirmative action programmes without keeping files based on racial categorisation? South African policy makers and intellectuals struggle with this.

[reading Levinas also might show us a way out of the quagmire of identity politics](#)

These are questions that reading Levinas allows us to approach differently. First of all, is ethical responsibility a function of identity? If so, my allegiance is to my own kind in the great chain of being and dif-

ference, my “us” posed against some other “them”. Then the natural justice of self-preservation would extend to cover what is mine, what I cherish, what I choose, what depends upon me and falls within my mastery.

Or is identity already a function of responsibility for the truly other, even the truly other in the face of the ones nearest to me?

The African National Congress has historically defined the aim of the South African “national democratic revolution” as the liberation of “black people in general, and Africans in particular”. In this formula, “national” roughly refers to indigenous (African) rule and the end of colonialism; “democratic” means universal suffrage and the end of authoritarian minority rule; “revolution” signals a decisive break with those political economies; “black people” includes all those who were targeted by apartheid law – coloured, Indian or African; while “Africans” means exclusively the latter, formerly categorised as “native” or “Bantu”, those who form the majority of the population and who, as a group, faced the greatest oppression under apartheid. With this characterisation, the ANC was able to bring together a famously broad church of nationalists, communists, trade unions and civic organisations.

Throughout the years of struggle, its political reports spoke in dialectical Marxist terms of “contradictions” and “motive forces”, with strategic analyses that viewed the political arena as inhabited by various national groups and social classes acting more or less rationally in pursuit of their own interests. Political activity was understood as the advancement-of-being of this group and that group, and the dynamic antagonisms and alliances that arise from this. Undeniably, this is a valid, useful and neces-

sary perspective. But it doesn’t get to the heart of the matter.

If the struggle against oppression reduced simply to self-interest, there would have been no place for a white revolutionary like Bram Fischer. Levinas opens up an earlier meaning, beyond essence and interest, revealing ethics as the hidden source of political activity. “With the arrival of the other man,” he writes, “there is something more important than my life. That is the life of the other.”

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To transpose *Difficult Freedom* from Nazi Europe to apartheid South Africa: “the experience of [apartheid] brought many [blacks] into fraternal contact with [whites] who opened their hearts to them – which is to say, risked everything for their sake.”

In their different ways, whether as traitors or heroes to their blood- or class-identified communities, black and white anti-apartheid activists were also always “for the Other”, comrades in the service of a common humanity that doesn’t depend on commonality.

The scene that has obsessed us since 1994 has been cast in black and white, probably necessarily so. But that polemic is also immediately interrupted and raised when we come face to face with the other others, those before whom we – both white and black – find ourselves responsible. Those who have been excluded by the narrowing of the frame of justice: Indian South Africans and those from the array of

communities bundled together under the label “coloured”. Those who, it is said, were not white enough then and are not black enough now. Beyond them, all the stranger neighbours, refugees and foreigners, the marginalised and vulnerable, the ancestors and the new generations. It gets complicated. But this very complexity reveals that the “antagonistic destinies” of Europe and Africa are perhaps complementary after all. We who have been so immersed with each other are brought up short by these third parties, called to re-examine our political programmes and our claims of entitlement, called to the work of justice, to understand what we know and to draw conclusions, commanding each other to this work in which we recognise each other.

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Levinas writes: “For the little humanity that adorns the earth, a relaxation of essence ... is needed.” This call to responsibility, which comes from elsewhere yet does not alienate, disengages the self from an imperious or desperate identification with the Same, with the commonality of a community – but without rejecting or disdaining it either. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with where we come from, and no need to beg to be otherwise. Indeed, our communities supply the resources that allow us to be present and useful for each other. Remember Levinas’s claim: every social relation leads, like a shunt, back to a singular responsibility for peace, “for the near and the far-off”. This is as true for us “Europeans” as anyone.

A commitment to justice entails understanding history. A commitment to peace entails transcending it. What could it be, Mbembe's "freedom that is aware of itself as an ethical practice?" The freedom of Africans who would enter history as the liberators of their oppressors? Of Europeans who would allow themselves to be liberated by Africa? These questions lead us to interrogate our economic, political and social relations and conditions. But even earlier, to try to grasp the deep significance of what it is to be human. An ethical practice: my responsibility for the freedom of the other, my freedom that does not begin from me.

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As Levinas writes in "A Religion for Adults":

This freedom is not in the least bit pathological, or strained or heartrending. It relegates the values to do with roots and institutes other forms of fidelity and responsibility. Man, after all, is not a tree, and humanity is not a forest. It promotes more human forms, for they presuppose a conscious commitment; freer forms, for they allow us to glimpse a human society and horizons vaster than those of the village where we were born.

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