

THE WHEELS IN MY HEAD GO ROUND AND ROUND

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SOLIDARITY AND THE NON-RACIAL (POLITICAL STRUGGLE 1)

“I’m not going into definitions with academics. Making resolutions and policy is one thing. These things evolve.” Ahmed Kathrada

He made it sound too easy! As if he, Sisulu, Mandela and the others had just sailed into a non-racial ANC. Building on the Congress Movement, it was they who made it such through their lived work. Brought to life with integrity, discipline, trust, humour, love. Practicing (non-racial) freedom, dignity and equality *here and now*, continually. And of course having a shared radical political project: not non-racialism for its own sake but as a method of struggle for national liberation. These things evolve.

RACISM (THE DREAM 1)

Achille: “The dream of a time-to-come when a person will be valued as a person among persons” Twin processes of racism (modernism, capitalism): “living persons refashioned as objects and commodities”; “the lived experience of surface/depth...”

Racism is a lie, a falsehood, an optical (precisely) illusion. (Levinas: “Ethics is an optics.”) For both blacks and whites. This is good news. We show the lie in our humanness, our resistance here and now, as we are

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able. To dream that “one day we will have faces” is to defer that day indefinitely – as someone swimming after a beach ball pushes it away with each stroke. Rather dream that we *wake up*. “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.” Without underestimating how excruciating that awakening might be. *What are you prepared to risk?*

There’s not enough thinking about what racism has done to white consciousness, how crazy-making it is to be taught (and taught to reproduce) false beliefs that “this” is not a man, that “those people” are not people. To learn to ignore, justify, or explain away such *evident* presence, such *evident* suffering. (*Twelve Years a Slave* is a film about psychotic white people – except Brad Pitt, the good Canadian, ha).

What does it mean to inherit an intellectual culture stained with that legacy? How much is Western empiricism – the subject/object split, the unexamined observer – implicated in protecting us from knowing what we have done? A task for thinking: if we took this on, what could be retained? For, as it says on the workshop [website](#), “democracy, freedom, dignity, equality, the human, universality, justice” are also Western philosophical and political values.

Thus the importance of Siba Grovogui’s question: what are our modalities of evidence? And thus the importance of cultivating one’s own reason, sensibility,

sense of veracity, to know the truth when we hear it and be able to test it, which is what I mean by “philosophical practice”.

WOPKO JENSMA (from spanner in the what? works)

i was born 26 July 1939 in ventersdorp/ i found myself in a situation.../ i hope to live to the age of sixty/ i hope to leave some evidence/ that i inhabited this world/ that i sensed my situation/ that i created something/ out of my situation/ out of my life/ that i lived/ as human/ alive/ i
(that’s it)

AS PRAYER OR INVOCATION (THE DREAM 2)

“a messianic supplement without reducing to a messiah” “the diabolical”

The religious or spiritual tropes that keep popping up (hello Josslyn) – how do they function? gravity of evil; dimension of transcendence, of openness, possibility, workability. Come what may. Faith? Joy? Relaxing with uncertainty, remaining steadfast and attentive. But not a progressivist view of inevitable victory, ugh. Akbar Abbas: to carry on with little hope while not succumbing to despair.

Some participants seem to have a fixed idea of what an enlightened non-racial future should look like, insist that the world adjust itself to their vision, and take offence when it does not. Political correctness and self-righteousness – emanating, so it seems, from fear, anger, pain (past and anticipated) and self-doubt. Suspicion is very clever, looks for (and finds!) treachery everywhere, with its beady little eye. It’s hard to relate to, not very generous, not helpful. The way to work with trust is to be trustworthy oneself. Another practice.

SACRIFICE/ OBLIGATION/ GIFT (POLITICAL STRUGGLE 2)

First of all, you can't preach it; monstrous to call for others to sacrifice themselves. One's contribution to the struggle, where it includes violence to one's self, has to be freely given. So, I'm not talking about calculated "economic" risk, investment and dividend; nor about throwing oneself into the fire of hatred, revenge and destruction; nor the reckless disregard of despair. I am thinking about "armed struggle as an act of love" (quoting Kgositsile and Guevera), as an engagement that maintains relationship with self, comrades, the people (the "cause") and the enemy. Thinking of Ruha Benjamin's "What are we prepared to give? It has to be everything", and hoping it won't come to that.

(We often didn't get this right in the struggle (ANC/MK), macho demands for more than a person was able or willing to give, and then not being able to acknowledge the damage that was suffered. Damage inflicted by the enemy, or each other, that we failed to attend to. Combatant as thing or commodity. I think this is something the Robben Island leaders did attend to and were more likely to get right. Perhaps it is another factor in our inability to keep our heroes in mind or even tend to their graves. And the impossibilities of telling our stories – like the Swazis we met.)

What is asked in the struggle has to be given freely, without duress. At the same time, there is a sense of obligation, one that comes from outside but with which one identifies oneself. As Levinas quotes Dostoyevsky: "We are each responsible for everything, and I more than the others." Unlike classificatory identities based on blood, race, gender etc., here is a singular subjective identity. One finds oneself in a situation.

It is also continually negotiated. What you give has great value (after all, it is the source of all value), so you don't just throw it away. No pearls before swine! But negotiated like a path: it is not a contract (again, ref Siba and the Strait of Malacca). It is not enforceable, but neither is it violable. It also does something weird with time.

Thinking sacrifice along with the idea of a "radical gift", one that asks for and gets nothing in exchange, which also comes up in Ghassan Hage's a-racism paper (in the mode of "mutuality"), and which seems one of the few "goods" that neoliberalism can't gobble up and refashion as a commodity or fetish. Hage is right and Derrida is wrong: such gifts happen all the time. Generosity and generation (*genera* of another kind).

Kathrada's story of Sisulu's generosity: "He didn't just give away whatever he had – he gave away what everyone else had, too!" What did Walter give away? He made free with them. They forgave him.

free. from an Indo-European root meaning "to love", shared by *friend*.

forgive. from *for-* "completely" + *giefan* "give"

"INDEBTEDNESS AND INTIMACY"

(*a note from Swaziland*)

The other thing I'm thinking about, in terms of particularly human resources against neoliberalism (which is unable to distinguish between corporations and persons), is the goodness of debt, of social or personal indebtedness that we could never repay and would never want to. At moments, The Bus offered a free exchange of ideas (a truly free market). It was hard to know which thought belonged to whom, and to whom credit was due. One receives it as a gift, out of thin air! One

is honoured and one honours the gift, holds it close. Even to express gratitude would be churlish. (Levinas: "We give thanks to give thanks!") And even when I can identify an idea with some person, it starts to feel artificial to single them out. How can I say, "as Achille said", without acknowledging his family, his grandmother, his colleagues and teachers and even his enemies? All of Cameroon and France and South Africa! No, it's nonsensical! Yet I remain happily beholden.

CRITICAL THEORY, LIVING PRACTICE

(*From "Giving birth to Derrida's mother: Philosophical practice at the end of philosophy", forthcoming in Women in Philosophical Counselling, De Paula and Raabe, eds., Northvale NJ: Lexington Books. This bit comes from The Bus.*)

One line of critical philosophy comes from within the lineage of Western critical philosophy and Europe's own struggles for liberty, equality and solidarity – which must not be forgotten. These theorists steal fire at the line drawn between centre and periphery, pointing to crossovers and permeations and exposing the workings of force. Other critique comes from interdisciplinary feminist and gender studies, post-colonial studies and critical race theory: different thinking by and for philosophy's historically marginalised "others". Drawing resources from specific embodied identities and histories – as black, as woman, as native or subaltern – they work to restore the dignity and worth of forms of life and ways of knowing that have been misunderstood, misrepresented and debased by "European civilisation".

Although Levinas has been justifiably criticised in these circles for remarks that are, at best, insensitive

to anti-black racism and colonialism, his fundamental critique of Western thought should not in turn be dismissed, nor his work received as simply another text among texts. It can give critical theorists and social justice activists pause for thought, for a thought beyond difference. If Levinas is right [that human consciousness is caught up in an inordinate ethical responsibility for others], and critical theory attends only to the realm of being – to matters of politics, power and interest, necessary as these are – are we not at risk of forgetting its latent origin in the responsibility of the one for the other that founds our humanness? If we fail to remember (to unconceal), in our practice, that justice is first of all justice for the other, and first of all one's own responsibility (and freedom), we risk instituting further violence and injustice in our struggles against them. If we don't realise in our practice that the equality of all, here and now, rests on one's own inequality before the face of the other, this untransformed thinking will not move us, as it could, towards a fully human philosophy, rather than yet another philosophy of the human. ☺