

Antagonism, social critique and the “violent reverie”

Abstract

This paper opens up a series of windows on racialised life in past and present South Africa as a way arguing for the value of antagonism as a mode of critical enquiry. Sampling a cross-section of recent writing on South African race politics, the paper calls attention both to strident critiques of white privilege, and to concerns over allegedly anti-white populism. Chabani Manganyi’s notion of the violent reverie is used to argue that such oppositional critique affords a crucial expressive modality, which perhaps unexpectedly, lessens the subjective (self-directed) violence of the historically oppressed and decreases rather than increases the possibility of objective violence between oppressor and oppressed. The paper also draws on a series of philosophical, psychoanalytic and political motifs – the ideas of “no hope”, the Lacanian concept of the imaginary, and Mngxitama’s notion of the failure of interracial dialogue – as a means of drawing attention to the readiness with which we often succumb to comforting social myths.

Introduction

For a journal that begun publication ten years before the official demise of apartheid in 1994, and that has continued two decades beyond that landmark date, it is unsurprising that PINS has often returned to the themes of racism and racialization. This broad topic has been the focus of several special issues of the journal (see PINS issues 31 and 40, special issues on contemporary racism and the Apartheid Archive, respectively), and a variety of different analyses and perspectives. As such it is appropriate, in reflecting on 30 years of PINS, to consider how the thread constituted by such discussions might connect to current debates and political perspectives on race and racism in the post-Mandela South African context. In what follows, I open up a series of windows on the topic of racialised life in (past and present) South Africa, before drawing a conclusion about the value of antagonism as a mode of enquiry that is of particular interest to readers and future contributors to PINS.

“No hope”

In May 2014 I attended a lecture by sociologist Werner Bonefeld, a specialist on the Frankfurt School. Following the arguments

Derek Hook

Department of Psychology,
Duquesne University,
Pittsburgh,
USA

& Department of Psychology,
University of Pretoria,
Pretoria

Keywords:

*antagonism, anti-white
populism, Manganyi,
racialization, violent reverie,
white privilege*

developed in his (2014) book *Critical theory and the critique of political economy*, Bonefeld unsmilingly recounted the basic elements of Theodor Adorno's analysis of the effects of capitalism on modern culture and consciousness. In a sober and unvarying tone, he stressed how the logic of capital has saturated society and consciousness to such an extent that even our most elementary experiences of temporality are today effectively over-determined by the agendas of economic profitability.

The audience, taken aback by the bleak diagnosis of the current socio-economic conjuncture offered by Bonefeld, was dis comforted, dissatisfied with this vision in which no future prosperity or recovery could be imagined. The most memorable point of the lecture came when Bonefeld responded to a contribution from the floor, to the complaint that Bonefeld's analysis made it sound as if there was no conceivable hope for the future. Avoiding the implicit request in the question, in other words, to outline one or two germs of optimism in the months and years to come, Bonefeld responded bluntly: "There is no hope".

The sociologist went on to say that investing critical theory with hope would come dangerously close to treating it – critical theory – as a form of religiosity. Doing so would be tantamount to believing that Walter Benjamin's figure of the Angel of History was coming to save us. Much incredulity and discussion followed on from Bonefeld's summary dismissal of hope. It was a wonderful moment, one which made it clear the degree to which social critical commentary is typically conditioned by an implicit proviso: be as critical as you want, so long as your critique entails a note of hope for the future.

Two useful ideas could be extrapolated from Bonefeld's standpoint. Firstly, the very gesture of hoping for an improved world can undercut the agency of the subject invested in such a hopeful belief. That is, hope all too easily assumes the form of an imagined rescuer (such as, in Bonefeld's comments, Walter Benjamin's Angel of History) who is relied upon to deliver us. Such a figure thus relieves us of our own agency, our own duty to assume responsibility for the dire social and historical circumstances within which we find ourselves. Secondly, by believing that "things aren't as bad as all that", that "a better future is on the horizon", we delude ourselves as to the extent of the current crises, and go on to develop inaccurate diagnoses and analyses of our social, economic and historical conjuncture, once again believing that things will change for the better simply because they must.

There was as such an ethical dimension to Bonefeld's (2014) insistence that the correct (early Frankfurt School) critical theory posture is one in which there is no hope. Bonefeld was, in the first instance, refusing to allow his audience to delegate the responsibility for change to an Other, to some or other rescuing figure who would swoop down at the last moment and save us. Hence his comment on religiosity: a form of hope that implies salvation must be rejected insofar as it relies on someone else (God, History, etc.) to change, or indeed, to save, society, us. Bonefeld was likewise – our second point – refusing to participate in an imaginary game, in the construction of a comforting myth with which we might console ourselves and mask the extent of our current social and political predicament. Put in more psychoanalytic terms: Bonefeld's unsentimental rejection of hope can be read as a principled denial of the illusions of (social) fantasy. That is to say: what is truly difficult is not talking about the dire conditions of our current socio-economic predicament. Such circumstances can easily be anesthetized with beatific – or indeed fetishistic – constructions that allow us to picture a social reality in which our own particular forms of enjoyment or privilege are still, nonetheless, gratified, protected. Far more difficult by far is to confront changing social circumstances in a way that does away with those two omnipresent narrative elements of everyday politics: the figure of the scapegoat and the promise of an improved future.

Screening the social

What is the pertinence of the above anecdote in a paper commemorating 30 years of the publication of **PINS**? Is it to endorse Bonefeld's message of "no hope" in respect of the post-apartheid context? Might we posit it as a vanishing-point of critique that has guided the best of the particular brand of social critique and commentary advanced within **PINS** for the past three decades? Perhaps so, although this message should, as I will go on to argue, be read in a qualified sense.

It is a good few years ago now that Stuart Hall (1992) remarked on the fantasies that come to the forefront in popular culture. He stressed in particular how certain instances of social fantasy work essentially to conceal underlying forms of social antagonism. Hall had in mind certain constantly reiterated motifs – such as that of the "multi-racial" coupling of one white and one black cop in many US crime dramas – that in effect proved that the opposite was still the norm (that is, the fact of ongoing tensions between races). In subsequent years the same theme has been given a Lacanian gloss, as in Žižek's (1997) insistence on how ideology often functions as a fantasy, that is, as a screen shielding a type of social incommensurability, obscuring the "real" of an underlying deadlock or antagonism that cannot easily be processed or explained away.

This screening function is as much an ideological as a psychical process. In Lacanian terms it would be considered an imaginary function. Lacan's (2006) notion of the mirror-stage maintains that in facing certain disconcerting or fractured scenes – the paradigmatic case being that of one's own uncoordinated body-in-pieces in infancy – the subject "imaginarizes" the scene in question. That is to say, the subject projects a greater degree of coherence and harmony than in fact exists, much in the same way that they tend to prefer a narrative to one which is fragmented or cut. This, for Lacan, is one of the primary functions of the ego, which is why he repeatedly emphasizes that it functions via types of *meconnaissance* (mis-recognition, or mis-knowing). As Pfaller (2005) notes, in his impressive summary of Žižek's theorizations of ideology, it is precisely this facet of Lacan's teaching that Althusser was drawn to in seeking to supplement his theory of ideology. This conceptualization works well in explaining how entire societies have been content to misrecognize themselves and to be comforted by ideological illusions which, in historical hindsight, seem barely credible. There is an affective – in fact a loving – relationship to such willing states of misrecognition. In this respect, Žižek often cites Mannoni's (1968) adage of ideology derived from Freud's notion of disavowal, "I know that it is not the case, but I am still believing it", stressing thus the tender relationship that is maintained by subjects of ideology to the illusions they have adopted.

We might add to Hall's above cited example with one drawn from the post-apartheid context. I have in mind here the advertising images that have come to be endlessly regurgitated in the context of sports spectatorship: a multi-racial group of (typically male) supporters celebrating a hard-won sporting victory with a few beers. The multiple variations of this theme – largely unchanged for the last 20 years – could be read as constituting a matrix such as that Lévi-Strauss (1963) devised for recording the proliferating instantiations of the Oedipus complex. In both cases the myth in question will be deployed again and again in an ever-widening set of variations until the underlying "real" (be it sexual/familial or socio-political) is itself dissipated. That is to say: there is no end to this advertising imagery in a divided South Africa; the more such scenes are deployed in national advertising strategies, the more we can be sure that they are not as yet a spontaneous or wide-spread phenomenon. We have thus another opportunity to reconsider the critical import of Bonefeld's declaration of "no hope". This is a gesture which refuses to conform to, indeed, which aims to puncture, a given social myth.

“Born unfrees”

There is an interesting echo of the “no hope” message in Simphiwe Dana’s Foreword to Malaika wa Azania’s compelling (2014) autobiography, **Memoirs of a born free**. Wa Azania’s memoir, at once a coming of age story and an account of her own dawning political consciousness, provides a vital perspective with which to consider the future of radical and/or decolonisation politics in South Africa. The narrative adopts the form of a disillusioned letter to the ANC, and it plots the author’s involvement with a variety of political organizations, from the Black Consciousness group Blackwash, to Andile Mngxitama’s September National Imbizo, to Julius Malema’s Economic Freedom Fighters. The book outlines the necessity of “rewriting the narrative of native identity” (2014: 150), and describes how the jubilant mood of the Mandela era that wa Azania experienced in childhood gradually gave way to a realization of the many ways in which the dream of national liberation had failed. Simphiwe Dana’s (2014) introduction includes the following: “I find no hope in [wa Azania’s] ... words – only a lonely young woman who knows what needs to be done but whose ideas she can find no space for in the world she occupies” (wa Azania, 2014: x).

Let us turn to a few representative extracts from wa Azania’s text. Doing so will allow us to extend our survey of a mode of critical intervention that succumbs neither to prevailing social myths nor to the lures of sentimentality or false optimism.

“[I]n South Africa ... the same system that had given oxygen to the apartheid government continues to be in existence, to define the face of the republic. That system is capitalism, a brutal system that can only survive through the exploitation of the majority by the elite minority who owns the means of production, primarily, land. It is a system that necessitates that a labour reserve be created to sell to the elite, who, to maximise profit, must necessarily exploit the workers. It is a system that creates a welfare state so that the poor can remain indebted to the state that feeds them. It is a system that is both anti-poor and anti-majoritarian. In South Africa, it is also a system that is anti-black, because while the political breakthrough of 1994 deracialised governance, privilege and poverty continue to have a race: the former is white while the latter is black” (wa Azania, 2014: 5).

Wa Azania’s insistence on deracialization as an unfinished project brings to mind one of the most notable essays on race politics published in recent years by **PINS**, namely the late Siyanda Ndlovu’s (2010) aptly titled “Deracialisation! What deracialisation? There’s no end to race”. The above passage is crucial also inasmuch as it brings to the forefront a longstanding mode of critique that many in the neo-liberal South African academy would prefer not to hear. That is to say, wa Azania keeps the critique of racist social structures firmly tied to that of capitalism itself. These comments on racialised capitalism chime with the call made by Hayes (2013) to consider again the importance of the critique of capitalism in **PINS** and thus act as a prompt to further critical enquiry of this sort. Wa Azania continues:

“The South Africa that we see today is but a different version of yesterday’s South Africa. It is a South Africa where racialism and racism are no longer imposed through violence ... nor are they constitutionalised as was the case during the apartheid dispensation. Racism and racialization are now institutionalised; they are the threads that hold together the fibre of South African society” (wa Azania, 2014: 5).

This sobering indictment steers well clear of the impulse encapsulated in the ANC’s recent

election slogan, “We have a good story to tell”, that is, that of offering an affirming – even mythical – narrative of progress. It is powerful also because it has been penned by a so-called “born free”, a member of a younger generation of South Africans, who, it is often assumed, will necessarily have a more positive outlook on the country’s political future. Wa Azania does not conform to this expectation, and writes:

“Democracy is impossible without political freedom but political freedom is not the ultimate objective of the revolutionary struggle. The ultimate objective is economic freedom, the liberation of the masses of our people from the clutches of economic bondage. But our people remain in chains. So, what about this generation, which has the mission of freeing the people from these chains, is ‘free’? What about us is reflective of a ‘born-free’ generation when our generation is born during a time of the struggle for economic freedom ...?” (wa Azania, 2014: 7).

Wa Azania offers a strident critique of forms of white supremacy and the various social and educational institutions that still shield and nurture white privilege. She is not alone in making such comments, as readers of Andile Mngxitama’s regular missives to the **Mail & Guardian** and **The Sowetan** will know. What is refreshing about these types of commentary is that they fly in the face of what we might call, with a tip of the hat to Sarah Ahmed (2004), the “everyday performativity of nonracialism” that so many of us are complicit in, and that the post-apartheid public sphere is, in a very significant sense, built upon. Mashela (2010: 58) hits the nail on the head when he notes that “most whites and blacks in South Africa ... lead daily lives of pretence towards each other”. In a choice of words that resonates with the comments I have offered above, he continues: “The truth is that racial integration in South Africa remains a myth” (ibid: 60). Suffice it to say that the performativity of non-racialism contrasts dramatically with the material and economic realities of racialized difference as they manifest in South African society today.

Against dialogue

If wa Azania provides a corrective to the sense of hope projected onto South Africa’s “born frees”, then **From a place of Blackness**, a text collecting the correspondences between Andile Mngxitama and Aryan Kaganof (2012), gives the lie to a series of imaginary themes related to the idea of inter-racial communication. In a subsequent commentary on the text, Mngxitama (2013) elucidates both the approach and the conclusion of the book:

“The correspondence between Kaganof and myself is caught in the impossibility of reconciliation. A kind of impossibility that is light-hearted and honest, a travel sketch of our ever-present discomfort, he sealed in his whiteness, me in my blackness. What appears sometimes to be a convergence of ideas leaves each on either side of a split society, fraught with exhaustion, never quite being able to speak to each other.”

Whether intentional or not, Mngxitama’s analysis – a refutation of notions of inter-racial dialogue, brotherhood and reconciliation – replicates a style of Lacanian theorization. A Lacanian approach eschews notions of mutual understanding, communicative efficacy and joint recognition, considering each such idealization to be the result of an imaginary conceptualization of human inter-subjectivity. Echoing many of Mngxitama’s key terms, a Lacanian framework prioritizes instead an attention to failures of communication and the ultimate impossibility of dialogue, to the impasse posed by ideals of empathy and joint recognition (Fink, 1995). It prefers, as a mode of analysis and theorization, attention to the “real” of what cannot be harmonized, reconciled or

papery over with the warming platitudes of humanism. Unwilling to countenance any pretence of interracial friendship or solidarity, Mngxitama (2013) argues:

“[T]here can be no true friendship between black and white. In all the instances where such friendships have been struck, it’s a case of one-way traffic to the benefit of the white ... [Following] Steve Biko ... we are forced to make an uncomfortable admission: any honest discussion of racism must necessarily lead to the end of dialogue ... There is a sense in which any interracial dialogue on race must be framed as a failure. Yet, in a country built on the lofty idea of ‘dialogue’, which forms false brotherhoods between black and white, we engage in an endless and meaningless discussion of racism.”

What is true of a Lacanian insistence on the failure of communication, the impossibility of truly inter-subjective rapport and understanding (Hook, 2013), seems true also of Mngxitama’s political analysis of interracial dialogue. That is to say, just because failure, impossibility and discomfort await us - be it in the context of psychoanalysis or in attempts at interracial dialogue - this by no means implies that we should throw our hands up at the futility of it all or adopt a posture of fatalistic resignation. The spectre of hope again makes an appearance here, although the type of hope posited by Mngxitama is one blended with pessimism and the imperative of self-interrogation:

“The reader [of **From a place of Blackness**] enters a self-reflective confrontation, encouraged to be frustrated and enthralled by an Afro-pessimistic position not widely held. More importantly, the reader is encouraged to question his or her own position of solidarity with the reproduction of racism. **From a place of Blackness** speaks about the failure of good race relations in a racist society. The hope is that this apparent book will subvert the perpetual insistence on empty dialogue in which speech is celebrated because it is all we have left.”

The politics of antagonism

Mngxitama’s rejection of notions of interracial brotherliness contains lessons about the positive value of a politics of antagonism. A recent blow up between Mngxitama and the white political activist Jared Sacks helps make the point. A 2013 **Mail & Guardian** article penned by Sacks, “Why Biko wouldn’t vote for Ramphela”, elicited angry threats of violence from Mngxitama. What is of concern here is less the intellectual content of the conflict than what was demonstrated by the form of the disagreement itself. Indeed, the irony pointed to by many was that Sack’s criticism of Ramphela seemed to differ little from attacks on Ramphela contained within the journal Mngxitama edited, **New Frank Talk**. In other words, the conflict had much to do with the speaking position of each of the men, and the issue of who had the right to publically critique Mamphele Ramphela.

A published attack on Sacks accusing him of insulting the legacy of Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement - Sacks was alleged to have arrogantly included himself in this tradition, and to have spoken on behalf of blacks (Mngxitama & Joja, 2013) - was followed by a threat posted on Twitter by Mngxitama. The threat, thoroughly dissected in the letter pages of the **Mail & Guardian** on the 29 March 2013 read: “Real biko-ists out there, whenever we see that white little bastard called Jared Sacks, we must beat the shit out of him”. What, if anything, is to be learnt from this unnecessarily fractious and seemingly regrettable promise of violence?

Predictably, Mngxitama’s comments drew a chorus of disapproval from a variety of **Mail & Guardian** readers outraged by the aggressive and bullying nature of his attack on Sacks. One potential shortcoming of such knee-jerk reactions is that they could be said to have missed the point, or,

to have made precisely Mngxitama's point. That is to say, the thrust of much of Mngxitama's work has been precisely to explode the liberal pieties governing post-apartheid norms of interaction when it comes to discussions of race and racism. One might argue that his choice of words was far from unintentional, but like the confrontational tone of much of his journalism, deliberately provocative, designed in this sense to elicit the outrage of liberal readers.

Mngxitama's style of engagement, as much as it raises the hackles, is notable inasmuch as it overturns the discourse of liberal tolerance, pronouncing instead the existence of an ongoing form of social (indeed, racial) antagonism. This runs against the platitudes, banalities and fantasies of a united South Africa that one feels so often compelled to endorse. Such an antagonistic position is a corrective to the liberal impetus to pronounce racial harmony, to uphold an imaginary view of an integrated rainbow nation that doesn't really exist, and it shows claims of a singular South African identity to be built, all too typically, on false solidarities. Exemplary in this respect is an anonymous letter of 28 June 2013 to the **Mail & Guardian** that takes issue with claims by readers that the death of Mandela will "bring the country together":

"Can [we] honestly say that the country is truly united? Can someone who enjoys a middle-class lifestyle truly admit that they are united with a woman who lives in an informal settlement? ... The country is not united, and those who say that they are brought together are doing so because they benefit from this unequal system ... I feel that when one makes statements such as "we are all in this together" one should be more honest about what that really means, and how one benefits from existing inequality."

One further remark should be made in respect of the Mngxitama/Sacks debacle. One sentence in Mngxitama's attack on Sacks was typically overlooked in comments on the affair. Mngxitama followed his threat to Sacks with a further comment: "when I see Jared, he must beat me up. That's the deal". This is curious. A threat followed by a comment inviting a reciprocal reaction goes some way to undoing the initial threat, or so it would seem. It introduces a balance of sorts, a degree of parity to what had been a threatening and thereby fundamentally symmetrical relationship. Are we going too far to suggest that there is a paradoxical type of solidarity to be found here? The solidarity, perhaps – at least in my reading – of antagonists bound by the same socio-political context yet separated by ideological, "race" and class interests that cannot and should not be ignored or wished away?

We might put it this way: antagonism does not indicate a state of war. Rather it connotes a critical position of non-rapport, a non-collaborative attitude that points out rather than denies current circumstances of oppression. Such a non-collaborative attitude does not deny the participation of one's ideological opponents in a given over-arching struggle, although – as in Biko's (1978) Black Consciousness position regards the role of white liberals – it refuses direct collaboration with them. Such a non-collaborationist position is crucial to prevent such would-be allies from diluting the cause, and, furthermore, so as to keep the lines of existing social division clearly in mind.

Anti-white populism

Two of the books discussed above, wa Azania's autobiography and **From a place of Blackness**, can be interestingly juxtaposed with another recent reflective political text, namely Max Du Preez's (2013) **A rumour of spring**. A connection immediately comes to the fore: the anger expressed by wa Azania and Mngxitama against enduring structures of white privilege will no doubt be read by some as "anti-white". This is a topic that has inflamed Du Preez, who complains about what he sees as the spreading influence of anti-white populism.

Du Preez (2013) laments how it has become acceptable for black South Africans to scorn and abuse whites as a racial group. He speaks of “a wave of unbridled populist politics” that has “created an atmosphere in which it is almost required of ‘good blacks’ to vilify and curse white people” (2013: 231). And, “[I]nsults and threats to whites have become ... commonplace in some sections of the black community” (232). A similar note of anxiety is evident in Boraine’s (2014) reflections on South Africa after twenty years of democracy. In **What’s gone wrong?** Boraine deplores what he takes to be the ugly and menacing demonstrations by the Economic Freedom Fighters, expressing particular concern over “the large posters which read ‘Honeymoon is over for white people in South Africa’, clearly racist in tone” (2014: 137). Back to Du Preez:

“crude racial stereotyping and name-calling, has suddenly become very common and acceptable in decent company, and it is becoming progressively more aggressive and hate-filled. Every imaginable ill in society is now directly blamed on whites. I know how this disturbs, angers and scares the average white citizen – and how it undermines the potential for dialogue.” (2013: 236-237)

Du Preez (2013) is quick to note that the apparent racism of anti-white populism is matched blow by blow by whites, although whereas white racism towards blacks is quickly penalised in public culture, black racism towards whites remains, in Du Preez’s view, largely unchallenged. Du Preez then changes tack by conceding that it would have been surprising if black South Africans’ feelings of resentment towards whites after the accumulated humiliations and dispossession of centuries had simply evaporated after 1994. The Truth and Reconciliation process, he admits, could never have been adequate to the task of undoing the anger built over many generations. Du Preez then moves to telling the story of participating in a Kigali workshop where survivors of the Rwandan genocide were given the opportunity to confront perpetrators responsible for killing members of their families. A woman told how living next door to a man who had killed her parents and brothers was made manageable: from time to time she would tell him to stand against a wall and hurl insults at him. Du Preez is impressed by the advice offered him – as a white South African – by this survivor of the Rwandan genocide, whom he quotes: “I think you white people should sometimes stand against a wall and allow black people to scream at you and insult you to get all their bad thoughts out into the open when they feel better, you can go on living together”. (Du Preez, 2013: 234)

Although this may at first seem a simplistic and necessarily inadequate mode of redress, it does contain a measure of symbolic value. That is to say, it entails not only the cathartic potential of the (partial) venting of traumatic affect. It allows also for the symbolization and thus externalization of what might otherwise remain inwardly bound – and no doubt toxic – “bad thoughts”. Reflecting on these words, Du Preez concludes: “There is some wisdom in her advice ... The wound is not yet clean. There’s still some stuff that needs to come out into the open ... we should face the anger on behalf of what our fathers and grandfathers did. It is hard, I know” (2013: 234).

A further anecdote follows, in which a senior, black “thought leader” expresses little sympathy to Du Preez for whites who felt unloved and attacked. Du Preez takes up the thread:

“My friend [asked:] Do you have any idea how black people felt over many generations being called non-persons, non-citizens or sub-humans? She ... had no sympathy with whites playing victim, feeling sorry for themselves ... We should spend our energies and resources on other crises ... rather than on white insecurities. White South Africans should realise they simply have to carry the burden of the past and the continuing inequalities and insecurities” (2013: 238).

Oddly Du Preez seems not to pick up on the obvious contradiction in his own text. He has the intuition that such expressions of anger may prove somehow ameliorative of past sufferings and abuse. He likewise intimates that whites should be thick-skinned, willing to absorb attacks stemming from past and ongoing inequalities. Yet he does not cease complaining about how black abuse of white South Africans is, in his mind, relatively permissible in post-apartheid society. White South Africa – to risk an unavoidable generalization – has a rather poor track record when it comes to listening to, even permitting, ostensibly “anti-white” critique. Du Preez’s own posture seems to exemplify such a defensiveness, an unwillingness to permit any narcissistic wounding to the subjectivity of whiteness.

A humorous interjection helps (re)contextualize the issue at hand. In a wonderful piece of satirical writing, Ndumiso Ngcobo (2009) makes fun of unreflexive white sensitivities toward threats of ostensibly anti-white violence:

“Remember Peter Mokaba and his ‘Kill the boer, kill the farmer’ chant? Does anybody *really* believe that Peter Mokaba fancied crawling over sheep droppings ... to kill Jannie van Tonder on the outskirts of Phalaborwa? If you believe this, may I suggest that you ... have of late been taking hits from the bong. And may I also suggest that if you ... think Julius Malema’s over-the-top agitating-for-votes statement [in 2008, that he would ‘Kill for Zuma] was ‘deplorable’ and worthy of the attention of the Human Rights Commission ... you also need to lay off the weed. No? Okay, let’s perform a little experiment. You know that panic button you keep on [you] ... as you go around the house supervising Mavis’s chores? Press it right at this moment. Now, how many seconds do you think it will be before those willing-to-kill ... guys arrive ... and splatter any would-be-burglar’s brains ... So let’s talk about ... the orgy of violence that is part of our everyday lives, shall we?” (Ngcobo, 2009: 47).

In fairness to Du Preez, it is worth noting an important qualification in his argument. Whites should be able to hear and withstand deserved anger for generations of racism, he says – an assertion one can only agree with – however: “there is the danger that this anger is not always righteous ... Sometimes it is simply racist abuse. Also, black anger for the sake of black anger is not very productive – black anger will remain forever if we don’t remove what is keeping it alive. We need this anger to take us somewhere, or it will never end and it will become destructive” (Du Preez, 2013: 234-35).

This would seem at first glance a reasonable objection, and yet it proves difficult to sustain. It pivots on the difference between perceptions of gratuitous (or hate-filled) instances of anti-whiteism, and apparently legitimate criticism and anger directed toward white supremacy in its past and current forms. There are of course legal precedents to the making of such distinctions, as in the South African High Court’s decision that the singing of “Kill the boer” should be considered an instance of hate-speech. That being said, the attempt to delimit such instances of angry speech to polite or acceptable public utterances surely cannot work if the speech in question is *precisely meant to give vent* to longstanding historical suffering and anger.

My own view is that Du Preez’s (2013) lamentations about what he considers unreasonable anti-white populism itself shows up his intolerance toward the type of venting he seemingly advocates. This contradiction likewise evinces a failure to appreciate the *disconnect* that a psychoanalytic theorist like Chabani Manganyi (2011) sees between the symbolic expression of such vengeful ideas and the violent acting out of such (often unconscious) impulses.

Drawing out the “violent reverie”

The work of Chabani Manganyi (1973, 1977, 2011; Couve, 1986), is not new to readers of **PINS**. His conceptualization of the “violent reverie”, recently re-published in the journal (Manganyi, 2011), enables us to extend several of the themes we have raised thus far. In **Mashangu’s reverie and other essays** (1977) Manganyi describes the travails of the eponymous protagonist, a black South African intellectual, who undergoes analysis while teaching Comparative Literature in an East Coast (of the USA) university. Mashangu is surprised by the extent to which a certain fantasy comes to predominate in his treatment, namely a scenario – a “violent reverie” – in which he murders a white man, a figure emblematic of the racialised oppression of apartheid. The autobiographical dimension of **Mashangu’s reverie** (1974), which represents a partly fictionalised account of Manganyi’s own experiences, is important to note inasmuch as it is crucial in understanding the motivation and ultimate purpose of the text. As Manganyi writes in his introduction to the book: “So overwhelming were the fantasies of revenge, so terrifying in their stark clarity, that it became important for me to arrive at some internal resolution of the diverse impulses which were constantly invading my consciousness” (1977: i).

I will focus here more on Manganyi’s scholarly and psychoanalytic reflections on the phenomenon with which he is concerned, namely that of the (un)conscious fantasies of violent revenge experienced by the oppressed as outlined in Manganyi’s essay “The violent reverie” (2011). Couve (1986: 107) describes Manganyi’s over-arching objective in this paper: a Kleinian concept of ambivalence is deployed so as to explain the collusion of the oppressed in their own oppression and, furthermore, to “extoll the valency of the murderous reverie in undoing this collusion”. This collusion, importantly,

“is primarily unconscious and is predicated upon the co-existence of both loving and hostile impulses towards the master. At the unconscious fantasy level the slave’s destructive impulses towards the master lead to ... anxiety ... As a consequence the destructive fantasies and impulses are turned against the self, so that the structure of ambivalence is maintained” (Couve, 1986: 107-8).

Two contextualizing comments should be made here, drawing attention both to the necessarily psychological and historical dimensions of Manganyi’s theorization. Manganyi (2011: 9-10) prefaces his analysis by noting that a historically extreme situation, such as that of apartheid “forces the flood-gates of the unconscious open” allowing primitive fears to achieve mass circulation. We would be foolhardy thus to foreclose an examination of unconscious relations of ambivalence and violence from any analysis of subjugation. “There is ... no comparable relationship which is as riddled with ambivalence ... and a potential for violence as that between a master and a slave” (2011: 10), insists Manganyi. Moreover, while his conceptualization is obviously anchored in the time of apartheid, I follow Hayes (2011: 3) in insisting that Manganyi’s psychoanalytically informed critique still offers us an “unravelling of the psychological and unconscious sedimentations that are consequent upon the dynamics of identity in a racialised society”.

In Manganyi’s reading then, the psychology of subordination is founded on an ambivalent libidinal economy in which impulses to objective violence are continually held in check and counter-balanced by subjective (self-directed) forms of violence. The problem of course is that subjective forms of violence oscillate continually with wishes to destroy the oppressor, a situation, which, in a spiralling fashion, gives rise to ever greater levels of subjective violence. The agonised and conflicted stasis of this situation is aptly rendered by Manganyi:

“The violent impulse of the unconscious ... is bound up with the most tender concern and affection for the object of hate. The ambivalent character of adaptation under conditions of subordination is

maximised by ... anxiety about ... retaliation ... and the lingering possibility that subjective violence may, without sufficient warning, be transformed into violence as a social act” (2011: 12).

The central dilemma in the psychology of subordination is the fear of losing ambivalence, or, more directly put, by subjective violence being effectively eclipsed by the impulse to participate in violence as a social act. That is to say, the ongoing condition of ambivalence (the concurrence of affectionate and aggressive affective ties) is “predicated and sustained by violence against the self to placate, once and for all, the alternative ... of objective violence against the representations of authority” (Manganyi, 2011: 12). The paradoxical logic of psychoanalysis comes to the fore here. Oppressors are shielded from the violent reprisals of those they oppress largely because this rage is internalised in the alienating form of self-directed violence that the oppressed exercise against themselves. In short, the prospect of violent revolt can be short-circuited by ensuring that the oppressed become ever more adept at self-hating.

While the vicious circle thus described (between impulses to objective violence and acts of subjective violence) is clearly of a self-perpetuating sort, Manganyi (2011) does outline two routes of de-alienation for the ambivalent subject of oppression. For the rank-and-file, he notes, the path from subjective violence against the self to violence against others, the oppressor and their various symbolic instantiations, may be a short one. Such forms of violence typically constitute an “acting out”. What is in question here is the unconscious’s preference for action, a violent type of direct expression which bypasses the potentiality of language, symbolization and conscious thought.

A second means of facilitating fantasies of revenge takes a more overtly symbolic – one might add, sublimated – form whereby the unconscious is “directed toward a more ‘creative’ course” which “allows language to mediate between itself and possible acting out in the social sphere” (ibid: 17). We should not slip over this point as for Manganyi a tremendous political and psychical value resides precisely in the cultural expression of such “violent reveries”, that is, imagined ritual murders, fantasies of killing or subordinating figures of oppression. To Manganyi’s list of violent reveries we may of course add the apparent instances of anti-white populism invoked by Du Preez. We might similarly include a spectrum of examples of political agitation and symbolic aggression – it is hard here not to invoke the figure of Julius Malema and the aspirations of the Economic Freedom Fighters – directed against white structures of power. The irony of the situation is that it is precisely these ostensibly “anti-white” expressions, those that white South Africa finds the most threatening and unacceptable, and that it labours so strenuously to prohibit, that might facilitate something of the creative course that Manganyi describes. It is for this reason that he asserts: “the violet reveries may be put to constructive social use by blacks” (2011: 18).

The symbolic assassination of the oppressor – murder in the realm of reverie – enables the oppressed, in Manganyi’s analysis, to come to live in an authentic manner in the social sphere. Such violent imaginings, “blossoming into metaphysical murder ... create unity in the psychic economy of subordinate individuals by dispelling a debilitating ambivalence” (ibid: 18). Not only is ambivalence thus undermined, along with the intra-subjective forms of violence associated with it, the false consciousness of the oppressed is likewise thus eroded.

This seems a soundly psychoanalytic – even if controversial – proposition, namely that by making the unconscious violent reverie conscious, by symbolizing it in disseminated cultural forms, one avoids the “acting out” of objective forms of violence. In other words – and counter-intuitive as it may appear – frustrating and prohibiting symbolic instances of the violent reverie may *decrease*

rather than increase the prospect of the anti-white violence so feared by whites. Hence the importance psychoanalysis affords the concept of abreaction, that is, the symbolic expression and/or discharge of unconscious material, in the presence of a significant figure, so as to lessen the build-up of intra-psychic conflicts.

Importantly, the violent reverie once symbolized in culture has its potential effect also *on the oppressor*, simply by virtue of a heightened awareness of the oppressed as potential rebel, as possessed of power. Hence:

“[T]he constructive use of the violent reverie prepares the way for the superordinate ... to recognize and appreciate the subordinate ... at a more profound level than was possible before ... Such an achievement could sustain painfully won victories in the sphere of tolerance, mutual respect and understanding ... From the violent reverie must be allowed to ... to touch us – in spite of some initial shock, disbelief or anxiety – where it matters most: the innermost core which informs our relations in public (Manganyi, 2011: 18-19).

For Manganyi then the violent reverie is capable not only of restoring identity to the oppressed, it is also a vehicle for moving the oppressor and oppressed toward a more equitable relation. In what sounds very much like a Freudian argument, the prospect of any type of social stability is built on the basis of fantasies of violence.

The relevance of Manganyi’s argument in respect of the radical forms of critique I have mentioned above is by now, I hope, clear. Manganyi’s theorization enables us to appreciate that if we indulge in illusions of inter-racial harmony and dialogue that repress or “imagarize” ongoing realities of inequality, we will fail to move beyond them. Rather, by proving unwilling to confront such conditions and the fantasies that they give rise to, by prohibiting expressions of social antagonism and associated violent reveries, we insulate and thus preserve prevailing conditions of social pathology.

Conclusion

In what has gone above I have attempted to draw attention to a trajectory of critique that much of the best of **PINS** has exemplified, namely the use of antagonism as a strategy of critique. I have tried to show how critiques that are antagonistic, that run against a prevailing social consensus – even against prevailing moral platitudes – most certainly have their place. The same is true of those modes of critique willing to picture and explore lines of antagonism even where we would most prefer not to imagine them. This last assertion is particularly germane to the post-Mandela context. Confronting antagonism is often precisely what we are not willing to do in South Africa, for fear that stating lines of division and – why not – of race/class antagonism, will resuscitate past (or not so past) forms of racism.

All too often we would rather engender a veneer of social harmony, participating thus in the odd post-apartheid dramaturgy of non-racialism and non-racism, rather than scratching away at the social and historical wounds of racism that are not yet healed. As understandable as such a reticent might be, it often seems tantamount to closing our eyes to the abounding social contradictions that characterize the post-apartheid context, and believing, *hoping*, that things may one day be different. In such conditions, it is perhaps better to confront a position of no hope, than to embrace comforting social myths – such as the notions of interracial dialogue, brotherhood, reconciliation critiqued by Mnxgitama (2013) – that repress inequality rather than interrogate it.

Following Manganyi's arguments as outlined above, we might take precisely the opposite position. Rather than shutting our eyes against what is unpalatable about South Africa's structural and racialised inequalities both past and present, we should intensify our attentions to those imagined and symbolic forms of anger, violent retribution and antagonism. Here lies a paradox. To facilitate the symbolic working through of such imagined scenes and expressions of antagonism, to pursue precisely those exploratory routes that seem to signify no hope, is very possibly the best real hope that we have.

References

Ahmed, S (2004) Declarations of Whiteness: The non-performativity of antiracism. **Borderlands Ejournal**, 3(2). http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations.htm
Accessed 14 September, 2011.

Biko, S (1978) **I write what I like**. London: Bowerdean.

Bonefeld, W (2014) **Critical theory and the critique of political economy: On subversion and negative reason**. London & New York: Bloomsbury.

Boraine, A (2014) **What's gone wrong? On the brink of a failed state**. Johannesburg & Cape Town: Jonathan Ball.

Couve, C (1986) Psychology and politics in Manganyi's work: A materialist critique. **Psychology in Society**, 5, 90-130.

Dana, S (2014) Forward, in wa Azania, M (2014) **Memoirs of a born free: Reflections on the rainbow nation**. Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jacana.

Du Preez, M (2013) **A rumour of spring: South Africa after 20 years of democracy**. Cape Town: Zebra Press.

Fink, B (1995) **The Lacanian subject between language and jouissance**. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hall, S (1992) Race, culture, and communications: Looking backward and forward at cultural studies. **Rethinking Marxism**, 5(1), 10-18.

Hayes, G (2011) (Re-)introducing Chabani Manganyi. **PINS (Psychology in Society)**, 41, 1-6.

Hook, D (2013) Nixon's "full speech": Imaginary and symbolic registers of communication. **Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology**, 33(1), 32-50.

Lacan, J (2006) The mirror-stage as formative of the I function as revealed in psychoanalytic experience, in *Écrits*. Trans. B Fink. New York & London: W.W Norton.

Lévi-Strauss, C (1963) **Structural anthropology**. London & New York: Basic Books.

- Manganyi, N C (1973) **Being-black-in-the-world**. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Manganyi, N C (1977) **Mashangu's reverie and other essays**. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Manganyi, N C (2011) The violent reverie: The unconscious in literature and society. **PINS (Psychology in society)**, **41**, 7-19.
- Mannoni, O (1968) **Clefs pour l'Imaginaire**. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Mashele, P (2011) **The death of our society**. Pretoria: CPR Press.
- Mngxitama, A (2013) From a place of blackness: Throwing the book at empty interracial dialogue. **Mail & Guardian**, 15 November 2013. <http://mg.co.za/article/2013-11-14-from-a-place-of-blackness-throwing-the-book-at-empty-interracial-dialogue> Accessed 27 June 2014.
- Mngxitama, A, Joja, A & editorial collective of **New Frank Talk** (2013) Untitled letter. **Mail & Guardian**, 22 March 2013.
- Mngxitama, A & Kaganof, A (2013) **From a place of blackness**. Melville, Johannesburg: Sankara Publishers.
- Ndlovu, S (2010) Deracialisation! What deracialisation? There's no end to race. **PINS (Psychology in society)**, **39**, 56-62.
- Ngcobo, N (2008) **Is it coz I'm black?** Cape Town: Two Dogs.
- Pfaller, R (2005) Where is your hamster? The concept of ideology in Slavoj Žižek's cultural theory, in Boucher, G, Glynos, J & Sharpe, M (eds) (2005) **Traversing the fantasy: Critical responses to Slavoj Žižek**. London & New York: Ashgate Press.
- Sacks, J (2013) Biko would not vote for Ramphela. **Mail & Guardian**, 15 March 2013.
- Wa Azania, M (2014) **Memoirs of a born free: Reflections on the rainbow nation**. Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jacana.
- Žižek, S (1997) **The plague of fantasies**. London & New York: Routledge.