



***De Beer, Stephan 2020. Clown of the City. African Sun Media. ISBN: 978-1-928480-80-8: R495. e-ISBN: 978-1-928480-81-5: R395. 262 pages.***

The review copy of *Clown of the City* in my possession was initially incorrectly sent to a journal on the sciences of city construction. I quite like to imagine how the book was received: with uncertainty, caution, and disorientation. I can imagine when the title, *Clown of the City*, was read, the uncertainty gave way to confusion. What has a clown to do with the city? And, even more, what has a clown to do with the serious work of constructing cities? Moreover, who is this clown and what is this city?

Interestingly enough, in this imagined moment of how a journal on the sciences of city construction might physically receive *Clown of the City*, I find a momentary suspension of my theological presuppositions. And in this suspension, I admire the chutzpah of *Clown of the City* for engaging the city, and indeed also the construction of cities, as a strange adventurer, rightly the clown, within the spaces where the theologian is not supposed to venture. That being said, the sciences of city construction would do well to seriously consider *Clown of the City* as an interlocutor.

Let me return to a state where my theological presuppositions are very much unsuspended and intact. I found within myself a recurrent ambivalence whilst reading *Clown of the City*. And, as I understand human behaviour, ambivalence tends to direct one towards rejection rather than embrace. Yet, under desirable conditions, ambivalence can lead to both appreciation and critical engagement, with the potential of newness entering the world. Thus, from my experience of ambivalence privileging the latter possibility, I will consider three important points of *Clown of the City*. Firstly, the epistemological location. Secondly, the imagination for transformation. And, thirdly, the person of the clown.

Early in *Clown of the City*, Stephan de Beer articulates his epistemological location as an “urban theologian of liberation” (13). He expands on this location as follows:

I seek to do urban theology from a liberationist perspective, locating myself and my theological praxis epistemologically and methodologically “outside the city gate”. I reflect on the well-being of the city from the perspective of those who are not allowed full participation in it or full access to the city’s resources, as equal partners, citizens and human beings. [...] Locating myself epistemologically with the underside of the city, or the vulnerable city of homelessness and informality, is also to draw from the wells of wisdom, tenacity and resilience that reside there (12).

This epistemological location represents an acute awareness that something is fundamentally wrong with how our cities are constructed, maintained, and administered. This is an important insight, for there are indeed vital flaws in living together in the city, which must be engaged and for which solutions must be sought. On this point, I much appreciate *Clown of the City* for its critical awareness and engagement of these vital flaws. However, in the spirit of my ambivalence, I have become quite convinced that the articulation of the vital flaws in our society is framed incorrectly by theologies of liberation as power and the manifestation of power in neoliberal capitalism.

Throughout *Clown of the City*, De Beer indeed frames the fundamental problem as power relations incorporated in the global economic structure (49-52, 164-165, 182-187). Unfortunately, as far as I can discern, this framing of the fundamental flaw has not, either epistemologically or practically, undermined the fragmentation of society. If anything, it has encouraged and underscored fragmentation between the so-called powerful and powerless. One might argue that this articulation of the vital flaws has not been adequately heard by the powerful. Or that there is an active colluding of the powerful against the powerless (49). I am not convinced.

Instead, the framing of power relations as the fundamental flaw has brought forth an unrepentant distrust within the academia towards the so-called powerful, framing them as perpetrators of evil, corruption, and social injustice. From the other perspective, the so-called powerless have become saints in their slavery and victimhood. But it seems to me if indeed there is tyranny at work – which is not improbable but not absolute – it would be wiser to frame both the tyrant and the slave within their corruption.

From postcolonial thought, both the coloniser, in their brutality, and the colonised, in their slavery, find themselves at a loss regarding belonging and common humanity working towards the good.

From this point, it seems more viable to claim that the tyrant is ethically corrupt in relenting their responsibility for the common good, opting instead for violence against the slave. Likewise, the slave is ethically corrupt in dreaming and subversively working for the destruction of the tyrant. Both the endeavour of the tyrant and the slave can rightly only conclude with the implicit and unintended destruction of the self and the other. There is nothing noble about either of these positions. I genuinely think it wise that theologies of liberation rethink and rearticulate the fundamental flaws of our society.

This brings me to the second point, and indeed, *Clown of the City* rightly imagines a transformation of living together. This is a crucial hope to cherish and imagination to develop for all who find themselves within spaces of searching for a better world and city. This imagination is most clearly articulated in the social movements and stories of the Zabbaleen in Cairo and the communities in Manila and Maputo, notwithstanding the inhumane realities in these spaces (119–136). Two images of these social movements are also worth mentioning: “the discovery of vocation in new places” and “the gift of informality” (133). However, *Clown of the City*’s overall imagination for transformation is articulated throughout as “deep change” (82) and “radical change” (243).

The obvious implication of this radical change is the overthrow of neoliberal capitalism. But there are some contentions to this imagination. Firstly, it is contentious whether neoliberal capitalism exists as an explicit system of violence construed to benefit the few and exclude the many. Secondly, the practicality of such an overthrow is most likely non-existent. Thirdly, more research needs to be done on the implications of these proposals on the well-being of the poor – there is no reason to believe that the poor would, *ipso facto*, be better off if such radical change takes place.

I would instead argue that a more viable avenue for change is the struggle for survival (derived from the Latin *supervivere*, which connotes overcoming towards life) through a change in consciousness. Three caveats are necessary. Firstly, although the communal consciousness is

essential, there must be an equal emphasis on the personal consciousness towards life. Secondly, such a consciousness must consider the realities of our existence beyond ideological claims and be malleable to overcome ideological captivity. Thirdly, a consciousness that will underscore the importance of taking responsibility towards life, bringing equilibrium to the overemphasis on rights.

This brings me to the final point, the person of the clown. De Beer names the clown as the “activist scholar or liberation theologian” (53). Much of my appreciation for De Beer’s understanding of the clown is, in my opinion, a correction to misappropriations of the activist scholar and liberation theologian. To my mind, and although De Beer does not explicitly say so, one must not underestimate the potential for liberation theologies (and other social justice movements) to become luxury beliefs. Thus, De Beer critiques any usurpation of liberation theology to build a career on the reality of the poor without “joining their struggle” (53), through shifting the interlocution from the poor to the middle class (87), and in misrepresentation of the poor (108). Over against these misappropriations, the clown participates in the struggle of the poor with the caveat of the poor’s agency for life (10, 241). It is primarily in the final chapter that this vision of the clown comes to the fore as “the capacities of fantasy, festivity and critique [...] expressed in playful – even laughing – protest” (245). In the final parts of the book, De Beer equates this clown with Jesus as follows:

The incarnation was the entrance of God onto the urban stage of life, to participate in our tragedy and comedy as the disruptor, the juggler, the riffler, the jester. And the Jesus community is invited to juggle life with Jesus. (254)

Here I find the most exciting aspects of *Clown of the City*. In this playfulness and laughter, newness emerges as the clown at play, transcending ideological captivity, struggling for life, and inviting us to become the other of ourselves, the clown.

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