Shame, envy, impasse and hope:
The psychopolitics of violence in South Africa

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Introduction
In her celebrated collection of letters, the Madame de Sévigné would detail the hangings, quarterings and wheelings of seventeenth-century France. On one occasion—the execution of a peasant—de Sévigné witnessed the condemned man’s terror at his imminent death. He shivered and wailed, his body wriggling in the hangman’s noose—a spectacle for the ladies and gentlemen gathered that morning. And yet de Sévigné was troubled: she could not fathom why a commoner should be so horrified at the prospect of his own death.¹ She was not a particularly vicious woman—on the contrary, she was “a rich human creature of balance and sanity,”² described as “delicious”³ by those who knew her. But in the words of Alexis de Tocqueville, “Madame de Sévigné had no clear notion of suffering in any one who was not a person of quality.”⁴

One may interpret the madame’s indifference as a historical artefact—the age of Enlightenment had not yet begun. In the mind of the aristocrat, it made perfect sense to treat the masses with a brutality that matched their supposedly brutish souls. It would fall to the humanists of the eighteenth century to formulate a belief in the dignity of ‘man’—albeit ‘man’ of a certain hue. But in the intervening centuries, that belief has evolved into something we can all appreciate today: the idea that all human beings deserve to be treated with dignity. In his new book on identity, Francis Fukuyama goes as far as positing the universal existence of something the ancient Greeks called thymos—“the part of the soul that craves recognition of dignity.”⁵ Human beings, that is, seek recognition from their peers, and when they do not receive it, one of two things happens. If they feel undervalued, they become resentful, and if they reckon within themselves a failure to meet the standards of others, they feel ashamed. Human beings are not satisfied with only food and shelter: they also want respect.

In this talk, I am concerned mainly with the question of dignity. My general position is that shame and envy—when framed at the societal level—are not only among the principal drivers of violence in South Africa, they are also responses to violence in the broadest sense of the term, that is, violence as “[a] manifestation of power that denies people their humanity.”⁶ In support of this position, I offer three interlocking arguments. First, I contend that the poor and working classes respond to the shame inflicted on them by structural violence with a scarcely believable interpersonal violence of their own—directed against their own. Second, I suggest that the black aspiring middle class—the intellectual elite specifically—responds to symbolic violence by means of a reaction formation, an
unconscious *ressentiment* according to Max Scheler’s rendition of that term. And third—following Alexandre Kojève’s influential reading of Hegel—I maintain that many white South Africans are mired in an *existential impasse* that blocks reciprocal recognition, and that they have settled for lives of alienated consumption instead. Finally, I consider the implications of widespread shame, envy and impasse in this land of terrible beauty—as Yeats might have put it—for the cultivation of life-giving hope.

**Shame**

The history books tell us that much of twentieth-century politics was driven by economic issues: the left focused on workers, unions and social democratic goals, while the right called for small government and free enterprise. In the twenty-first century, however, the political spectrum has constellated itself around markers of social difference: today, both the left and right advocate on behalf of groups they consider marginalized, be they women, black people, the white working class or nationalists. It is not that class politics has become irrelevant to cultural politics—what appears to have happened, rather, is that the politics of equality has been dissociated from the politics of difference in both public and intellectual life.

The Marxist feminist, Nancy Fraser, identifies these two camps as the politics of *redistribution* and the politics of *recognition* respectively. She describes how the concept of redistribution is rooted in liberal politics whereas the notion of recognition draws heavily on Hegel’s phenomenology of consciousness. In the public imagination, talk of redistribution is equated with *class politics* while recognition discourse is reduced usually to *identity politics*, which involves struggles over categories such as gender, ‘race’, sexuality and so on. Interestingly, the dominant political trend of our times—identity politics—is profoundly *psychological*, being organized around the injured dignity of oppressed groups. Each group, that is, claims an internal group identity that has been rejected by the outside world. For proponents of identity politics, therefore, the problem of dignity turns on a society that is pathologically unvalidating. Human beings are first and foremost social beings, and when social formations compromise the dignity of marginalized groups, the consequences can be devastating, involving either self-hating shame or envious resentment. For Hegel, therefore, the history of our species is a history of the struggle for recognition. Human beings only become conscious of themselves when recognized by others, and the failure to attain this recognition must eventuate in conflict. History begins, therefore, with warriors who risk their lives in order to compel their adversaries to recognize them. If they succeed, they become
masters who are recognized without having to reciprocate, but if they fail, they become slaves who must recognize their vanquishers without themselves being recognized. Inside this matrix of unreciprocated recognition, Hegel’s famous master-slave dialectic takes shape, the master affirmed in his dignity and the slave deprived of his humanity.

It goes without saying that the history of South Africa is a history of masters and slaves. Over the course of three centuries, European settlers subdued the native populations, confiscating their lands and exploiting their labour. It did not suffice, however, that the locals were defeated militarily and economically: the entire edifice of their cultural traditions had to be liquidated. Material domination, therefore, went hand in hand with ideological domination—and in the South African instance, that meant the denigration and shaming of all black people. Frantz Fanon explains how, in the colonial encounter, “[i]t is not possible to enslave men without logically making them inferior through and through.” Henceforth, the native population looks on helplessly as the occupying powers set about obliterating its cultural forms, imposing “a pejorative judgment with respect to its original forms of existing.” The natives are not recognized as human, being nothing more than an afterthought in virgin land. They live in “[a] world divided into compartments, a motionless, Manichaeistic world, a world of statues: the statue of the general who carried out the conquest, the statue of the engineer who built the bridge; a world which is sure of itself, which crushes with its stones the backs flayed by whips: this is the colonial world.”

A catastrophe of such magnitude can mean only one thing—that “God is not on [their] side.”

Fearing death, the black man is “[s]ealed into that crushing objecthood… For not only must [he] be black; he must be black in relation to the white man… [He] has no ontological resistance…” He simply is what the white man says he must be. Feelings of inferiority and shame overwhelm him but he never stops desiring the world of the master. “For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white. Long ago the black man admitted the unarguable superiority of the white man, and all his efforts are aimed at achieving a white existence.” This should not surprise us: the black man has no option but to lactify himself, having witnessed the wholesale destruction of his former mode of being. The problem of course is that the border between the black and white worlds is impregnable: “The native is a being hemmed in; apartheid is simply one form of the division into compartments of the colonial world. The first thing which the native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits.” The black man, accordingly, is released from his fetters only while he sleeps; he dreams constantly of physical prowess, Fanon claims, in a classic case of wish
fulfilment. On returning to waking life, the wish is denied once more. Like Aesop’s fox reaching for the grapes, the black man can never be white for that would mean being recognized as human.

Disrespect rains down on the black subject. Unable to resolve the existential dilemma, the shame becomes unbearable. The resentment towards the self is turned outwards in an attempt to restore a sense of agency eroded by shame. Soon enough, it erupts into senseless violence—but not against the oppressor. Instead, the victims of structural violence will vent their rage first against themselves, their violence so incomprehensible that—in the words of Fanon—“the police and magistrates do not know which way to turn.”

According to sociologist Richard Sennett, poverty encourages “chaotic, arbitrary, and unpredictable behaviour” as it prevents people from “act[ing] rationally and exercis[ing] self-control.” The shame of deprivation and the burning sense of injustice that goes with it undermine the legitimacy of the law in the eyes of the disenfranchised. Mindless violence breaks out as resentment towards the power establishment is displaced onto substitutes: women, children, refugees and—especially—other black men. What ethnographers call everyday violence starts to set in: the routinization of interpersonal aggression at the microlevel and the constitution during peacetime of a virtual “common-sense of violence.”

Displaced from its original object, the experience of bitterness explodes into the external world as spontaneous, sadistic and often arbitrary violence—a process borne out by statistics on violence in post-apartheid South Africa. For example, the national rate of violent deaths is five times the global average. The murder of women is six times the world average. The raw numbers confirm that most victims are black while the highest rates are suffered by coloured men and women. What we know about homicide hotspots is that Cape Town ranks fourteenth in the world and—by some distance—first in Africa. Nationally, an estimated half-a-million rapes are perpetrated against women and girls every year. Outbreaks of xenophobic violence occur with regularity. Meanwhile, income inequality and male youth unemployment emerge as the strongest correlates of murder and major assault. In their widely praised book, The Spirit Level, epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett describe how inequality in modern, industrialized nations generates fear, envy and resentment, affecting the physical and mental wellbeing of both the poor and the well-to-do.

Feelings of shame, that is, are difficult to escape in class society. As Norbert Elias observes, the ubiquity of class contempt dictates that even young children intuit social
stratification long before they acquire any understanding of it.29 In fact, the political conditions most conducive for the shaming of poor and working-class people are liberal bourgeois democracies, which are shot through with invidious cultures of social comparison. Democratic South Africa, that is, aggravates the psychological torture of its citizens: they live in a constitutional dispensation that guarantees the equality of all yet they feel themselves barred from enjoying its material benefits. Social ressentiment—in the words of Scheler—“must therefore be strongest in a society like ours, where… formal social equality, publicly recognized, go[es] hand in hand with wide factual differences in power, property, and education.”30 For ordinary people, such a divergence can only make sense by evaluating themselves negatively. By admitting that they lack all “badges of ability,”31 the poor man and woman can lay to rest the question that has followed them all their lives: the question of why—despite their best efforts—they got nowhere in life. Assuming personal responsibility for a society that failed them, not only do they feel the pain of inadequacy—they resent themselves for feeling it.

But the injustice of it all does not end there. For those who believe they do possess a badge of ability, powerful sanctions will be levied against them should they ever resolve to wear it. Consider, for example, the case of a school for working-class children.32 The teachers are anxious to enforce discipline; they imagine that their charges do not value order and routine, given their unruly backgrounds. The general mass is deemed unteachable while one or two are singled out as having potential. The few who are made to stand out, must make an agonizing decision: excel and shame their peers—for which they will be bullied mercilessly—or, accept the shaming of their teachers, but enjoy the bonds of friendship. An identical scenario faces the worker who may harbour fantasies of excellence: get promoted to supervisor and earn the scorn of your colleagues, or live with them as equals, sharing the common bond of indignity. It is no wonder that the few who rise above their class cannot live with the shame of having distinguished themselves. They can neither be who they are nor stay where they are: many will marry outside their circle, most will leave the neighborhood for good.

That is how class society operates: “In turning people against each other, the class system of authority and judgment-making goes itself into hiding; the system is left unchallenged as people enthralled by the enigmas of its power battle one another for respect.”33 In an unequal society that professes equality for all, shame rears its head at every turn; for the poor and working classes in particular, substance use becomes a ready
consolation. Indeed, South Africa—which has the second highest Gini coefficient for income inequality in the world—also has one of the highest alcohol consumptions in the world. Alcohol misuse, in turn, is strongly related to the perpetration of acts of violence and, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, our country has the fourth highest rate for drug-related offences in the world. Although the value of socioeconomic status as a predictor of substance use is contested, a growing body of research suggests that the relationship between addiction and shame—as distinct from guilt—is mutually reinforcing. The resort to substances, that is, can be conceptualised as a defence against chronic feelings of shame—as much as it can trigger the very same feelings.

Ressentiment

The Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset, once wrote of his German counterpart, Max Scheler, that he was “the first man [sic] of genius, the Adam of the new Paradise.” Scheler was widely regarded as one of the most brilliant minds of the twentieth century but, with his unexpected death in 1928 and the suppression of his work by the Nazis, his ideas faded rapidly. I want to resurrect one of Scheler’s ideas today, namely, his reading of the concept ressentiment as laid out in his book, The Role of Ressentiment in the Make-Up of Morals. The concept was not originally his own: the first to elaborate ressentiment systematically was in fact Nietzsche who decried the Christian values of love, compassion and humility as a form of slave morality. For Nietzsche, what lay at the heart of Christian ethics was, effectively, a reaction formation: the early Christians were motivated by impotence, hatred and envy of their Roman masters—and they sought to reverse their lowliness by supplanting Roman morality with a value system of their own. Acknowledging his debt to his countryman, Scheler quotes as follows from Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals: “The inoffensiveness of the weak, even the cowardice in which he is rich, his unavoidable obligation to wait at the door acquires a good name, as ‘patience,’ it is also called virtue; the inability to avenge oneself is supposed to be a voluntary renunciation of revenge, sometimes it is even called forgiveness… They also speak of ‘love for one’s enemies’—and they sweat while doing so.”

When approached through a social justice paradigm, Scheler’s book is likely to offend: several commentators have suggested, even, that his work was a massive projection of his own ressentiment at the social leveling of the early twentieth century. His thinking was “deeply aristocratic” and his endorsement of social and value hierarchies meant that, for Scheler, inequality was a natural feature of human existence. On the other hand, the rise of
what Fukuyama calls “the politics of resentment” has transformed Scheler’s *ressentiment* into a potentially valuable tool for analysing the latest trend in local and global politics—identity politics—which threatens to shatter all possibilities for mutual recognition and reconciliation. It is towards Scheler’s own treatment of *ressentiment* that I now turn.

In their efforts to preserve the specialized meaning of the term, Scheler’s translators prefer the French *ressentiment* over the English ‘resentment.’ This is because Scheler himself has in mind something much deeper than ‘mere’ resentment. In his view, *ressentiment* has several elements. First, a human being experiences some injury and an associated negative emotion. Second, he or she is unable to express this emotion directly, usually on account of occupying a lower position in a given status hierarchy. Third, the negative emotion is consequently repressed. And fourth, under the direction of a repressed desire for revenge that proceeds “via rancor, envy, and impulse to detract all the way to spite,” the subject engages in value delusions and their corresponding judgments, demeaning values that are objectively superior while denigrating those that are objectively inferior.

These are the essentials of Scheler’s *ressentiment*, the practical meaning of which is best illustrated through examples—and Scheler himself provides several. The *priest*, for one, is a typical *ressentiment* subject: he is required to control his emotions and project himself as the embodiment of serenity. Then there is the *mother-in-law* who must not only relinquish her son to another woman but must “offer her congratulations, and receive the intruder with affection.” Scheler reports a case of what he calls *class ressentiment*—specifically, an incident in 1912 near Berlin when someone tied a length of wire between two trees on either side of the road so that drivers passing through would be decapitated. What unites Scheler’s collection of *ressentiment* characters is a “way of thinking which attributes creative power to mere negation and criticism.”

**Reaction formation**

This preliminary account of *ressentiment* brings me to the second leg of my argument, which is an analysis of the black intellectual elite’s response to the *symbolic violence* that pervades institutions of higher learning in South Africa. I do so partly in an attempt to understand a phenomenon in which my own working life is immersed but primarily to draw our attention to the pervasiveness of envious resentment in our public life. According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, symbolic violence designates the intimate encounter in which the oppressed cannot help but assess their predicament through the terms of reference provided by the oppressor.
and thereby participate unwittingly in their own subjugation. The protests that have shaken university campuses over the last four years, that is, signal a conscientization about the workings of symbolic violence. All the talk of intellectual colonization, Eurocentrism, whiteness, privilege, epistemic violence and so on is university-speak for a perceived system of knowledge and an encompassing institutional culture that make it impossible for black students and academics to participate as their white counterparts’ equals in intellectual life. Their argument is that the dice is loaded—that the rules of the game prevent them from challenging the ideological workings of the knowledge-making apparatus. Unable to challenge the system from the inside, they seek therefore to disrupt, their seemingly incoherent demands an example of Walter Benjamin’s notion of ‘pure means’ as a response to capitalist violence.45 Straightforward enough—except that, for anyone who believes in the existence of the unconscious, “the simple is never but the simplified,” in the words of Gaston Bachelard.46

Recall Fanon’s reluctant admission in the opening pages of Black Skin, White Masks—that the only real destiny for black people is the colour white. The psychological import of Fanon’s verdict cannot be overestimated because it raises the crucial question of how—in the minds of student protesters—the pursuit of whiteness is transformed into its denigration. Freudian theory offers an elegant solution, namely, the reaction formation. As per Fanon, the black subject desires to be white. There is no fear of whiteness per se—but there is an overwhelming fear of the desire for whiteness. It is no longer the black subject but the white subject who becomes—in the words of Fanon—“a phobogenic object, a stimulus to anxiety.”47 Whiteness is converted into a phobia: “We can’t breathe!” the Fallists exclaim, expressing one of the classic symptoms of a panic attack. The deprecation of whiteness, in other words, attenuates the very desire for it.48

Political commentators suggest that Fallist fury has a touch of drama to it, that they doth protest too much. Adam Habib, for example, has written about the “politics of spectacle,” which he interprets as a strategy used by minority factions to seize control of the political narrative on campus.49 I would go further by suggesting that the performative aspect of Fallism is typical of reaction formations, which are habitually overelaborate and affected.50 Moreover, the implacability of student anger has an almost compulsive feel to it—another characteristic of the reaction formation—for no matter how far backwards university management bent, students could never feel satisfied. It was as if they had to be angry—regardless of the actual deal on the negotiating table.
Envy

Reaction formations aside, why does the wish for whiteness inspire such anxiety? It is here that the Kleinian theory of envy proves instructive. According to the standard version, envy is constitutional and enters the world with the neonate. The infant revels in gratification at the mother’s nourishing breast but also has to contend with deprivation. It is this latter experience that generates the persecutory anxiety of the paranoid-schizoid position. The infant starts to hate the good breast and—as is also the case with gratification—spoils it with envy. Sadistic attacks on the breast increase until it is entirely without value: in the words of Klein, “it has become bad by being bitten up and poisoned by urine and faeces.” The stronger and more enduring the envy, the more difficult it becomes for the infant to reclaim the lost object; the ego becomes fragile and the capacity for love and hope fades into obscurity.

Whereas Klein conceived of envy as an expression of the death drive, I want to approach it primarily as an intersubjective phenomenon, as a destructive mode of being resulting from persistently unequal social encounters. Viewed from this perspective, the relevance of Kleinian theory for a psychological analysis of Fallism becomes obvious upon recognizing the equivalence of elite institutions with the nourishing breast. The University of Cape Town, for example, dispenses precious knowledge, financial support, networking opportunities and—above all—the promise of a life of dignity. But for Fallists, the internal logic of the institution is ‘white.’ They feel themselves deprived of the fruits they imagined a university education would confer, which triggers for many the familiar feeling of deprivation. They feel persecuted by an institution experienced as massively shaming, and as they begin to compare themselves to more privileged students, their shame turns to envy. In a literal display of anal sadism, they set about spoiling the university, unloading bins of human faeces into lecture halls. Haunted by a relentless sense of grievance, they set fire to life-affirming artworks and shut down life-giving classes of knowledge. “If we cannot enjoy this place, then no one will,” they may as well be saying. It does not matter that they may be damaging their own university—at least in the short run. As Freud observes, “[I]f one cannot be the favourite oneself, at all events nobody else shall be the favourite… [S]ocial justice means that we deny ourselves many things so that others may have to do without them as well.”

But this is a somewhat pragmatic assessment next to the psychological calculus that is now in play: the more the Fallists destroy the institution, the more impoverished the
collective ego feels. Their envy grows stronger still and the protests spiral out of control.\textsuperscript{56} The experience of deprivation and the destruction of the good object unleash a merciless persecutory anxiety; paranoia, aggression and projection take over as the dominant psychological themes in university life.\textsuperscript{57} With the good object now spoilt, it becomes impossible to distinguish the good from the bad\textsuperscript{58} as the Fallists start agitating for the decolonization of the curriculum. The entire Enlightenment canon—they believe—must be dismantled because it stands for colonization by intellectual means. They insist that the Enlightenment values, ideals and methods that came out of Western Europe are simply unworkable in the South African context. Reason itself becomes the object of their opprobrium—even science must fall—as \textit{lived experience} emerges as the new basis for argumentation. The purported universals of the Enlightenment project are regarded as invalid in relation to the particulars found in the colonized world. A decolonial form of praxis is sought that will privilege the lived experiences of the oppressed here and around the world.

With the Fallists attempting to replace one set of academic values with another that must yet be determined, Scheler’s \textit{ressentiment} enters the frame—that special kind of envy concerned with value delusions. It may well be that the proposed reimagining of values stands on solid ground—but the ongoing confusion over what exactly decolonization entails, suggests the presence of a “way of thinking which attributes creative power to mere negation.”\textsuperscript{59} To be clear, talk of decolonizing consciousness has been a staple of the academic circuit for more than half-a-century—and it is the lack of resolution that turns Fallist politics into a legitimate object of \textit{ressentiment} analysis.

It is my contention that several Fallist motifs bind the student movement to \textit{ressentiment} politics. The first involves the \textit{ressentiment} subject’s adoption of what Léon Wurmser calls the position of \textit{innocent victim}.\textsuperscript{60} Regardless of their actual behaviour—and this is a matter of public record—student activists considered themselves beyond reproach and therefore entirely free of guilt. A second point of convergence—described again by Wurmser—is the \textit{moral absolutism} of the \textit{ressentiment} universe, which manifests itself at the individual level as an “anal-sadomasochistic superego operating in absolute polarities.”\textsuperscript{61} For those of us who followed the university protests, the twin tropes of \textit{white privilege} and \textit{black pain} were seared into our consciousness, leaving little room for the contemplation of moral and political ambiguities. The complexity of our political situation was whittled down to the simple moral binary of “with us or against us.” And third, the classic sign of the \textit{ressentiment} mood is the \textit{displacement} of a suppressed impulse for revenge onto substitute objects.\textsuperscript{62}
Scheler describes how *ressentiment*—through repression—involves the disconnection of the person in question from “the original object of an emotion” with the result that the person “does not know ‘of what’ he [or she] is afraid or incapable.” In this regard, as much as elite university culture can leave black students struggling with feelings of alienation, it is not the primary locus of the problem. My reading is that Fallist rage originates in prior humiliations—*misrecognition*—that are raced, classed and gendered in complex ways. Shame, after all, is hardwired into the chronicity of everyday and structural violence: unable to exact revenge, the original trauma that is structural violence is forgotten—but the sense of injury remains. It is picked at compulsively, eventually exploding without warning onto unwitting secondary targets. And as John Steiner points out in his work on grievance, the victim position is not easily relinquished: it is a source of satisfaction that is narcissistically invested, hence the seeming self-aggrandisement of Fallist supporters.

What remains to be examined, then, is the decisive matter of values. In my own writings, I have described the term ‘decolonization’ as an *empty signifier*: notice the oddity, for example, of intellectuals stressing the importance of ‘decolonizing’ higher education *before* they commence discussions on what it actually means. Indeed—as the post-Marxist Ernesto Laclau points out—it is *because* it lacks any definite meaning that decolonization discourse can frame the political landscape—at least symbolically—in compelling ways. In a post-truth world that has presided over the relativization of all knowledge claims, decolonization discourse is not required to justify itself; its seat at the high table of epistemology is reserved. Yet it is a highly suspect form of politics because it often looks for problems in the wrong places. To begin with, proponents of decolonization almost never acknowledge one basic fact—that most poor and working-class students have suffered the indignity of being miseducated for twelve years of their lives. South Africa’s schooling system ranks consistently among the worst in the world and by the time these students enter elite universities, they are hopelessly underprepared for the academic life and struggle to cope with the unrelenting institutional demands. But instead of acknowledging these difficulties as areas for personal development, like Aesop’s fox they conclude that the grapes must be sour *because* they are unreachable. The problem is not the collective injustice they suffered in our dysfunctional schools—rather, it becomes the university system and the Enlightenment values it espouses. It does not matter that no one knows what decolonization means—the university must be decolonized regardless.
It is no accident that—in the post-apartheid years—there has never been a Fallist movement in our township schools. Everyone receives the same inferior education and—because of Cape Town’s enduring apartheid-style geography—there is scant awareness of the first-rate education learners in the leafy Southern Suburbs are receiving. But when these school-leavers enter elite universities, the inevitable social comparisons begin. A feeling of relative deprivation emerges as the political ideal of equality collides with the social reality of inequality. Poor and working-class students observe the ease with which their more privileged counterparts appear to negotiate university spaces. Envious resentment flares up among those students most alienated from the social order. What are they to do? Because they desire a middle-class existence—why else would anyone go to university?—they cannot draw on the traditional values of the working class. Frustrated and without counter-values of their own, they can only attack the existing institutional order, despising it in public yet desiring it in secret. They have forgotten the original crime—their own miseducation—and vent their anger at the university authorities instead. At this point, the politics of decolonization becomes the politics of displacement. It does not stand on its own ground, being fundamentally a reaction against the Enlightenment tradition. It is a resounding “No!” to the affirmations of the academic establishment. Yet its proponents are also tortured by their own ressentiment—because the values they abhor consciously are the same values their educational aspirations demand that they embrace. On this point it is worth quoting Scheler once more: “[A] man [sic] who ‘slanders’ the unattainable values which oppress him is by no means completely unaware of their positive character... the positive values are still felt as such, but they are overcast by the false values and can shine through only dimly. The ressentiment experience is always characterized by this ‘transparent’ presence of the true and objective values behind the illusory ones—by that obscure awareness that one lives in a sham world which one is unable to penetrate.”

One would be mistaken in assuming that the future of South Africa depends entirely on the condition of the poor and working classes. (I, for one, have made that assumption before.) To prove the point, one need only ask oneself why our country has not yet descended into civil war. The short answer is that the exploited classes do not have the wherewithal to organize themselves into a viable force—and that verdict has been reached on both the political left and right. That is why the influence of middle-class ressentiment should not be underestimated. There is of course a substantial gap between the ivory tower and the street—but it is equally true that what happens on university campuses filters into
public spaces. I mention this because research conducted in the middle of the twentieth century showed how followers of fascist movements were most likely to come from the lower strata of the middle classes who—because their strivings for self-improvement were continuously blocked—were most susceptible to developing feelings of *ressentiment*. At present, colleagues around the country inform me of the increasingly ‘fascist’ tenor of campus politics: they describe the suppression of dissent, rampant opportunism and ideological dishonesty. We see the same in national politics as quasi-fascist movements swim ever closer to the political mainstream. With the degree of cooperation between the two spheres increasing all the time—and with social inequality showing few signs of abating—it is only a matter of time before impotent rage—*ressentiment*—gets channelled into the creation of anti-democratic political movements.

**Impasse**

In the mid-1950s, the French psychoanalyst, Octave Mannoni, published what would become his most famous work, *Prospero and Caliban*. In his attempt to understand the psychological workings of colonialism, Mannoni assigned a dependency complex to the colonized, which he believed expressed itself via a reaction formation in the shape of a pathological desire for freedom. It is a highly contentious argument that I cannot take up now. Instead, I want to focus on two of Mannoni’s observations on the psychology of the colonizer. First, Mannoni reasoned that the cultural and technological achievements of Europe—powered by enterprise, ingenuity and an urge to dominate—were in fact the products of a defensive maneuver against an underlying inferiority complex. Second, he suggested that the need to rule in faraway lands stemmed from a paradoxical hatred of humankind. Pouring out of Europe—spurred on by their own misanthropy—the colonizers set out in search of worlds they fantasized would bear no trace of a human presence. High on “the lure of a world without men,” it was easy to convince themselves that they had ‘discovered’ America and Australia and southern Africa—in spite of the presence of the local populations—because the locals did not qualify as fully human. Rather, the colonizers would project their own forbidden impulses onto the subhuman creatures they encountered. Obsessed especially with the sexual rapacity of the natives and the clear and present danger to their own delicate women, the savages had to be infantilized, paternalized or subdued by force—and any attempt by the colonized to declare their own humanity was to be suppressed by all means necessary. This was no simple matter of economic or strategic interest—the *psychological* equilibrium of the colonial project was at stake—in Mannoni’s words, “we are perfectly happy if we can project the
fantasies of our own unconscious on to the outside world, but if we suddenly find that these creatures are not pure projections but real beings with claims to liberty, we consider it outrageous.”

As the Fanonian scholar Hussein Bulhan explains, colonizers are tragic figures. On the one hand, they need the colonized to remain in their place, to serve as the repository of their projections, a fate that no human being will tolerate indefinitely. On the other—since the colonial relationship is a recapitulation of the master-slave dialectic—the colonizer never feels recognized as human because the act of recognition is made by a slave and is therefore worthless. It is this hapless situation that constitutes what Kojève calls the existential impasse of the master—a situation that I believe may apply to many white South Africans today.

Progressive white psychoanalysts including Gillian Straker and Melanie Suchet have written courageously about their racial melancholia as “the unwilling beneficiaries of Whiteness.” But we neglect at our peril those whites whose racial melancholia is all about a “refusal to relinquish what has been lost.” As Suchet admits in the postscript to her chapter, Unraveling Whiteness, this refusal involves most white South Africans. Indeed, the end of apartheid has not led to significant changes in the distribution of material resources—but the passage of time does appear to have exposed the fragility of whiteness. Uncertain of their place in South African life, many whites have withdrawn from public spaces into fortified enclaves—“their gated communities with high walls, electrified fences, closed-circuit television and private [armies].” The steady erosion of whiteness has produced a sense of loss and confusion: as per Suchet’s analysis, what was once a narcissistic veneer has been replaced by a melancholic structure. No longer do black people submit to the white subject’s fantasy: they are exiting the dialectic en masse, leaving the master without a raison d’être. Disoriented, it is as though white South Africans were asking their black counterparts—and I quote Suchet again—“If you are no longer that to me, then who am I to myself?” But rather than step into the void between whiteness and blackness, many white people have simply battened down the hatches, retreating still further into their whiteness: they live (barely) in an existential impasse, refusing to recognize black people and, being unable to resolve their grief, they cling stubbornly to their lost object—just as Freud’s melancholics once did. In an evident case of disavowal, they know what is happening yet still they believe, or, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, “I know, but I don’t want to know that I know, so I don’t know.”
Disavowal is made possible through its connection with *fetishism*. Marx described the commodity fetish as the expropriation of workers’ labour power, which then reappears magically in the products of their labour. The commodity comes to represent what has been lost: the target of powerful identifications, it is converted readily into a fetish. Following Straker’s line of argument, one may reason that white South Africans manage their experience of lack and loss through fetishism, their castrated Whiteness affirmed and negated simultaneously. Locked away in their gated communities—a symbol of what Stephen Mitchell has called an “internal protection racket”—commodities overcome them in splendid isolation, this their defense against the brittleness of whiteness. *Perversion* has entered the scene, the anxiety generated by lack papered over by the fetish.

Deborah Posel notes how “[r]ace is always a relational construct”—the meaning of whiteness both implies and depends on the meaning of blackness—but with black people refusing to endorse the historical terms of reference, white people find themselves in psychic freefall, cut loose from what was once subjective and objective truth. Too many deny their moral culpability, their defensiveness typical of paranoid-schizoid guiltiness rather than depressive guilt. Reflecting on this inability to mourn, Adrienne Harris describes a gap in the white psyche that functions as “an imploding star, refusing signification,” where not only trauma but also destructiveness has been bleached out. All the while, the loss of the white ideal is disavowed through the commodity fetish with its stockpiling of economic power, no matter the attendant psychosocial damage.

Strictly speaking, Kojève’s *existential impasse* refers to the master’s realization that he has not been intersubjectively confirmed: he turns the Other into his slave in order to be recognized yet the slave by definition is not worthy of recognizing him. The situation I am describing, however, is one in which it is black people who see through the rules of engagement—although the outcome for white people as putative masters is still the same. Kojève explains how the master realizes that he is on the “wrong track [yet he] has no desire to ‘overcome’ […] himself as master… he cannot be transformed, educated… Mastery is the supreme given value for him, beyond which he cannot go.” Without the prospect of redemption, the master can only continue as before. Kojève again: “The Master… does not work, [he] produces nothing stable outside of himself. He merely destroys the products of the Slave’s work [by consuming them]. Thus his enjoyment and his satisfaction remain purely subjective: they are of interest only to him and therefore can be recognized only by him; they have no ‘truth,’ no objective reality revealed to all. Accordingly, this ‘consumption,’ this idle
enjoyment of the Master’s, which results from the ‘immediate’ satisfaction of desire, can at the most procure some pleasure for man; it can never give him complete and definitive satisfaction.”

Whereas the style of the black middle class is to consume their goods in plain sight, white consumers do so seemingly in private. As far as I can tell, this is not because white people do not need to signal their status; it is rather the case that white consumption is an exercise submerged in guiltiness. The difference in consumption habits may explain why we still know rather little about the goings-on in the homes of the white elite; indeed, it is only by “studying up” that the workings of the master-slave dialectic can be articulated in full.

On the basis of this analysis, however, it would appear that, in the drawing rooms of private urban enclaves, it is impasse, inwardness and joylessness that prevail, the hallmarks of whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa.

Hope

In tracing the trajectories of shame, envy and impasse in our national life, I have attempted to place Hegel’s master-slave dialectic front and centre. But one also needs to situate the question of equality in historical context: never mind South Africa, it is a sobering fact that the history of our species is a history of masters and slaves. In his account of social organisation from the Stone Age to the present, Walter Scheidel contends that a combination of domesticated food production, sedentism, state formation and hereditary property rights ensured that material inequality became a central feature of human coexistence. A fundamental part of the civilising process, in other words, is inequality itself. But history is not without surprises. What Scheidel calls the Four Horsemen of Leveling is proof that unequal societies can be leveled—in exchange for a monumental loss of life. Mass mobilization warfare is one of those horsemen involving the kind of killing contract that more or less seeps into every segment of society. The two world wars are fitting examples where industrial-scale warfare, aggressive taxation, rising costs of living, state involvement in the economy and trade disruptions ravaged the wealth of the rich, leading to unionization and the creation of welfare states that would level inequality on a scale almost unparalleled in human history. Transformative revolution is another notable leveler. Communist takeovers—exemplified by expropriation, redistribution and collectivization—succeeded in challenging inequality in extraordinary ways, rivaling even the world wars for number of fatalities and human suffering in general. State failure is the third horseman: when states fall apart, the rich
simply have more to lose so the playing fields get evened out. And finally, there are lethal pandemics: when sufficient numbers of people die, the balance between capital and labour can shift so dramatically that one can be left with Black Death-type situations where the workers make merry on meat and beer while the nobles run around trying to maintain appearances.

Acts of God aside, Scheidel is clear that exemplary violence alone has been shown to address inequality in genuine ways—not democracy, not macroeconomic crises, not modern economic development, not even radical policy reforms. Fanon may well have intuited this when he declared that “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.” Naturally, the irony of seeking to end structural and symbolic violence with revolutionary violence is not lost on anyone; indeed, the wellsprings of life-giving hope may have to be sought elsewhere. But the basic point is this: the cultivation of hope in the absence of actual material prospects amounts to little more than another cheap opiate for the masses. Real hope cannot exist within a matrix of shame, envy and impasse when the material base of our disfigured national psyche remains locked in place. As for the observable correlates of everyday violence, ressentiment-driven value delusions and alienated consumptiveness, these should remind us that nothing less than our shared humanity is at stake.

The only way to dissolve the master-slave dialectic is to resolve the problem of unreciprocated recognition in which the master insists on remaining the master. Fanon envisioned a particular outcome to the deadlock but it is not a solution that builds nations. As psychologists, we tend to treat misrecognition as a “psychical deformation”; philosophers regard it as a matter of “ethical self-realization.” Neither of these positions will suffice. Following Nancy Fraser, I want to reframe the question of misrecognition as a question of justice—because misrecognition involves “an institutionalized relation of subordination,” a relation that prevents South Africans from participating as peers in a dignified social life.

But what makes for a life of dignity, what makes a life incontrovertibly human? One can hardly do better than Martha Nussbaum’s catalogue of ten central human capabilities. This is not the occasion to repeat the entire list, so allow me to quote only those of her reflections that are of immediate relevance. For Nussbaum, being human means “Being able to move freely from place to place… Being able to use the senses; being able to imagine, to think, and to reason and to do these things in a ‘truly human’ way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education… Being able to form a conception of the good and to
engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's own life… Being able to live for and in relation to others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; being able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation; having the capability for both justice and friendship… Having the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others… being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life… being able to hold property… being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.”^109 Anything less and the life under consideration is no longer a human life.

Notice Nussbaum’s emphasis on *material* space: the freedom to move from one place to another, the reality of owning property. These are among the attributes that make us human. For the millions of disenfranchised South Africans, therefore, the question of landlessness is not only of practical importance: it is an existential question. To own land is to own oneself, to live with confidence in the world, to build communities of feeling, to pursue questions of meaning rather than survival, to have the sense that one is ontologically real.\(^{110}\) To deny a people their land, therefore, is to deny them their humanity. Ominously, Scheidel makes the point that land reform—when accompanied by violence or the threat of violence—is an effective strategy for levelling inequality. Why is violence or the threat of it effective? Because no one gives up anything worthwhile without a struggle. One can only hope that it does not come to that, that the power elite in this country will recognize that the interests of the dispossessed are the interests of us all.

But Nussbaum also discusses *psychological* capacities in her account of what it is to be human. We should not make the error, therefore, of imagining that the psychological is trivial in contexts of massive material deprivation. The land question is critical—and its resolution will go some way towards restoring dignity to the lives of South Africans—but we must not underestimate the political relevance of recognizing and validating the *mental* states of others. Treat others as you wish to be treated and do not treat others in a manner that you do not wish to be treated: this is the so-called ‘Golden Rule’ that underpins almost every religious, cultural and ethical system known to humankind. Yet one cannot realize this principle without a capacity for empathy, just as it is true that empathic sensitivity is damaging when it is oblivious to the political struggles of ordinary people. That is why critical theory matters, why sociology matters, why philosophy matters, why history matters,
why economics matters, and why psychology matters. Personal change and social transformation are inseparable: as much as we need programs for social improvement, we also need to remember that the small things still matter. We have to nurture hope—that most fragile of cargoes—with the realization that what each of us does in our lives on a moment-to-moment basis will ripple through the ages.

3 Ibid., p. 41.
9 Fukuyama, Identity.
10 Ibid.
13 Ibid., p. 25.
15 Fanon, Racism and culture, p. 25.
17 Fanon, Racism and culture, p. 25.
18 Fanon, The wretched of the earth, p. 41.
19 Fanon, Black skin, white masks, p. 178.
20 Fanon, The wretched of the earth, p. 40.
22 Fanon, The wretched of the earth, p. 40.
23 Sennett, The hidden injuries of class, p. 22.
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30 Scheler, *Ressentiment*, p. 28.


32 See ibid., pp. 79-90.

33 Ibid., p. 150.


40 Scheler, *Ressentiment*, p. 45.


42 Ibid., p. 47.

43 Ibid., p. 64.

44 Ibid., p. 67, original emphasis.


47 Fanon, *Black skin, white masks*, p. 117.


50 Hall, *A primer of Freudian psychology*, p. 92.

21

[52] Ibid., p. 186.


[54] Ibid.


[57] Ibid., pp. 108-9.

[58] Ibid., p. 108.

[59] Scheler, Ressentiment, p. 67.


[61] Ibid., p. 397.

[62] Ibid., p. 396.

[63] Scheler, Ressentiment, p. 69.


[69] Scheler, Ressentiment, p. 60.

[70] Long, Decolonizing higher education, p. 23.


[73] Bulhan, Frantz Fanon and the psychology of oppression, pp. 107-113.


[75] Ibid., p. 117.

[76] Bulhan, Frantz Fanon and the psychology of oppression, p. 116.


[80] Ibid., p. 211, emphasis added.

[81] Ibid., p. 217, emphasis added.


[83] Long, Essence or experience?, p. 308.


[85] Ibid., p. 205.

[86] Straker, Race for cover, p. 412.
Straker, Race for cover, pp. 413-4.
Suchet, Unraveling Whiteness, p. 212.
Straker, Race for cover, pp. 407, 420.
Mitchell, You’ve got to suffer if you want to sing the blues.
Ibid., p. 207.
Ibid.
Kojève, Introduction to the reading of Hegel, pp. 19, 21-2.
Ibid., p. 24.
Ibid.
Fanon, The wretched of the earth, p. 27.
Fraser, Redistribution or recognition?, p. 29.
Ibid., original emphasis.
Ibid., pp. 41-2.
Long, Essence or experience?, p. 308.