

From apartheid to empire: How (post)apartheid South Africa became an anti-poor black society

Abstract

Using psycho-political analysis as a method of seeing and interpreting, this essay meditates on why and how Frantz Fanon's observation that 'the Black is not a [hu]man' is true in (post)apartheid South Africa. In particular, the essay is concerned with the histo-political circumstances that make Fanon's observation true for poor black people. And to this end, the essay argues that local and international white-monopoly capital orchestrated a psycho-political defeat and co-option of the ANC well ahead of the 1994 democratic elections. Consequently, South Africa transitioned from apartheid into recolonisation as a satellite of the empire of capital thus, closing all prospects of a decent and dignified life for poor black people. Using a newspaper article as an illustrative example, the essay analyses the lived experience of poor black people as a consequence of the ANC's psycho-political defeat and custodianship of capital imperialism in South Africa. In this, the essay shows the violence of the ANC government on poor black people and the fate of the latter as a disposable population of the empire of capital.

Introduction

"What does the black [hu]man want?... I shall say the black is not a [hu]man".

- Frantz Fanon

This essay uses Frantz Fanon's observation in **Black Skin, White Masks** that "the black is not a [hu]man" (1986: 10) as an occasion to think about the existential challenges of black existence in (post)apartheid South Africa. Fanon's observation is, however, something of a puzzle given that before claiming that 'the black is not [hu]man'; he

Buhle Zuma

Human Sciences Research
Council

buhle.zuma@gmail.com

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asks a question – “What does the black [hu]man want?” thus raising several questions about black desire. What is the nature of the desire of people who are forced to live as non-humans? Could black desire be a politico-ethical resistance to dehumanisation? Can black desire ignite imaginations of humane forms of existence and futures? The essay does not address these questions that require dedicated treatment. Presently, and as stated above, I will concern myself with Fanon’s claim that “the black is not a [hu]man”.

Fanon’s observation requires meditation because the “European Spirit [that took] ...over the leadership of the world with fervour, cynicism, and violence” continues to consolidate itself in the 21st century (Fanon, 1961/2004: 235). Put differently, the *Zeitgeist* of colonial modernity continues to envelop the world as white supremacy, anti-black racism and as a socio-political, economic, cultural and symbolic author(ity) of the world despite the dawn of democracy. How then are we to understand the continuing consolidation of the European ego? The hardened and violent Western ego persists because the legal abolishment of slavery, imperialism and settler colonialism almost always leaves intact the institutional, social, cultural, symbolic, judicial, economic and psychological structures and practices of white supremacy and anti-black racism under a different name – democracy. In the so-called (post)colonies, white supremacy and anti-black racism draw their lifeblood from the degree to which black governments have been captured by the West to do its bidding, and especially through neoliberalism as a way of life that has left millions of poor black people and other vulnerable groups across the globe, once again, “mired in the Dark Ages” (Fanon, 2004: 96). This state of affairs has been critiqued by commentators and scholars (cf. Bauman, 2004, 2007; Mbeki, 2009; Giroux, 2009; Gibson, 2011; Saul, 2014; Seabrook, 2014; Thompson, 2014).

This essay meditates on Fanon’s observation by addressing two questions – how did (post)apartheid South Africa become an anti-black society? And, in what ways is (post) apartheid South Africa an anti-black society? The first section of the essay addresses the first question by arguing that the ANC was psycho-politically defeated and co-opted by local and international white monopoly capital through a series of secret negotiations that started in 1986 between the ANC leadership and white capitalists. The ANC’s psycho-political defeat and co-option resulted in a contrived Fanonian dialectic of liberation.

The second section, still elucidating the first question, argues that the elite settlement between the ANC and white capitalists that culminated in the acceptance of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) Strategy in 1996 was, in effect, a recolonisation of South Africa through neo-liberalism not simply as ideology and policy but fundamentally, as global economic rationality – an ‘empire of capital’¹. In this

¹ The essay uses neo-liberalism, ‘empire of capital’, and ‘capital imperialism’ interchangeably.

empire of capital, the section argues, poor black people were permanently excluded from any prospect of a decent and dignified life from the outset. The third and last section illustrates that the lived consequences for poor black people under the empire of capital are dehumanisation, violence and disposability. Ultimately, poor black people live and die as the human waste of the empire of capital². Taken together, Fanon's observation is relevant today as a call and challenge particularly to black scholars, psychologists, leaders and artists to meditate on why and how (post)colonial social formations, such as South Africa, permit the consolidation of white supremacy as capital articulations of the erasure and death of black humanity in (post)colonial societies.

South Africa and the consolidation of the European ego

For almost two decades South Africa enjoyed some sort of celebrity status cast in terms of a 'miracle nation' that avoided a descent into a civil war when settler colonialism was legally abolished in 1994. In actuality, there was a civil war that was not referred to as such because it mainly involved black people killing each other in what was labelled 'political violence' and represented in the media as 'black-on-black violence' that lasted roughly between 1990 and 1998 (cf du Toit, 1993: 11; Guelke, 2010; Kaufman, 2018). South Africa also actively participated in self-aggrandisement by calling itself a 'rainbow nation' – a religious and political imagination of the nation-building efforts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The promulgation of a new Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, a new national anthem and a new flag not only gave a convincing impression that South Africa was indeed exceptional but also that settler colonialism was permanently removed. However, several events have troubled the notion of a 'post' in (post)apartheid South Africa. Some of these events include the killing of mineworkers in Marikana in 2012, the highest levels of social protests for basic human needs recorded in the world (Salehyan et al., 2012; Ngcamu, 2019; Visagie, Turok & Swartz, 2021), and the currently unfolding corruption exposé, in the African National Congress (ANC) government by the Zondo Commission.

These ruptures of South African exceptionalism, however, are not surprising when we consider that from the outset, some scholars and commentators questioned and criticised the processes, decisions and compromises made by the ANC/South African Communist Party (SACP) allies leading up to and during South Africa's political transition from apartheid to democracy. For instance, some commentators particularly noted the near absence of revolutionary theory and debate within the anti-apartheid movement, the subversion of ideological alternatives to political democracy by the ANC/SACP allies, and the adoption of neoliberal macro-economic policies outlined

² 'Human waste' is used metaphorically to draw attention to the ways that under neoliberalism poor black people are treated as an unwanted population and a problem that is violently disposed of in deplorable living conditions. They are, in this sense, a by-product of a system that deliberately wastes human life by depriving it conditions of possibility.

and promoted by the transition literature (see O'Donnell, Schmitter & Whitehead, 1986a, b; Friedman, 1993; Marias, 1998; Bond, 2000; Terreblanche, 2003; Gibson, 2001, 2011; Klein, 2007; Habib, 2013). Yet, all this is a consequence of a fundamental psycho-political defeat of the ANC that made it not only possible but also easy to consolidate white supremacy and anti-poor blackness at the precise moment of political independence from settler colonialism. This section examines how South Africa shifted from settler colonialism to neo-colonialism window dressed by black politicians secretly captured by white capitalists to protect and promote their interests. Consequently, Fanon's observation that 'the Black is not a [hu]man' is more than an inconvenient truth in South African today.

A contrived dialectic of liberation

The ANC/SACP led South African liberation movement failed to fulfil its mission – 'A better life for all' – as espoused by some of the founding presidents such as John Dube, Albert Luthuli and Oliver Tambo (cf Mgcina, 2019). This mission tagline has also appeared in numerous ANC documents, speeches and election campaigns post-1994. The failure can be understood in psycho-political terms through Frantz Fanon's oppressor-oppressed dialectic of liberation. In **Black Skin, White Masks**³, Fanon thinks with and through Georg Hegel's slave-master dialectic. In his **Phenomenology of Spirit**, Hegel's (1949) dialectic of recognition between the master and slave unfolds as follows:

The enslaved accept their bondage and thus, their masters. This, in turn, establishes a reciprocal master-enslaved dialectic of recognition and consequently, the enslaved turn completely toward their work as demanded from them by their masters. In so doing, the enslaved supposedly find liberation in their work, since in undertaking their labour, they act under the natural law that created them as "animal-machine man" and placed them in their static station in life as things of labour for their white masters (Fanon, 2008: 194). For the enslaved, therefore, Hegel's dialectic of recognition amounts to a dialectic of submission to dehumanisation, to 'the Black is not a [hu]man'. Fanon reworks Hegel's dialectic into a dialectic of liberation within the colonial context. In Fanon's hands, the oppressed-oppressor dialectic does not take the form of reciprocal recognition. However, similar to Hegel's dialectic, the colonised black is a tool of labour that is below the level of the human. In this, the white coloniser denies the self-consciousness of black people not only as "natural reality" in the world but also as "human reality" (Fanon, 1986: 217). The white coloniser "laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work" (Fanon, 1986: 220)⁴. The result is an open conflict since black consciousness does not accept submission, insisting instead on making

³ Chapter Seven: *The Black Man and Recognition* in the 1986 translation. The essay uses both the 1986 and 2008 editions of **Black Skin, White Masks** depending on the translation preferred for its clarity.

⁴ Fanon's reformulation appears in footnote 8 in the 1986 translation and footnote 10 in the 2008 translation.

itself recognised as “the universal consciousness of self...in [the] quest of absoluteness” (Fanon, 1986: 217). At this point, the situation is a matter of life and death since Fanon agrees with Hegel that “it is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained...and proved that the essential nature of self-consciousness is not *bare existence*” (Hegel, as cited by Fanon, 1986: 218). Despite Fanon and Hegel’s agreement on this last point, we should pause here to note the racist impulse in Hegel’s thought for in his dialectic the enslaved submit rather than risk their lives for freedom and in so doing, serve the interests of racial capitalism and white supremacy.

Let us now briefly review a short period in South African history to ascertain whether it is Hegel’s dialectic of recognition or Fanon’s dialectic of liberation that accords with black people’s experiences of bondage. The 1980s were some of the most intense years of struggle against apartheid. Social and civic movements together with militant youth and trade unions played an important role in bringing the anti-apartheid struggle to a tipping point at a time when political parties were banned and political leaders in exile, prison or dead. For instance, the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) in the 1980s played a key role in creating a national platform that politicised, mobilised and organised national school boycotts that soon took on wider political issues (see Hyslop 1988; Mufson, 1991, Lodge, 1991). It was partly in this context that the youth became intensely politicised and militant and increasingly participated in what became known as ‘revolutionary violence’ targeting state property and agents. By the mid-1980s it was clear that apartheid was no longer sustainable as the country became increasingly ungovernable. Also, noteworthy is that in the absence of directives from any political party, local activities that had made the country ungovernable were also developing their methods of self-governance (cf Zuma 2009; Gibson 2011). Thus, the call in 1985 by the ANC to ‘make South Africa ungovernable’ merely reflected political liberation praxis on the ground rather than initiating it (Gibson, 2011). This aligns with Fanon’s dialectic of liberation, the masses were already risking their lives by “threaten[ing]... [settler colonialism] in [its] physical being” in their quest for self-consciousness (Fanon, 1986: 218). This grassroots dialectic of liberation was, however, compromised and ultimately deferred as a consequence of the psycho-political failings of the leaders of the ANC/SACP allies long before the snaking queues of the first democratic elections in 1994. This psycho-political defeat of the liberation movement in South Africa is a long tale however, due to space limitations, the essay only highlights key points that give coherence to the remainder of the argument in this section.

The grassroots politics of the mid-1980s, as outlined above, drove the National Party (NP) to declare a state of emergency in 1985 and in that same year, the American Congress declared a comprehensive divestment policy against South Africa (the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act, 1986). Both these events signalled to the South

African business sector that its wealth accumulation was in an irretractable crisis and this convinced the sector (the Mineral Energy Complex) that a political transition that included the ANC was inevitable (Terreblanche, 2012)⁵. The MEC wanted a complete transformation of South Africa's politico-economic system as a means to preserve the wealth it had accumulated⁶. To this end, the MEC had several hurdles to overcome including "how to convince the ANC to abandon its socialist orientation [and] how to prevent the ANC from becoming a populist government inclined towards massive redistribution spending" (Terreblanche, 2012: 59).

These hurdles were overcome through a series of secret talks in the USA, Britain and South Africa funded by the Anglo-American Corporation, Consolidated Goldfields (Consgold), Shell and De Beers (see Esterhuysen, 2012). Added to these were American pressure groups, the Woods Institutions (World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) and the transition literature (cf Sparks, 1994). All these groups were committed to neoliberal market fundamentalism and particularly the American model that promoted deregulation, privatisation, anti-statism, free trade and fiscal austerity (cf Terreblanche, 2012; Gibson, 2001, 2011). Three examples will suffice to illustrate that the MEC and American pressure groups worked on the psychology of the ANC. First, international banks and American universities handled the ideological training of a large number of ANC leaders on the supposed merits of neoliberal globalisation and market fundamentalism (cf Terreblanche, 2012: 64). Second, American pressure groups were not only relentless on the ANC to abandon socialism but also gave the ANC false promises of prosperity to get the ANC to embrace neoliberalism (Terreblanche, 2012: 65) Third, between 1985 and 1989 leading figures of the NP were in secret talks with Nelson Mandela while he was still a prisoner in Robben Island (cf Higley & Burton, 2006: 94). Furthermore, from 1990 Harry Oppenheimer and Nelson Mandela met regularly for lunch or dinner and similarly, the MEC met with the core leadership of the ANC at Oppenheimer's estate, Little Brenthurst (cf Sparks, 1994; Esterhuysen, 2012). These activities culminated in an elite compromise that "emphatically excluded the possibility of a comprehensive redistribution policy" once "the interests of the old white corporate elite and the emerging black elite" were secured and the American-led neoliberal empire [was] accepted" (Terreblanche, 2012: 67; Gibson, 2011). We will examine the consequences of this neoliberal empire in the next section. For now, let us consider the argument I am advancing that what transpired in the leadership of the ANC constitutes a psycho-political insurrection of the dialectic of liberation into a dialectic of submission to bondage.

⁵ "The MEC is comprised by a cluster of industries, heavily promoted by the state, around mining and energy – raw and semi processed mineral products, gold, diamond, platinum and steel, coal, iron and aluminium." (Ashman, Fine & Newman, 2011: 178)

⁶ Also see Alister Spark's (1994) whose gives an account of the negotiations starting much earlier in 1982 and by different persons than the MEC.

Let us for a moment consider the possibility that the ANC reasoned that the elite settlement was its best option given the following. First, it has been argued that armed struggle with the South African Defence Force (SADF) had not yielded a decisive victory for the ANC with Umkhonto Wesizwe (MK) operations severely thwarted by SADF covert and clandestine operations (see Goldich, 2015)⁷. Second, the collapse of the Soviet Union ended the military support that MK had received (cf SAHO, 2012). We can concede these enormous difficulties for which the ANC probably had no time to formulate coherent and sound political and military responses, and especially as we have seen, that the ANC had been pressured and persuaded by local and international players towards a neoliberal settlement. However, there are still questions to raise about the ANC's choices. For instance, we know from the preceding discussion that the apartheid regime and white capitalists were on a backfoot and had more to lose than the ANC. We also know that the settler colonialists saw and treated black people, including the leadership of the ANC, as terrorists (cf SAHO, 2011, 2016; Elliot, 2019), a 'black danger', and ultimately as non/quasi-humans who could be exploited without consequence. In other words, the totality of life in South Africa was forced into a Hegelian master-slave dialectic. This being so, why then is it difficult to find evidence that the ANC attempted to push back on the pressures staggered against it as we have seen? Perhaps the answer is as simple as Gibson (2001, 2011) has argued that notwithstanding local and foreign pressure on the ANC, this should not overshadow the fact that within the liberation movement, the ANC/SACP alliance exerted its hegemony to subvert any ideological alternatives (to the neoliberal ideology) offered by the trade unions and left-intellectuals (also cf Lewis, 1986, Jongilizwe, 1986, Bond, 1999, Alexander, 2003). This subversion makes sense when we understand that the ANC may never have been committed to a socialist ideology despite any pretensions it may have projected in its relationship with the USSR⁸. For instance, responding to Robert Fatton Jr. who had argued that "the ANC has failed to develop a truly socialist revolutionary strategy" (1984: 593), Thabo Mbeki (1984: 609) wrote: "...the ANC is not a socialist party. It has never pretended to be one, has never said it was, and is not trying to be. It will not become one by decree or for purposes of pleasing its 'left' critics."

Given that the correspondence between Fatton and Mbeki occurred in 1984 before the ANC was wined, dined and schooled on the merits of neoliberalism, we are safe to conclude that the ANC had no reason to resist the pressures from neoliberals who now seem to have given the ANC exactly what it desired – an ideology in tune with its nationalist and multi-class ideology. This being so, we see that the ANC had no reason to insist on establishing ethical and political first principles upon which to rupture

⁷ Some commentators have argued that what held back MK was the ANC's moral and political restraint to avoid civilian casualties in its guerrilla operations (cf Kasrils, 1988; Williams, 2006).

⁸ See South African History Online, *The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the Anti-Apartheid Movement* <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/union-soviet-socialist-republics-ussr-and-anti-apartheid-struggle>

the slave-master dialectic and create the conditions for black life to forge its future in South Africa. This would have been the preconditions for a negotiated settlement envisioned by Chris Hani (cf Macmillan, 2014). In his sceptical response to the MEC funded negotiations and his criticism of Thabo Mbeki, Chris Hani's view in 1990 was that: "[n]ow, we want to take this question of negotiations away from the clever initiatives and manoeuvres of individuals. We want to put it squarely in the hands of the people. The people must know that negotiations are [*sic*] an arena of struggle. They must know that negotiations are not going to be possible through offers from the ruling class" (Macmillan, 2014: 107).

And yet, this is precisely what happened in the elite settlement between the ANC and the MEC: "The *quid pro quo* between the corporate sectors and the ANC leadership core was that lucrative opportunities would be created for the emerging ANC elite to join the white capitalist elite to become rich enough to maintain the same consumerist lifestyle as the white elite" (Terreblanche, 2012: 69). This is precisely what Fatton was criticising the ANC for, its nationalist ideology and goals that had repeatedly failed in other parts of the African continent post-independence. Fatton (1985: 433) writes, "[m]y criticism stems from the historical results of nationalist struggles in Africa. While these struggles did, in fact, achieve an Africa seizure of power, they more often than not culminated in the consolidation of petty-bourgeois privilege and class exploitation"⁹. Put different, nationalist struggles preserve the Hegelian master-slave dialectic with the black elite as the co-opted window dressing. In the final analysis then, "[t]he Negro/[ANC] is a slave who has been allowed to assume the attitude of a master". Or, what amounts to the same thing, "[t]he white man is a master who has allowed his slaves/[ANC] to eat at his table" (Fanon, 1986: 219). This is one formulation of what the essay is arguing to be the psycho-political failure and defeat of the ANC which holds even if the ANC claims to have had no socialist pretensions. The argument I am advancing is that it is the ANC's psycho-political orchestrated, as we have seen, through the neoliberal elite settlement, that had made the ANC incapable of fulfilling its mission to provide a 'better life for all' and especially the vulnerable segments of the population. The analysis of the ANC's psycho-political failure can be further advanced as follows.

First, the elite settlement reveals and fulfils the ANC's materialist and consumerist desire that is perhaps best captured by the phrase "[i]t's our turn to eat" (Wrong, 2009) or as Smuts Ngonyama once remarked, "I didn't struggle to be poor"¹⁰. Second, in an ontological sense, the ANC's elite settlement is a plea for white recognition emanating

⁹ There is perhaps no better criticism of African nationalist projects than Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.

¹⁰ In 2004, the then ANC spokesperson Smuts Ngonyama defended his participation in a Telkom BEE share scheme which, after the sale of the government's shares, would have netted him up to R160 million, he was quoted as saying: "I did not struggle to be poor" (cf Saunders-Meyer, 2021).

from a “logic that props up their oppressors as the standard of human value” (Gordon, 2008: 86). The obvious problem with making white people the standard of humanity is that it is a lie. Reinforcing this lie demands that black people imitate whiteness, as a type of admission fee, into the category of the human¹¹. Third, since whiteness is predicated on the hatred and death of black people, to seek white recognition and to desire whiteness (in its structural, cultural, social, psycho-emotional, economic, and symbolic articulations) is to desire to contribute to the global historical echoes of a Black Holocaust¹². Once again, all this returns us to Fanon’s analytical claim that ‘the Black is not a [hu]man’. Ironically, this includes the black political and business elite who may think of themselves as an exception because they have been invited to the white table to feast on (ab)used black bodies.

An elite settlement and the empire of capital

In this section, the essay argues that the elite settlement between the ANC and capitalists inaugurated the recolonisation of South Africa by American led global neoliberalism as an ‘Empire of Capital’ (cf Saul, 2014). This section does not offer a history of neoliberalism, instead, it presents an argument for understanding neoliberalism as ‘capital imperialism’ or an ‘empire of capital and how this empire manifests in South Africa. These arguments are, in turn, a premise for discussing an example of the lived consequence of the ANC’s elite settlement and the ‘empire of capital’ it oversees.

Conceptually and at the current stage of its development, capitalism can be understood as a form of a global empire. Unlike imperialism of old that operated through geopolitical occupation, control of commercial routes and military conquest, capital imperialism has conquered the world through market fundamentalism whose levers are manipulated by the most powerful capitalist nations to achieve similar objectives as those of imperial states and settler colonialism (cf Wood, 2003, Saul, 2007). This recolonisation of many parts of the world that had achieved political independence is possible because the economic reach of the empire of capital far exceeds that of political and military domination. This, however, does not mean that the empire of capital no longer requires the use of coercive power and the existence of nation-states for, indeed the economic domination of nations across the globe is a form of war waged by “economic imperatives and the ‘laws’ of the market” (Wood, 2003: 154).

¹¹ My understanding and use of ‘whiteness’ is borrowed from Melissa Steyn who argues that ‘whiteness’ as “an extremely successful ideological construction of modernist colonisation, is by definition a construction of power: whites as a privileged group take their identity as the norm and the standard by which other groups are measured” (2000: 1).

¹² By Black Holocaust I am not only referring to the black people who were tortured and massacred by the Germans in Southwest Africa (Namibia) between 1890-1945 (cf Carr, 2003) but more broadly to the torture, enslavement and killing of black people by white people in the last 500 years.

While neo-liberalism does advocate and is premised on government austerity, global capitalism and market fundamentalism, neoliberalism cannot, in any practical sense, be reduced to the fanaticism of a supposed natural reality of the market. Properly understood, neo-liberalism is “first and fundamentally a...*new global rationality of contemporary capitalism*”, a ‘world reason and a *Zeitgeist* “that structure[s] and organise[s] not only the action of rulers but also the conduct of the ruled (Dardot & Laval, 2013: 3-4). The concept of ‘rationality’ used here borrows its meaning from Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘political rationality’ or ‘governmental rationality’ by which he means “the activity that consists in governing people’s conduct within the framework of and using the instruments of, a state” (Dardot & Laval, 2013: 4). For this reason, imperial capitalism requires and supports the formation of liberal democratic states because it needs the political apparatus for its ends¹³. From this perspective, we can see in a new light why it was important for the local MEC, international financial institutions and American pressure groups to carefully facilitate the transition from apartheid to liberal democracy. Democratic states are therefore not held prisoners by global neoliberalism but they are co-opted into and are a crucial part of the empire of capital. They are thus co-creators of generalised competition that is normalised “at the expense of safeguarding minimal conditions for the populations’ welfare, health and education” (Dardot & Laval, 2013: 5). Neo-liberalism then is also a political project.

The (post)apartheid neoliberal politico-economic system is not any different as we saw in the previous section. It serves the interests of the white capital monopoly and those of the black elite. The adoption of GEAR in 1996 signalled the final success of capital imperialism in South Africa and thus the permeant exclusion of the impoverished from any possibility of a dignified and humane existence. Two examples of how this was achieved are as follows.

First, the ANC was promised by global capitalists that once GEAR was adopted by the ANC, favourable conditions would be created that would allow a “large influx of foreign direct investment, higher growth rates, higher employment and a trickle-down effect to alleviate poverty” (Terreblanche, 2012: 65). Yet, in reality, GEAR “increase[d] the outflow of domestic capital – even while the hoped-for investment inflows failed to materialise” (Ashman, Fine & Newman, 2012: 183). Second, Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and Affirmative Action (AA) were crucial components of the elite settlement that are misunderstood as an invention of the ANC whereas, in actuality, BEE and AA (including affirmative procurement) were conceived by the MEC as a device to bring the leadership of the ANC (and its network of close-knit families)

¹³ That is why, paradoxically, the more purely economic empire has become, the more the nation state has proliferated... It has even...been a major strategy of capitalist imperialism to create local states to act as conduits for capitalist imperatives (Wood, 2003: 154).

into the fold of lucrative opportunities for self-enrichment and thus create the ANC as a black elite (cf Mbeki, 2009).

And yet, in a move to pacify the masses and to continue to portray itself as the vanguard of the liberation movement, the ANC used the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) for its 1994 election campaign¹⁴. In keeping with the elite agreements made with the MEC, the ANC marginalised and quietly dismantled the RDP within five years and the last remaining structure of the RDP (the RDP Portfolio Working Committee in the National Assembly) was abandoned in 1999 (cf Streek, 1999).

It is in taking all this together that we can appreciate the catastrophic scale of the defeat and failure of the ANC and the entire liberation movement. And, just as the masses of poor black people were the casualties and disposables of settler colonialism and racial capitalism, the ANC has ensured the continuation of this injustice by allowing South Africa to be a neo-colonial satellite of the empire of capital.

The consequences of the ANC's psycho-political failure: inequality and state violence

According to the 2020 World Bank Poverty and Equity Brief, "South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world... High levels of income polarisation are manifested in very high levels of chronic poverty, a few high-income earners and a relatively small middle-class" (Sulla, 2020: 1). Given our discussion hitherto, not only is this bleak reality not surprising, but it is also consistent with our understanding of how the elite settlement excludes poor black people from prospects of a humane existence within the empire of capital. To illustrate the deplorable living conditions that poor black people live in as a consequence of the ANC's elite neoliberal settlement, this section uses a story reported in the newspapers about a sanitation protest. What makes it possible to use a single story to make general analytical claims about the living conditions of poor black people is the fact that South Africa has one of the highest service delivery protests in the world (cf Salehyan et al., 2012; Ngcamu, 2019; Visagie, Turok & Swartz, 2021) and thus, the story represents a phenomenon that has become a defining feature of (post)apartheid South Africa.

Common sanitation protest tactics including blocking the streets with uncollected and/or uncleaned buckets of faeces from the bucket toilet system, emptying the buckets of faeces at the entrances of government buildings or other strategically important locations such as airports, and pelting government officials with faeces (cf

¹⁴ Vision and Objectives: 2.2.3 The central objective of our RDP is to improve the quality of life of all South Africans, and in particular the most poor and marginalised sections of our communities.

Molosankwe, 2014). My illustrative example is a story reported in The Star newspaper on 11 June 2014 (Molosankwe, 2014). For our purposes, the essay highlights some aspects of the story and the woman at the centre of this story. The article opens as follows: “[s]he pulled her pants and underwear down and squatted in the road. First, she showed her backside to all and sundry, then she turned around and flashed her crotch. Nomathemba Hlongwane danced and jiggled her buttocks in protest at her disgust at the fact that the bucket system, which her hostel still depends on, had not been emptied in three months...” (Molosankwe, 2014: no page number).

I argue that Nomathemba’s decision to protest naked reflects a tacit and lived knowledge and understanding that the ANC government treats poor black people with naked cruelty by subjecting them to dehumanising living conditions. This is precisely the view expressed by a community leader interviewed by the journalist – “we were tired of being treated like we are not humans. Even animals don’t live in stinking places with maggots, hence we demonstrated” (Molesankwe, 2014: no page number). Yet, Nomathemba was not interviewed even though pictures were taken of her and the story foregrounds her nudity. Nomathemba is represented as a spectacle without voice or intelligence, nothing more than a naked poor black body¹⁵. In contrast to the male community leader in a position of relative power and status, Nomathemba is a proxy for the figure of the naked ape in the thralls of “economic Darwinism” and at the centre stage of imperial capitalism’s “theatre of cruelty” (Giroux, 2009: 2-4).

In this theatre of the elite, her naked body is a symbolic representation and literal materiality of millions of poor black people who are excluded from humane conditions and experiences constituting the ‘post’ in (post)apartheid South Africa. In (post) apartheid South Africa, the poor black body “is that *thing that is, but only insofar as it is nothing*. And it is the point where the thingness and the nothingness meet that the... identity [of poor black people] lies” (Mbembe, 2015: 187, emphasis in original). Black people in general and specifically poor black people live in a world that suspends them in the contradiction of being made hyper-visible as things to be “look[ed] on in amused contempt and pity [and disgust]” (Du Bois, 1903/2005: 3). And yet, the hypervisibility of impoverished black bodies simultaneously renders black people invisible as human beings and consequently, their perspective and any meaning they give to their lives and suffering. There is, therefore, no need to interview Nomathemba because her actions carry no more meaning than that “[s]he pulled her pants and underwear down...showed her backside...turned around and flashed her crotch [and] danced and jiggled her buttocks” (Molesankwe, 2014: no page numbers). This is the fate of black

¹⁵ We see the same practice, for example, in Rehad Desia’s documentary *Miners Shot Down*. The documentary does not interview a single mine worker who survived the ordeal.

poor people who are forced to live as a presence that is “a form of absence – white absence”, capital absence and ultimately the “absence of human presence” (Gordon, 1997: 71-72).

Despite being dehumanised in every aspect of their existence in the empire of capital, socio-economically impoverished black people cannot experience themselves and their lives in any way other than as human beings who think, feel, desire and endeavour to give meaning to their lived experiences. Let us then, as a thought experiment imagine what Nomathemba Hlongwane might have said if she were interviewed by the journalist.

“I live naked, undressed of any semblance of dignity. There’s no dignity even in how and where we poop. Can you imagine living like that, how that must feel and what it says about you and your life? The ANC government forces us to live with our shit, to stew in it for months. I don’t know what that tells you, but to me, it says that poor black people are an inconvenience to the ANC. The ANC keeps us alive enough to vote for it and keeps us dependent on it with social grants instead of giving us education and job opportunities.”

Even if Nomathemba had made these remarks, it would not matter because people like her do not matter. Irrespective of what poor black people do and say, the rationality of the empire of capital is capable of only one response – violence – the coercive power to silence and erase the no-body’s it creates as its waste. The story continues as follows: “An hour later, Hlongwane was flat on her back – fully clad, but floored by the tear gas police had shot to disperse the protesters. The protesters began dispersing of their own accord at about 10.30 am. Suddenly two loud bangs rang out and the acrid stench of tear gas filled the air... more shots rang out. The police were now firing rubber bullets. Hlongwane was left lying on the ground, passed out from what is believed to be a respiratory problem [...] Hlongwane later got up and was able to leave the scene unassisted” (Molesankwe, 2014: no page numbers).

Whether state violence was necessary for this situation may be debated. However, from the above account, it seems obvious that the police had no motive to discharge teargas and rubber bullet when protestors were already dispersing. I argue, therefore, that state violence was used because it has become the default response to poor black people. State violence is the proxy for the ANC government’s lack of compassion for impoverished black people. A historical recurrence refuses to go unnoticed here, for like the apartheid system that used state violence to create spectacles of black bodies in anguish, destruction and death, the ANC government continues the practice of violence on impoverished black people. Part of this violence manifests in the way

that the empire of capital creates humans who are treated as disposable populations because they are perceived as ‘problem people’ (Du Bois, 1903/2005). One of the state’s preferred methods of disposing of ‘problem people’ is violence on the flesh and the story we are studying is a case in point.

Another example is the state violence inflicted on mineworkers in Marikana in 2012 resulting in 75 injured and 34 dead. Disposable populations, therefore, live as “death-bound subjects” (cf JanMohamed, 2005) which is “...living with the possibility of one’s arbitrary death as a legitimate feature of a system...that demonstrates that one group of people’s lives are less valuable than other’s to the point of their not being considered to be real people at all” (Gordon, 2007: 11). Once again, all this returns to Fanon – ‘the Black is not a [hu]man’.

There is, in fact, an uncanny resemblance and theme between the images of Mngcineni Noki¹⁶ and Nomathemba Hlongwane. In two frames, the characteristic feature of South Africa as an anti-poor black social formation is exhibited and the message to poor black people is unambiguous – demand ‘a better life (for all)’ and you will be fed violence.

First, Gordon (1997: 75) put it aptly “[t]he black...does not symbolise crime and licentious sexuality in an antiblack world. The black is crime and licentious sexuality, bestiality...”. Second, under the “politics of disposability” the suffering and cries of vulnerable, exploited and abandoned human beings fall not on deaf ears but sadistic minds and hearts that have ensured that “politics no longer advocates for compassion, social justice, or the fundamental provisions necessary for a decent life” (Giroux, 2009: 10) and instead, “punishment” and death have been made the “appropriate civic response to poverty...and human suffering” (Giroux, 2009: 11). Third, the imagery of dead miners and exposing of buttocks are part of a long history of black bodies in destruction which although began as a white racist fantasy for a “horrible pornography of death” (Hook, 2014: 48) has morphed into a general anti-poor black social fantasy of the black and white elite without being expunged of its racism. In all this, the black body continues to be suspended in the “antinomies of fantasy” (Hook, 2014: 53) that consists as we have seen, on the one hand, of poor black bodies as ‘death-bound subjects’. On the other hand, and the male black body, in particular, represents the “phallic corporeality of black masculinity...as the epitome of physicality...as *body in apotheosis*” (Hook, 2014: 53, emphasis in original). Black bodies, therefore, exist in a permanent and irreconcilable contradiction as “the body-in-pieces” and as “a site of exaggerated vitality” (Hook, 2014: 54).

¹⁶ Mngcineni Noki was one of the leaders of the mine workers striking for better pay and working conditions from their employer Lonmin Platinum Mine in Marikana. After the Marikana massacre, he became known as ‘the man in a green blanket’.

That such an absurd and cruel existence of extreme opposites is possible within the empire of capital is because poor black people are not, strictly speaking, a part of the empire of capital, they are, as we have argued, unidentified aliens and its expelled waste. People like Mngcineni Noki, Nomathemba Hlongwane and millions more, "...belong nowhere, and their problems, being they, mean that they cannot gain the legitimating forces of recognition" (Gordon, 2007: 125). And while disposable black lives are left to rot and disintegrate "without protections, benefits and support" in the wastelands of informal settlements, hostels and townships, "a small, privileged minority can purchase time, goods, services and security..." (Giroux, 2009: 11). Lastly then, while the empire of capital is a form of death machine, it "is also *productive* of certain kinds of social relations, certain ways of living, certain subjectivities...and ultimately, it "defines a certain existential norm in western societies and, far beyond them, in all those societies that follow them on the path of 'modernity'" (Dardot & Laval, 2013: 3, emphasis in original).

Conclusion

In the last chapter of **The Wretched of the Earth** – 'Colonial War and Mental Disorders' – Fanon writes, "because it is a systematised negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity, colonialism forces the colonised to constantly ask the question: "Who am I in reality?" (Fanon, 2004: 182). What the essay has argued and illustrated is that the war of dehumanisation on poor black people continues in South Africa and therefore, we can reasonably expect that poor black people are constantly confronted with the same question, even if it may not be asked explicitly in these terms. However, from what we have seen in the preceding sections, probably, the question that haunts poor black people is not an identity question – who am I? It is, instead, an existential question – what am I?

The essay has examined the histo-political circumstances under which the liberation movement failed, in psycho-political terms, and the resultant neoliberal elite settlement that made South African an anti-poor black social formation. It is this recolonisation of South Africa by capital imperialism that closes all possibilities for poor black people to formulate alternative answers, other than that offered by Fanon, to the existential question – what am I? Tragically, Fanon's analytical claim – a black is not a human – remains a sobering reality for millions of poor black people. It seems to me, however, that the tragedy is not only on poor black people but on South Africa as a nation. It is difficult to imagine how the current levels of inequality and the dehumanisation of millions of people will not, at some point, lead to social, political and economic instability. If we accept the likelihood of this possibility, then we ought to also accept that the recolonisation of South Africa by the empire of capital and the deplorable living conditions and dehumanisation of poor black people has serious implications for all of us.

There are perhaps a series of questions that critical scholars in general, and psychologists in particular, ought to grapple with. For instance, have we, in our theories and theorising, not missed a crucial feature of postcolonial societies which may be that the 'post' is a destination not yet achieved? Instead of theorising about the (post) colony, perhaps we should be theorising about the (neo)colony as a distinctly anti-poor black democratic social formation. And if there is any measure of truth in this, what would that mean for how we practice psychology as a healing modality? Put differently, what should be psychology's contribution in a country in which more than half of its population experiences everyday life as a 'horrible pornography of death'? (Hook, 2014) More to the point, how should psychology theorise the *lived experience* of poor black people? What Du Bois in **The Souls of Black Folk** formulated as "how does it feel to be a problem" (2005: 2). What does psychology have to say about the inner life of a people who, for generations, have been treated as though they have no internal life? Still wrestling with the arbitrary suffering and death of black people, Du Bois in **Darkwater: Voices from within the veil** finds himself at the end of his intellectual wits and slips into prayer "we raise our shackled hands and charge Thee, God, by the bones of our stolen fathers, the tears of our dead mothers... What meaneth this? Tell us the plan, give us the sign" (1999: 15). Lastly then, can psychology make *meaning* (in theoretical and clinical terms) of the suffering and dehumanisation of poor black people? For if we are not, at the very least, ethically compelled to make meaning of the dehumanisation and suffering of other human beings, what are we becoming in the empire of capital?

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