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LIVING IN THE INTERREGNUM

Although South Africa is a declared republic, a presidential white Napoleon waits in the wings to crown himself emperor-dictator of a country divided into fake national states.

Although South Africa calls itself a democracy, it has been so for barely one fifth of the South African people, the whites who have the vote.

"Our time" is the last years of the colonial era in Africa. We are at once the most advanced country on the continent, and a relic of the past.

It's inevitable that 19th century colonialism should finally come to its end here, because here it surely reached its ultimate expression, open in the legalised land- and mineral-grabbing, open in the constitutionalized, institutionalized racism that was concealed by the British under the sly notion of uplift, the French and Portuguese under the sly notion of selective assimilation. Our extraordinarily obdurate crossbreed of Dutch, German, British, French as the South African white population produced a bluntness that unveiled everyone's refined white racism: the flags of European civilization dropped, and there it was, unashamedly, the ugliest creation of man, and they baptized the thing in the Dutch Reformed Church, called it apartheid, coining, to outlast Nazi terminology, the ultimate term for every manifestation, over the ages, in many countries, of race prejudice. Every country on earth could see its semblances here: and most peoples.

The sun that never set over one or other of the 19th century colonial empires of the world is going down finally in South Africa.

Has gone down; a concept such as the proposed new South African constitution could only be a product of fading light and failing foresight - the senile resort of a fierce, dying force.

Since the black uprisings of the mid-seventies, coinciding with the independence of Mozambique and Angola, and later that of Zimbabwe, the past has begun rapidly to drop out of sight, even for those who would have liked to go on living in it. Historical co-ordinates don't fit life any longer; new ones, where they exist, have couplings not to the rulers, but to the ruled. For example, the plight of modern industry, unable to deal with labour relations without representative trade unions, has compelled the state to allow black labour to organize itself in line with 20th century practice - while Group Areas and influx Control continue to restrict the lives of those same black workers as if they were still living in the age of feudalism.

'The old is dying, and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.'

The quotation is from the diary of a man in prison, Antonio Gramsci. He dies in another country, a prisoner of the state, like Bram Fischer, Steve Biko, Neil Agett, Ahmed Timol, and too many others. And, like them, he died dedicated to finding a way for the new to be born.

You and I and all South Africans who are living in that interregnum between the old and the new, products, perpetrators and victims, all at once, of that great diversity of morbid symptoms.

We live in a time and place where bannings of student and other publications fill columns as apparently unremarkably as advertising 'smalls'; where editors work under threat of police action against them, and so do bishops;

where individuals are released from the silencing of one law only to be silenced under another; where colossal removals of black people from their homes become disasters apparently as remote from human intervention as natural disasters of flood or drought; where people water-ski on artificial lakes a few kilometres from others who queue to buy a tin of water; where young men train to fight their brothers, and bombs in the street explode not only human lives but the old certainties of whether there are such things as innocent victims in what has been made of this country - a country where the latest product on the home improvement market is advertised as a fully washable and durable safety curtain, available in a range of pastel shades, that is capable of keeping out splintered glass and shrapnel from parcel and car bombs, and the secondary blast of rocket attacks.

The existential coherence of our lives we term 'concepts' is in essential disruption. Our reason-to-be is to find a way for the new to be born of all this.

My presence here today is illustrative of some of the morbid symptoms displayed by our society - a contradiction of what seems to be, ought to be.

Firstly, here I am, ready to explicate my conviction that our reason-to-be is to find a way for the new to be born. And were am I? I am in a university whose students have just disaffiliated from the national student body whose dedication is to search out that way. Those of you who voted to disaffiliate no doubt sincerely feel that the organization is full of faults and shortcomings. Yes, of course it is; it cannot be otherwise at this time. But these very mistakes and setbacks are the battle-scratches of people who are grasping the haak-en-steek of issues in the thicket of the interregnum.

I presume to say to those who felt they were making a free and democratic decision in disaffiliating: you can't disaffiliate from our hard South African realities. There is no referendum that will achieve that.

Secondly, here I am, giving an Academic Freedom Lecture in a year when this university, like all other so-called open white universities in South Africa, has narrowly missed being forced to introduce a quota system controlling the admission of black students.

Academic Freedom in its generally-understood sense is concerned with the freedom to teach and learn without restriction on access to and dissemination of ideas, and to the literature and documentation necessary to the pursuit of knowledge. It is more or less taken for granted that anyone with the necessary educational qualifications will be free to be accepted by a university.

But in our country the basic academic freedom - freedom of entry to a university - is and long has been denied on grounds of another qualification altogether: colour.

The quota is merely the latest, up-dated version of this entrance exam no brain can pass unless it is encased in a head of Caucasian-type hair.

The present system of restricting the entry of black students, the permit system, was and is also a kind of quota; we must not forget that whether the onus of refusal or acceptance lies with some government official or with the university itself, the South African university - whether black, white, or 'open quota' - remains an institution where real academic freedom doesn't exist.

The Quota Act is on the statute book now, and Dr Gerrit Viljoen has made clear that it could be applied at any time. Ominously, the position will be reviewed yearly. This latest threat of preventing academic freedom from coming into existence in South Africa happens to utilise one of the very old, means, borrowed from other repressive regimes, among the many and ingenious new forms of repression introduced by South African governments. I am the daughter of a man who couldn't get into high-school, in Lithuania, under the quota for Jews set by the Russian Czar. But if the quota now hanging over our heads, ready to drop the guillotine at the government's pleasure, is an ancient evil, it is no less the newest proof, if any were needed, of the lie of this government's commitment to peaceful change.

The fact is that over the last decade, some white higher educational institutions have been admitting more and more black students, through bureaucratic cracks in the present system. Despite the black separatist movement of the 70s, young blacks and whites at the most alert and flexible stage in life have been mixing at universities.

Where else should peaceful change be initiated, if not with young people in educational institutions?

Now the threat of the quota has been introduced to stop this small beginning of a chance of the understanding between the races the government admits is so necessary for the survival of us all.

Those white South Africans who have been persuaded into some vague feeling, if no particular conviction, that the 1980s micro-chip version of apartheid - the constitutional proposals - represents on paper a move towards a more equitable social order and safer if not better race relations in our country, should set beside Both's vortacist dream the placing on the statute book of the quota, that old stand-by of racist regimes, and note how the practical realities of day-to-day racist laws and administration not only continue but regress..

Confusions of this kind are common morbid symposiums of which we all need to clear our heads if we are to think straight.

As for those of us, within and outside the universities, who are determined to fight for the repeal of all those sections of the amended Universities Act which empower a Minister of the State to impose conditions of admission on students on racial grounds - if our opposition is to have any real meaning in the move towards a new society, we have to be clear that the issue of the quota under any guise is not an end in itself but a very limited objective, a temporary beachhead in the struggle to be waged constantly against segregated and - by definition - unequal education.

One of the few certainties one can have in the state of interregnum is to act in full cognisance on those occasions when one does know, is sure, how to act.

The no to the quota expressed by mass protest and non-co-operation that has succeeded in gaining a one-year stay of implementation of the Act has its full meaning when it is recognized as a no to the whole South African system of education, from nursery school to university.

It is no to education that - to extend Professor Es'kia Mphahlele's statement about black ethnic universities - does not express the culture of the people it serves, the people of South Africa, but that of the Establishment.

It is a no meant to echo through the House of Parliament and the Union Buildings.

It is a no, by the inevitable unravelling of effects back to causes, echoing all the way to the entire statute book of repressive laws which restrict normal life and bring suffering and humiliation to the majority of South Africans.

It is a no to the power-structure that makes such laws possible.

It is a no which adds its volume to the no that is the only answer to the referendum on the constitutional proposals.

I am white and I shall be addressing myself to white South Africans in this lecture. This is not 'although' but because I belong to and believe in a unitary South Africa to come.

It is because I believe in a future where the status of those with white faces who have learnt the way to practice a common political, social and geographical identity will not be singled out.

I talk as a white because I have accepted - while not accepting that there are no ways and areas in which black and white can work together for change - the advice of blacks whose judgement I trust that the priority for white is to move whites, including myself, to dismantle their mental and emotional constructs of the past, face the morbid symptoms of the interregnum, and try to free themselves to belong to a post-apartheid South Africa.

Many will not want to, many cannot bring themselves to.

But in the white population - less than one fifth of the total population now, predicted to drop to one seventh by the year 2000 - there is a vigorous segment preoccupied, in the interregnum, neither by plans to run away from nor merely ways to survive physically and economically in the state of majority rule that is coming. I can't give you numbers for this segment, and I am almost certainly overreaching myself in assuming that everyone in this hall belongs to it. Nevertheless, in its existence as a measure of some sort of faith in the possibility of structuring society humanly, in the possession of skills and intellect to devote to this end, the growing segment has something to offer the future.

How to go about this is becoming our great preoccupation, as whites.

Since skills, technical and intellectual, can be bought in markets other than those associated with the vanquished white power, although they are very important as a commodity ready to hand they do not constitute, alone, a claim on the future. And who wants to be a commodity, anyway?

The claim to be a South African without a colour definition rests on something else: how to offer oneself, now, and in the future.

South Africa has been for generations one vast private club for whites.

All facilities, resources, and opportunities which make up the quality of life have been for the full benefit of whites only, and therefore under-used. That is our artificial paradise that foreign tourists admire. All of us whites, rich and poor, have had automatic membership from birth, and we don't really know how to live in the world outside.

We have never known the realities of this country - the urban overcrowding, the rural poverty, the family life wrecked by migratory labour practices and influx control, the crime and backwardness these generate.

The agonised fuss over the desegregation of a few parks and beaches is proof of this.

Of course flower beds will be trampled and litter will appear where 26,5 millions use spaces and places where 4 million spread themselves before. If you had kept the great white club completely closed to blacks, but the white population had suddenly more than quadrupled, the great white club's grounds from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic would have shown the same signs of normal use.

Packed in one to the Chinese boxes of racism is the position of total unreality from which the fuss over such issues comes. For in the interregnum some of the club's notices have been taken down, but the pattern of the fences remains imprinted on the mind.

There are other, similar imprints.

When, in the present drought, the plight of the farmers is mentioned and not only on the SABC - it is never necessary to qualify this statement in any way: 'the farmers' in Southafिकासpeak means white farmers. We have been born and brought up where only whites may own the land in question. Blacks are peasants, occupants of dispossession, who scratch the badlands of 'homeland' and 'resettlement'.

These examples are not merely something a change in terminology will transform. New euphemisms for old facts change nothing. Yet we whites need to recognise the definitions and the structures that lie behind our subconscious habits of mind.

I don't believe or suggest South Africa can be changed by any 'change of heart'; only the defeat of the present power-structure and the laws it has made can do that. But we have to see and admit what we have been, and are, in order to find the will to defeat that power-structure in whose concrete past we are set, and in order to find out how to live beyond its terrible human limitations.

In the eyes of the black majority, whites of South Africa are seen to need to redefine themselves in a new collective life within new structures.

This is surely a just and reasonable expectation.

The future is not a matter of blacks taking over white institutions, it is one of all South Africans conceiving of institutions - from nursery schools to government departments - that reflects a societal structure vastly different from that built to the specifications of white power and privilege.

This vast difference will be evident even if capitalism survives, since South Africa's capitalism, like South Africa's whites-only 'democracy' has been unlike anyone else's. For example, free enterprise among us is for whites only, since black capitalists may trade only, and with limitations on their 'free' enterprise, in black ghettos, and so not have access to the customary resources of capital.

A more equitable distribution of wealth can and may be enforced by laws.

The hierarchy of perception that white institutions and white living habits implant throughout daily experience in every white, from childhood, can be changed only by ourselves.

For the weird ordering of the collective life, in South Africa, has slipped its special contact lens into the eyes of whites; we actually see blacks differently, which includes not seeing, not noticing their unnatural absence, since there are so many perfectly ordinary venues of daily life where blacks

have never been allowed in, and so whites have forgotten they could be, might be, encountered there.

When you stand in a cinema queue, does it ever cross your mind that everyone in line is white?

I know that it doesn't mine.

And when you strap-hang in the bus?

And when you walk down your street and greet your neighbours?

Beyond its startling horrors, apartheid is a habit: the unnatural seems natural - as far from banal illustration of Hannah Arendt's banality of evil.

The successfully-fitted device in the eye of the white beholder is something the average white South African is not conscious of. The segment of the white population that is conscious of it has become highly aware of a dependency on distorted vision induced since childhood.

We know that, with the inner eye, we whites have seen too much ever to be innocent. But this kind of awareness, represented by white guilt, had been sent off into the sunset since, as Czeslaw Milosz puts it, 'guilt saps modern man's belief in the value of his own perceptions and judgements' and we have need of ours. We have to believe in our ability to find new perceptions and our ability to judge their relative truth.

We've also given up rejoicing in what Gunter Grass calls 'headbirths' - those Athenian armchair deliveries of the future presented to blacks by whites. We know that the new will not be born through us. We want to use our perceptions to help bring it to birth. That is the substance of our integrity in determining to belong to it.

Not all blacks concede that whites can have any part in the emergence of the new that is struggling to be born. One who does, Bishop Desmond Tutu, defines that participation:

'This is what I consider to be the place of the white man in this - popularly called - liberation struggle. I am firmly non-racial and so welcome the participation of all, both black and white, in the struggle for the new South Africa which must come whatever the cost. But I want to state that at this stage the leadership of the struggle must be firmly in black hands. They must determine what will be the priorities and the strategy of the struggle. Whites unfortunately have the habit of taking over and usurping the crucial decisions, largely, I suppose, because of the head start they had in education and experience of this kind.

The point is that however much they want to identify with blacks it is an existential fact ... that they have not really been victims of this baneful oppression and exploitation. It is a divide that can't be crossed and that must give blacks a primacy in determining the course and goal of the struggle. Whites must be willing to follow.'

A poet said it years before: 'Blacks must learn to talk; whites must learn to listen', wrote Nongane Wally Serote, in the Seventies.

This is the premise on which I believe those of us who have opted for the future should live our lives at present. To people who live in democratic countries this may sound like an abdication of the will. That is because they

are accustomed to exerting the right to make abstract statements of principle for which, at least, the structures of practical realization exist; the symbolic action of the like-minded in lobbying congress or parliament is a reminder of constitutional rights to be invoked.

For us, Tutu's premise enjoins a rousing of the will, a desperate shaking into life of the faculty of rebellion against unjust laws that has been outlawed by the dying power, and faculties of renewal that often are rebuffed by the power that is struggling to emerge.

What are the further conditions on which blacks can accept whites' dedication to mutual liberation?

What Bishop Tutu didn't say was that although white support is expected to be active, it is also expected that whites' different position in the still-standing structures of the old society will require actions that, while complementary to those of blacks, must of necessity be different from those of blacks.

We are expected - challenged as proof of our integrity to unqualified participation in non-violent change - to find our own forms of struggle in areas where we in particular, as whites, are specifically implicated.

It is every South African's business, black and white, to work to put an end to removals like the proposed Khayelitsha scheme; it is the white South African's responsibility, particularly, as part of the employing class, to face his involvement with the economic repression of blacks; it is the white South African's responsibility, alone, to answer the black South African's terrible question: why, if the white democrat abhors apartheid, he puts on a uniform and takes up a gun and risks his life to protect it.

Between black and white attitudes to struggle there stands the overheard remark of a young black woman: 'I break the law because I am alive.' She was not a criminal. She was referring to the laws that deny her life, categorizing, confining and repressing the spirit.

'I break the law because I am alive.'

- We whites have still to thrust the spade under the old roots of our lives; for most of us, including myself, struggle is still something that has a place. But for blacks it is everywhere.

The state of interregnum is a state of Hegel's disintegrated consciousness, of contradiction and confusion. From the internal friction to the interregnum energy somehow must be struck for whites to break the vacuum of which we are subconsciously aware. For however hateful and shameful the collective life of apartheid and its structures has been, there is, now, the inhibiting unadmitted or subconscious fear of being without structures.

The reason for this is complex.

The fact is that the interregnum is not only between two social orders - apartheid and post-apartheid - but between two different sets of identities.

The one, of the past, is known and discarded.

The other, of the future, is unknown and undetermined for whites, but not for blacks. For whatever the human cost of the liberation struggle, whatever Manichean poisons must be absorbed as stimulants in the interregnum, the black knows he will be at home, at last, in the future. The white who has declared himself or herself for that future, who belongs to the white segment that was never at home in white supremacy, does not know whether he will find his home at last.

Now - it is assumed, not only by racists, that this depends entirely on the willingness of blacks to let him in.

But we whites, if we live out our situation consciously, proceeding from the Pascalian wager that that home of the white African does exist, and exists specifically in a democracy without the self-perpetuating racism of so-called safeguards of minority guarantees and other hankerings to cling to white power - we know that entry to that home depends primarily on our finding our way there out of the perceptual clutter of curled photographs of the segregated past, and the sound of the 78RPMs of history, repeating the conditioning of the past.

There is sincere encouragement from blacks, moving away from the separatism of the 70s to revived recognition that it is possible for whites to opt out of class and race privilege and identify with black liberation as their own liberation.

We know that this recognition is far from unanimous, we have no right, in my opinion, to bitterness over this, nor accusations of racism in reverse being practised against us.

The onus is on whites to look at ourselves and our record realistically and prove this option ourselves, in word and deed.

This has to be done, furthermore, in the sober and distressing awareness that the issue of whites' participation in liberation movements is a source of division of black unity, and an exacerbation of contradictions within the black liberation struggle itself.

So for whites, struggle is not a matter of a straight-forward decision - if a revolutionary one, in a society in which whites have always dictated black lives - to follow-the-leader behind blacks. It's taking on, as blacks have done, agonizing and inescapable choices to be made clear-headedly, empirically, pragmatically, ideologically and idealistically about the morals and tactics of the struggle.

These are the conflicts blacks have to live with and resolve, in the present, and if whites are making any claim to accompany them, come what may, beyond apartheid, so must whites.

This is the condition, imposed by history, if you like, in those areas of action where black and white participation may conjoin as one. I believe it is the condition of the only possible chance left to bring a new life to South Africa without a bloody war.

South Africa does not lack its Chernyshevskys to point out that the highroad of history is not the sidewalk of fashionable shopping malls in the white suburbs of the cities.

In the bunks of migratory labourers, the 4 a.m. queues between one-room family house and factory, the dreams argued round street braziers is the history of black's defeat by conquest, the scale of the lack of value placed on them by conquering whites, the degradation of their forced acquiescence; and the salvation of struggle that is there too, a match dropped by the builders of every ghetto, waiting to be struck.

Within this situation the white has to make a decision whether to remain responsible to the dying white order or to declare himself positively as answerable to the order struggling to be born. To do the latter he has to break himself out of the spell of what Czeslaw Milosz terms 'the powerlessness of the individual involved in a mechanism that works independently of his will'. He has to find a way to establish his relevance to the culture of a new kind of community as well as the struggle to help realize it. And he has to do this doggedly, whether his efforts are, for the time being, recognized or not.

What kind of new is struggling to be born?

There has not been, there will not be, there never is enough thought and discussion given to this.

Charters and manifestos of South African liberation movements are broad outlines of intention. They differ, but they are at one in the unshakeable assumption that the present social order must be replaced by something else, not merely taken over by black majority rule. And since, to put this at its most basic premise, the present social order is incontestably a unique product of racism and capitalism, there is doubt that one can be retained without the other.

In South Africa's rich capitalist state stuffed with western finance, 50,000 black children a year die from malnutrition and its related diseases; this year, with the drought, the figure will be perhaps 10,000 higher.

In two decades, three-and-a-half million black people have been forcibly removed from homes and jobs, ejected from the context of their lives and banished to arid, undeveloped areas by decree of a white government supported by Western capital.

And this still goes on. Another quarter-of-a-million black people are to be moved under the monstrous Khayelitsha scheme if it is allowed to proceed.

It is difficult to point out to black South Africans that the forms of Western capitalism in the outside world are changing towards a broader social justice, citing the genuine examples of countries like Sweden, Denmark, Holland and Austria, with their mixed welfare economics, when all black South Africans know of western capitalism is political and economic terror. And this is not some relic of the colonial past; it is being financed now by Western democracies- concurrently with their own evolution towards social justice.

No wonder a vast number of black South Africans, and whites like myself, doubt the will of Western capitalism to bring about social justice where we live. We see little evidence of that possibility in our history, or our living present. Whatever the Western capitalist democracies have done for themselves, they seem to be failing, in their great influence and power, to do for us.

What conditions were attached to the International Monetary Fund loan of approximately \$1 billion that would oblige the South African government to stop population removals, to introduce a single standards of unsegregated education for all, to reinstate the eight million black South African deprived of citizenship?

If, as many now believe, the injustices of communism are innate and cannot be reformed, must it be assumed that those of South African capitalism's longer history, constantly monitored by the compassionate hand of liberalism, can be?

I don't think we should be afraid to ask that question aloud.

And I don't think we South Africans should be afraid to muster a cosmic obstinacy to believe in and work towards an alternative, a democracy without the economic and military terror which exist, alas, at present, in both certain left and right regimes.

There is no forgetting how we could live, if we could find the way. We must continue to be tormented by the ideal of an identity beyond race and class. Only from that will come the will to tramp on towards an attainable approximation of freedom for every human being in this country.

I leave you with a parable for white South Africans.

My friend Carlos Fuentes, the great Mexican writer, tells the story of how while he was on a trip to visit the birthplace of Emiliano Zapata, the folk hero of the Mexican liberation struggle, he stopped to ask a labourer in the fields how far the village was.

The man answered, 'If you had left at daybreak, you would be there now.' And Carlos Fuentes remarks that the clocks of all men and women, of all histories, are not set at the same hour.

We whites didn't set out at daybreak, when our forefathers first moved into the African's country, to arrive at a just future, a single identity as Africans among the African people themselves, one nation in a unitary state.

The clock of our history is set late; if we leave now, we could still get there.