Beyond Rationalism in International Relations


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Who Will Provide the West with Therapy?

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All the flux, all the radiation. The body is no longer deaf or blind. Everything has the right to life. Everything is called. Everything is waiting.

(Césaire 1996, p. 139)

Thinking thought usually amounts to withdrawing into a dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists. But thought in reality spaces itself out into the world.

(Glissant 1997, p. 1)

In this chapter I follow the poetic method suggested by the above Francophone Caribbean writers. I will express the question, ‘who will provide the West with therapy?’ through a set of meditations whose inter-connections across time, space and discipline I manifest wildly. In a sense, this is a necessary method through which to critique Western liberalism, a pathologically narcissistic and racialised sense of human being. Western liberalism is the antithesis of this poetic method. It must consistently repress the memory of its own illiberalism, displace its culpable relationships to the non-Western/un-liberal worlds and rationalize a fascistic obsession with the dominance of white, property-hetero-male bodies via an abstract universality that it calls human rights.

Any critique that renders fragile the white supremacist psyche is welcomed. In this respect, a research agenda that utilises the concept of ‘vulnerability’ to bring down Western rationality out of its dimensionless place by a concretised ‘working through’ of its suppressions is also to be welcomed. Nevertheless, a focus on making this
‘rational’ subject vulnerable can unintentionally defer the moment of engaging with the worldly effects of white supremacism. That is to say, the triumphal narcissism of liberal universalism can easily – and safely – be modified into a narcissism of civilizational angst. Much can be learnt from the fact that one of the most popular books for the European reading public during the dark days of the interwar period was Spengler’s *Decline of the West*. Contrast Spengler, in the same era, with Sylvia Pankhurst and her principled activism that ‘spaced itself out into the world’ by inter-relating European feminism to socialism to anti-fascism to anti-colonialism (especially in her support of Haile Selassie’s Ethiopia against the Italian threat). Pankhurst knew, one could say, that effective therapy of the white-Western subject required a social commitment to the overturning of structures of injustice that it might favourably inhabit.

I will begin my poetic connections with a moment in time: 14 March 2011. On this day, the Centre for the Study of Islam and Democracy, a Washington D.C. based organisation that enjoys a close relationship with the National Endowment for Democracy, published a letter to Barak Obama (Various 2011). The letter supported Obama’s announcement in Cairo 2009 of a US foreign policy for the Middle East that would be principled in its support of popular movements for democratic transformation. The letter urged Obama to act upon that principle with regards to enacting a no-fly zone over Libya. Noting the regional support for such a plan, the letter then also requested Obama to ‘join France in recognizing the provisional government of Libya based in Benghazi as the sole legitimate government of Libya’. Having leapt from regional support for a no-fly zone to supporting French recognition of a provisional government, the letter warned: ‘we now stand at a pivotal moment in the struggle for democracy in the Arab world’, and in this moment the United States had to assume a leading role not just for the sake of national security but in order to stand ‘on the right side of history’. One month later, the leadership of the United States, France and Great Britain had effectively ratified this leap in logic: “Our duty and our mandate under UN Security Council Resolution 1973 is to protect civilians, and we are doing that. It is not to remove Gaddafi by force. But it is impossible to imagine a future for Libya with Gaddafi in power” (Cameron et al. 2011).

It is not hard to explain the reason of these leaps in logic from those signatories of the 14th March letter who were Bengazi born, out-of-favour Libyan politicians. But perhaps the academic signatories should be held accountable for endorsing the letter’s contradictions of almost Socratic proportions that make an equivalence between limited, contextualised, multi-lateral permission and absolute, world-historical, unilateral right. Francis Fukuyama was one of the prominent academic signees. With this in mind, let us return to 14 March 2011. On this day, another correspondence was published online: a poetic imagining of a debate between Francis Fukuyama, Steve Biko, Samir Amin and Minoru Yamasaki from a 1976 test of Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET) (the prototype internet). I have extracted from this imagined correspondence some of the relevant exchanges between Fukuyama and Biko:

*Biko*: … we feel like we are lab rats for a much bigger grander form of apartheid. A global apartheid.

Fukuyama: I disagree. The end of segregation in the US is a symbol for all.

*Biko*: They [Black South Africans] want freedom. What kind of freedom. No one knows exactly. It’s the kind of conversation we have not been allowed to have. It’s like Fanon’s question what does the black man want…. It is sad to say but most probably what the students want is what the white man has. That is why I often say that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.

Fukuyama: I cannot see anywhere as free as America. Correct me if I’m wrong. It is unequivocal and it is something we will quite rightly protect to the end.

*Biko*: It seems elusive. I mean how can the founding fathers of the USA draft the Bill of Rights while committing genocide and enslaving people.

Fukuyama: We are not a perfect nation but it was in the defense of our belief in freedom. It is all about how people are allowed to participate in a fair and fair society. It can transcend our differences.

Steve *Biko*: That is also the essence of modernism. The idea that you can simply export ideas without taking into account what people in those countries feel about them.
Francis Fukuyama: I am still a little unclear about what it is yourself and South Africa is seeking. Is there an existing society you would like to learn from? ... I hope South Africa will find its new beginning and find its new beliefs from places where it is proven to work.

Steve Biko: I think at the bottom of it all is something about human dignity having pride being able to look another human being in the eye and say I AM... AMANDLA! (Amin et al. 2011).

The South African Students Organization to which Biko belonged had found inspiration in part from the Black Power (Amandla) movement in the United States (G. Gerhart 1979, pp. 270–281; G. M. Gerhart 2008, pp. 23–25). Despite this, Fukuyama appropriates this Black struggle as a triumphal and universal signifier of Western progress; he unequivocally cannot see anywhere as free as the United States; this freedom emanates from an internal belief in liberal democracy so powerful that it is already universal; alternatively, Black South Africans must look elsewhere for a mobilising ideology, and from places where it has been ‘proven’ to work. Biko, on the other hand, starts with the lack of freedom at home and abroad and wishes to understand this unfreedom in its global effect; moreover, he is reflexive of the fact that his own people might not know what meaningful freedom entails, although his intuition is that it has something to do with dignity and in struggle; most importantly, however, he defends the necessity for oppressed peoples to find the meaning of freedom from out of their own lived experiences.

With this in mind, let us consider Fukuyama’s most recent comments on the ‘Arab spring’:

There’s something very gratifying about the Middle East demonstrating that Islam is not at odds with the democratic currents that have swept up other parts of the world .... But what’s most important, actually, is what happens next. I guarantee you in a year or two it will not look as hopeful .... You need institutions, leaders – and corruption has to be under control. These are really the failings of many democracy movements. And it’s happening again – if you look at Egypt, the liberal parties are floundering.

(Cited in Bast 2011).
also expanded this critique to incorporate the white South African left (G. M. Gerhart 2008, p. 34). Biko’s main target was white liberals who, in their promotion of integration, assumed that they would do ‘all the talking and the blacks the listening’ (1979, p. 20). Biko’s critique of white liberalism, although separated by time and distance from the present-day pursuit of ‘humanitarian intervention’ in Libya, nevertheless resonates:

I am against the intellectual arrogance of white people that make them believe that white leadership is a sine qua non ... and that whites are the divinely appointed pace-setters in progress.

(Biko 1979, p. 24)

Biko argued that with this unquestioned assumption of natural leadership, white liberals read the possibilities of political engagement solely in terms of their battle on behalf of blacks. Hence when programmes and ideologies were crafted by blacks and emerged out of the black struggle, they could only be labelled by whites as reverse-racism or otherwise simply particularistic and partisan (Biko 1979, p. 25).

Biko’s critique of white liberalism was in part indebted to the Martiniquian psychiatrist Frantz Fanon and his criticisms of Jean-Paul Sartre’s qualified support for the black consciousness movement of the Francophone colonial world – Négritude. It should be noted that, regarding the current French thirst for intervention in the Maghreb, Sartre, a notable critic of French rule in Algeria, would no doubt follow the opinion of another French philosopher who supported Algerian independence, Alain Badiou. Recently, the latter has strongly argued against the assumption that ‘we absolutely have to remain in charge of everything happening’ (Badiou 2011). For Fanon, however, it is not that Sartre sought to remain imperially in charge of political action, but rather that despite his politics, Sartre retained an imperial authorship over the dialectic of human development itself (see Bernasconi 1996).

Sartre embraced the ‘anti-racist racism’ of Négritude (1965, p. 48) expounded by Leopold Sédar-Senghor and Aimé Césaire (whose poetry began this chapter). Nevertheless, Sartre denounces this ‘racism’ to an ‘up-beat of a dialectical progression’ that would be ‘insufficient by itself’ because its purpose would be to prepare the ‘synthesis or realization of the human being in a raceless society’. Hence, Négritude was “a ‘crossing to’ and not an ‘arrival at’” (Sartre 1965, p. 49). Fanon exposed the white supremacy that Sartre, at that point, could not quite alleviate himself fully of – a supremacist thinking that is so much more unapologetic and unthinking in Fukuyama’s taming of the anti-Apartheid struggle and the Arab Spring:

... so it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me. It is not out of my bad nigger’s misery, my bad nigger’s teeth, my bad nigger’s hunger that I will shape a torch with which to burn down the world, but it is the torch that was already there, waiting for that turn of history.

(Fanon 1986, p. 134)

To guard against this supremacism in the realm of thought and perception, Biko impelled white liberals to focus their struggle against Apartheid on their own communities. This imperative should not be mistaken as sectarian or separatist. To my mind it demands an accountability that is neither narrowly procedural nor abstractly universal but concretely ethical and relational: the privileged must invest their own sense of worth into a common struggle against their own structural supremacy. Witness Biko:

They must realize that they themselves are oppressed if they are true liberals and therefore they must fight for their own freedom and not that of the nebulous “they” with whom they can hardly claim identification.

(Biko 1979, p. 25)

In practice, Biko argued that this commitment required ‘absolute dedication’ to the idea that privileged whites might have to rewrite the history of the country, pluralise the protagonists and sanctify the epistemic validity of the voice and stories of the sufferers (see 1979, p. 25). One white man to pick up and run with this commitment was Rev. Bob Scott, who arrived in South Africa in 1972 from another settler colony, Aotearoa New Zealand, in order to participate
In a University Christian Movement (UCM) conference attended by Biko.

On the first evening that Scott spent in Johannesburg, he was introduced to the Black Consciousness movement as well as its critique of white paternalism at a South African Soccer Federation reception (Scott 1972). Soon after, Scott attended the UCM conference, where, on the first day, resolutions of dissolution were passed (Scott 2009). By evening time, Scott was the only white who had remained and was witness to the telling of black stories by blacks about white racism. Scott was daunted at the scale of the struggle that he was witnessing. At this point, Biko took him for a walk and explained that what the blacks wanted from the whites was not sympathy but anger: anger about and for the debilitating effects that white supremacy had upon whites themselves. Biko told Scott that they could never be sure that whites would stick with them for the duration of the struggle. However, if whites were angry for the reasons he had stipulated, then they would be personally invested in the struggle and could be counted upon. To be committed and accountable to the struggle in this way meant that Scott's prime task was to 'work with your community, not ours'; and when Scott protested that he knew too little to undertake this work, Biko replied that 'what you're hearing gives you enough to start'.

Scott took this orientation back to Aotearoa New Zealand and in the early to mid-1980s conducted a series of anti-racism workshops for Pākehā in the church. Pākehā is the name that the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa, the Māori, have gifted New Zealanders of European descent. In these workshops the rules for Pākehā to understand the impact of – and their culpability in – white supremacy were made simple: first, you must know that you are not cultureless, but carry a particular culture of individualism, a culture that is embraced and privileged in the mainstream institutions of society; second, you must know your own history, not the sanitised history of the diffusion of Western civilisation, but rather the history of colonial dispossession that, like it or not, you – and your culture – are implicated in and benefit from.

During the workshops there would be a Māori monitor in attendance. Participants were not allowed to address statements or questions to the monitor because to do so would deflect the responsibility for change on to Māori and not Pākehā. Here, Scott was taking a lesson drawn from Biko: 'why use the energy of the oppressed to educate the oppressor?' However, for the sake of accountability, Māori had to be kept informed; hence the presence of the monitor who, on occasion would decide to answer questions. The prime pedagogic strategy of the workshop was to encourage Pākehā participants to write as much history as they knew on a white paper above a line that divided the sheet in half. In almost all cases this was the sanitised history of settler colonialism: of discovery, development, gentlemanly disagreements and honourable battles, of reasonable assimilation and the triumph of civilisation. Afterwards, the facilitator, with support from the monitor, would fill in the other half of the story under the line as a counterpoint: of prior discovery and indigenisation, of incursions, dishonourable agreements and genocidal war, dispossession and racial oppression.

The purpose in providing this contrapuntal story was not, as tended to be the case in US-based racism education programmes, to 'shock and awe' whites, to break them down with guilt so as to ultimately build them up. Rather, it was positively therapeutic from the outset in that it sought to empower Pākehā with a personal accountability to tackle a white supremacist that, while global in extent, started with them. In short, Pākehā had to save their own souls, and there is no greater investment than that. Pākehā were thus tasked with redeeming their identified pasts by confronting and changing the ways in which these pasts privileged them in the present.

With this in mind, let us briefly return to Césaire's poetics that sought to articulate a new humanism through Négritude: '... no race holds a monopoly of beauty, of intelligence of strength and there is room for all at the rendezvous of victory' (1995, p. 127). Quite simply, Scott's challenge impels white-Westerners to arrive at this rendezvous with something to contribute other than just their privilege and arrogance, or guilt and apologies. And dwelling on this challenge allows for a further comment on some of the main themes of this book. As I have noted, vulnerability is an important pedagogical tool to the extent that it can contribute to making an opening in which the white-Western subject might begin to feel 'all the radiation' emanating from the 'spaces of the world' beyond its narcissism. Yet, without careful attention a focus on vulnerability as the key enabler might subvert the process itself. After all, to
find one's vulnerability is already a privileged pursuit. Alternatively, those who do not enjoy this privilege are seeking to exorcise the spiritual-psychical-social-political vulnerabilities that they already feel all too well.

Indeed, the subjugated and oppressed have never waited for the Western contribution in order to arrive at the rendezvous. They walk on in any case. Just after Scott's workshop project had wound down, a Jamaican psychiatrist, Frederick Hickling visited Aotearoa New Zealand for a year working with both Māori and Pākehā clients. Back in Jamaica, Hickling had been developing something very similar to that of Scott. Like Biko, Hickling been inspired by Fanon's challenge to psychoanalysis when it came to treating individuals from colonised groups. Against the prevailing wisdom that the defence mechanisms of the unconscious mind - rationalisation, displacement, repression - arose first from cathexis regarding the nuclear familial relation Fanon claimed that it was rooted immediately in the psychopathy of the colonial relation (1986, chapter 6; Hickling 2007, p. 176). Therapy, therefore, had to work through the collective trauma of living under a system of not just exploitation but dehumanisation. Working in Kingston's mental asylum - Bellevue Hospital - in the late 1970s as senior medical officer, Hickling, attentive to Fanon's challenge to psychiatry, renounced the individualised and barbaric treatments being meted out and developed instead a method of group cultural therapy.

A circle of reasoning is crucial for Hickling's therapeutic practice in that it forms a collective arena wherein peoples with underdeveloped political and psychological understandings of colonialism can debunk its myths, recognise its associated delusions of white supremacy and establish a decolonised version of reality as a framework for action (Hickling 2009, chapter 4). This circle also requires of the facilitator/leader/doctor a personal and political solidarity (rather than neutrality) with the patients as sufferers of a colonial past that still resonates in the present (see Hickling 2009, pp. 190-191). Strikingly cognate to Scott's pedagogy, the facilitator then draws a time line on blank sheet. Either side of this line, a 'dialectic matrix' is constructed from antipodes that relate to the lived experience of the patients (Hickling 2007, pp. 68-69). These are invariably articulated a combination of race (white supremacy episteme/black resistance), class (especially, rich/poor unskilled) or even abnormality (madness/badness) (Hickling 2007, p. 100). Through ethnographic recollections, the patients fill in the time line and with the help of the dialectical matrix construct a chronology through theme lines. The contrapuntal chronologies explicate to the patients the delusion of white supremacy through which they are living as well as the reality of black resistance. Then this decolonial articulation of the self is concretely manifested in a group production of, for example, poetry, arts, craft, music, dance or theatre (Hickling 2007, p. 83).

To draw out the significance of this therapy, it is useful to remember the experiences of Walter Rodney, Guianese historian, activist and, in many ways, inaugurator of the Black Power movement in the University of the West Indies during his sojourn as a lecturer in the late 1960s. Rodney had made an effort to travel to poor neighbourhoods and sit and reason with the people and especially members of the Rastafari faith. Reflecting on these 'reasonings', Rodney even argued that 'in our epoch, the Rastafari have represented the leading force of [the] expression of black consciousness' (Rodney 1990, p. 75). Hickling's own work has, similarly, placed Rastafari at the centre of the decolonising of the psyche (2010). In this respect, a passage that reflects on Rodney's 'grounding with the brothers' deserves to be quoted at length:

It is a miracle how those fellows live. They live and they are physically fit, they have a vitality of mind, they have a tremendous sense of humour, they have depth. How do they do that in the midst of the existing conditions? And they create, they are always saying things. You know that some of the best painters and writers are coming out of the Rastafari environment. The black people in the West Indies have produced all the culture that we have, whether it be steelband or folk music. Black bourgeoisie and white people in the West Indies have produced nothing! Black people who have suffered all these years create. That is amazing.

(Rodney 1990, p. 83)

Let us put these observations together with the contrapuntal narratives manifested in Hickling's therapy sessions, which can be condensed as follows. First, a white supremacy narrative of: discovery,
settlement, trade, industry, abolition, civilising missions, world wars and genocides in Europe, the granting of decolonisation and the war on post-imperial terror; second, the articulation of a black resistance:

Invaders, come [get] outta mi lan’
Genocide, dem a kill we
Dem wipe de slate clean
Dem tek we from we lan’
Fight down de white oppressor
Dem tief [thieve] we lan’
Whites fighting over our treasures
Dem ah kill dem one anoder
Gimmie back mi lan’
Take your hands off my oil; invaders, come outta mi lan’

(Hickling 2009, p. 71)

In sum, the counterpoint to white supremacy is a story of consistent resistance wherein the sufferers are not just living a bare existence but are consistently creating the very stuff of human habitation – activity, intellect, spiritual meaning and joy. But nothing positive or humanistic can be drawn out of the story of white supremacy on its own terms outside of delusion, destruction and dispossession. Hickling paints these terms starkly:

When it is all behind us, the human race will look back at major aspects of European civilization as monstrously evil constructions of a mentally deranged people, totally consumed by their own narcissistic self-centeredness, dominated by delusions of power and control.

(2007, p. 201)

To conclude, I wish to turn to some of the dominant articulations of Western liberalism in foreign policy making. The delusion of white supremacy is distinctly evident in, for example, Robert Cooper’s ‘liberal imperialism’ and his assignation of most of the non-white world to an artefact of primitive history (2002). Similar delusions abound with International Relations theorists. Consider how the Princeton Project on National Security urges the United States to take the lead in consolidating a concert of liberal democracies while not even considering that its own foreign policy has consistently democratic movements in the postcolonial world and even within Europe itself (2006). Hardly any distance separates these positions from those articulated in the letter to Obama concerning Libya. Alternatively, white supremacy is neither tackled nor promoted but merely rendered unspeakable through the art of abstraction. This is especially the case when hypothetical rational argumentation favours the preemptive exercise of force on behalf of the protection of human rights (for example, Buchanan & Keohane 2004). All these argumentations tacitly or explicitly repress the memory of Western liberal violence; they displace Western culpability in the making of a ‘dangerous’ world for Western liberalism; and they rationalise fantasies of white domination via an abstract universality given the perverse name of human rights.

On this note, I will finish by way of a short article written by the liberal cosmopolitan thinker, David Held, recently made infamous for his (retrospectively) uncomfortable close relation with Saïf Gaddafi (Anon 2011). However, another moment of discomfort is more revealing for the purposes of this chapter. Contemplating the future of his cosmopolitan ideal in the wake of 9/11, Held starts by quoting at length a contribution to the Los Angeles Times by the novelist, Barbara Kingsolver, famous for writing The Poisonwood Bible. In the op-ed, Kingsolver makes wifful connections, as I have done in this chapter, but in her case between 9/11, an earthquake in Turkey, a hurricane in Honduras and Nicaragua, the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, and finally, the dropping of American atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Held 2010, pp. 52–53). Held finds these connections ‘unsettling and challenging’ because it ‘asks the reader to step outside of the maelstrom of 9/11 and put those events in a wider historical and evaluative framework’ (2010, p. 49). At this moment the British cosmopolitan pauses, verging on recognising the ‘half never told’ below the line on the white sheet of paper… But the moment vanishes, as does the line, in a quick re-affirmation of basic human rights for all on a blank page of rational thought.

None of these approaches to International Relations will provide the West with therapy to overcome its white supremacism. They do not envision any line in the white sheet that would, in terms, give everything the right to life, to be called, to be waiting.
They do not warn white-Westerners that, for the sake of their own souls, they must bring something other than death, destruction and dispossession to the rendezvous of victory. Neither, then, can they redeem the peoples, pasts, experiences and ideas that were themselves colonised through imperial ventures so as to be baptised anew as a fascist white-West (see Nandy 1988). I have briefly retrieved Pankhurst as an example of decolonising the Western past itself. Yet examples alone are not enough. A different vision and horizon of relationality cannot be prescribed in an academic text because it has to be crafted as part of an engaged and active process of therapy, or perhaps, exorcism. Hickling has treated black, white and indigenous peoples and is adamant that his method of cultural therapy can cross from third to first worlds (2007, p. 151); Scott’s workshops are proof that such a crossing can be undertaken and owned by whites (if not quite Westerners). There can be no excuses.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. See some of the contributions in Bhamra & Shilliam (2009). And as a counterpoint, see Beattie (2008).
2. Kate Schick (2009) points to the more concretised engagement with trauma suggested by Adorno as an alternative to somewhat abstract post-structural accounts.
3. The content of the following two paragraphs are taken from this interview.
4. Hickling has expressed the centrality of the “circle” to me in personal conversations.
5. Although many (but by no means all) of Hickling’s patients have been African-Caribbean, Hickling uses the term in the same sense as Biko, as the variegated group of (post)colonial subjects who share the commonality of being oppressed/exploited by the fact of being interpellated as non-white.

Bibliography


We have entered a period of earth history referred to – without
dint of hyperbole – as the anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer,
2001). Despite what one may encounter in the popular press, and
despite the claims of a small yet highly vocal group of contrarian
scientists, the overwhelming consensus of climate scientists is that
average global temperatures are rising due to human intervention
in the environment (Doran and Kendall Zimmerman, 2009). While
the label of anthropocene is suggestive of humanity’s technologi-
cal prowess, it also speaks of our vulnerability and finitude. The
technological foundations of the current epoch, which have helped
to significantly reduce mortality and increase longevity, expanding
populations worldwide, are now potentially exposing billions to
inadvertent threats from a changing climate.

Despite our best attempts to eliminate it, vulnerability is an inex-
pungible aspect of the human condition. It is this vulnerability, as
Judith Butler (2004) has suggested, arising from our fragilities – phsy-
cial and psychological – that humanises us. Our humanity springs
from our precariousness and the appreciation for life that it instils.
Through the understanding of the vulnerability of others, they
become flesh and blood. When we truly grasp the vulnerability of
others, they escape the mere realm of facticity, becoming entwined
in our own subjectivities. In essence, their vulnerability becomes our
own. So too, through the recognition of our own vulnerability we
better appreciate the social constitution of ourselves.