

(RE-)INTRODUCING N CHABANI MANGANYI

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Abstract.

The reprinting of Manganyi's (1997) work, "The violent reverie", is introduced through a contextualisation of the social relations that form the structural and material foundations of violence. To this end the ideas of Zizek on the symbolic and systemic dimensions of violence, and Badiou's account of the "violent history" of democracy, are briefly discussed. The central argument of Manganyi's argument is adumbrated, namely, that the violent reverie has the potential to offer a creative expression to the alienation and anguish of the subordinated racial (black) subject. The article concludes with a brief introduction to Manganyi's impressive oeuvre that incorporates work on psychology, biography, and contemporary politics.

Keywords: *Manganyi, the violent reverie, racialised subjects, social relations, the psycho-politics of (racial) identity*

There is a lot that can be said about violence, and a lot has been said and written about it, and yet the persistence of many forms of violence in our society still challenge our social science conceptions of the phenomenon. It seems that part of the explanation for our somewhat inadequate social accounts of violence has to do with the subjective nature of violence. Zizek (2008: 3) in his recent text on violence justifies his "sideways glances" at violence by saying: "My underlying premise is that there is something inherently mystifying in a direct confrontation with it: the overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking."

The sheer horror of our confrontation with violent acts inhibits us from thinking about the social relations that underlie violence. Violence is never violence on its own, it is not a thing in itself, as it is always part of social relations. In this regard Zizek (2008: cf 1-2) notes that there are at least two kinds of objective violence, what he calls systemic violence and symbolic violence. The subjective experience of violence always locates an identifiable agent "behind" the violence, and this immediate identification of the perpetrator/s acts as a palimpsest for the "original cause" of the violence. This seems true even where political agents of violence are identified, and yet often the material conditions and social relations of these politically motivated acts are left untouched!

For instance, it is rare that a particular practice of democracy is ever implicated in the violence that erupts in so-called liberal democratic countries. The burning of France's suburbs (the *banlieue*) of a few years ago, and the recent riots in England certainly bear witness to the reluctance to "indict" the particular democratic practices of these two countries' social turmoil. The perpetrators are easily identified – the youth in both instances – and are seen to be part of a social pathology that has its roots in family background, religious affiliation, and a lack of moral socialisation. The systemic violence of a society that has "produced" youthful subjects who are so disgruntled and alienated as to act in these violent and "anti-social" ways goes unexamined.

Badiou (2011), in a remarkably evocative short essay, reminds us of the history of violence that has accompanied the achievement of democratic practices in contemporary (Western) societies. He notes that democracy is "the dominant emblem of contemporary political society." (ibid: 6). Badiou (2011) is not essentially making an argument against democracy, but rather pointing to democracy's embeddedness in social relations. Democracy is not a pure notion that floats above the institutions and history of society. Badiou (2011) locates his discussion and critique of democracy within the operations of capitalist societies. And so it is interesting to think about what is allowed and tolerated in the name of democracy, what goes on under the democratic emblem? Not only the systemic or structural aspects of democratic societies need to be analysed, but we also need to ask the question of what kinds of subjects are "produced" in democratic societies, or another way of saying this is, what subject formations are "fit" for democracy? Badiou's (2011: 8) answer to these questions is rather forthright: "The capacity of the democratic emblem to do harm lies in the subjective type it molds; and, not to mince words, the crucial traits of the democratic type are egoism and desire for petty enjoyments".

What is more important, than whether one agrees with Badiou's particular characterisation of the constitution of the democratic subject, is to at least acknowledge the "types of harm" that are done in the formation of the subject under democracy. This then raises some critical questions regarding the ("political") conduct of subjects in democratic countries. For instance, what are we to make of the conduct of the youthful protestors in the recent England "riots", or the conduct of the supporters of Julius Malema, the ANC Youth League president, outside Luthuli House in Johannesburg during his disciplinary trial, or the predominantly peaceful protests of the now world-wide "occupy movement"? Are the perpetrators of these violent acts, the predominantly youthful protestors, the "harmed" subjects that Badiou talks about who are behaving "egotistically" and with a "desire for pleasure"? Is their violent conduct then reactionary, or a potentially revolutionary challenge to democratic capitalist societies? On the other hand, are the mostly peaceful protests of the "occupy movement", who are making very few (explicit) political demands, an instance of the transcendence of the constitution of the democratic subject?

It is these types of questions concerning the constitution of the subject, and the myriad manifestations of violence in our societies, and obviously particularly in South Africa, that **PINS** would like to encourage people to write about. We are keen to institute a regular set of discussions in the form of brief or full-length articles on the issues of violence in our society, and would encourage our readers to make written submissions to **PINS**.

To this end **PINS** is starting off the discussion of the complexities of violence in our society with the reprinting of an article by N Chabani Manganyi entitled “The violent reverie: The unconscious in literature and society”. This essay was originally published in 1977 in a collection of his essays entitled **Mashangu’s reverie and other essays**. “The violent reverie” is thematically linked to the fictional and autobiographical piece called “Mashangu’s reverie” that opens this 1977 collection. In the Preface Manganyi tells us that the origins of this work were an attempt to rid himself of the alienation and angry anguish that he experienced upon arriving in America, from Johannesburg, in the early 1970s to study at Yale University. His reflections, in both “Mashangu’s reverie” and “The violent reverie”, were (or even still are for many black people) the “reaction to my experience as a black man in a social world created by white people primarily for their own ends” (Manganyi, 1977: i). And more precisely his impetus to write both a creative and an analytic work were initiated by a desire to resolve some of his inner turmoil. Manganyi (1977: i) says that “So overwhelming were the fantasies of revenge, so terrifying in their stark clarity, that it became important for me to arrive at some internal resolution of the diverse impulses which were constantly invading my consciousness.” It must be remembered that Manganyi is writing this in the mid-1970s, and that much has changed with regard to being black in “a white world” in this new century, and especially so in contemporary post-apartheid South Africa. And yet much stays the same in the structuring of relations between black and white, even if the “formalities” of discrimination and racism are no longer.

Thus to read “The violent reverie” as merely an historical account of a different time would be to profoundly misread the way “race” still operates to structure social and interpersonal relations between black and white people. Manganyi’s work was both prescient, and now still offers us a very complex unravelling of the psychological and unconscious sedimentations that are consequent upon the dynamics of identity in a racialised society that South Africa still very much is.

Manganyi (1977: 68) ends his essay with a powerful caution in noting that “When all is said and done we ignore, suppress and abort the violent reverie and the subsequent image at our peril.” His argument is that the violent reverie needs to be expressed and represented in forms that release it from the dynamics of [unconscious] repression that could so easily, and do, result in violent acting out. The logic of this argument is that maybe the many violent acts that regularly disturb the fabric of South African society would be less extreme and dangerous if a reverie for violence and an emancipation from the violence of everyday life, could be sought, could be expressed. The potential positivity of the violent reverie is obviously premised on the simultaneity of undermining and eradicating the material and socio-historical conditions that give rise to violence in the first place.

And yet in this essay Manganyi’s focus is on the subjective aspects of the alienation and “de-formation” of black identity in a context of (dominant and dominating) white identity. The dialectics of black / white identity are evocative of Fanonian thinking in Manganyi’s (1977: 55) formulation that “With the unfolding of the historical process, including as well much that is irrational in it, the identity of blacks came to be invested, as is the rule in pseudospeciation, with the negative attributes of the white identity”. In post-apartheid South Africa the historical process of a master and slave relation between white (masters) and black (slaves) still lingers in the consciousness and practices of both white and black subjects. It is unsurprising then that on this matter

Manganyi (1977: 56) has the following to say: “There is probably no comparable relationship which is as riddled with ambivalence, ambiguity and a potential for violence as that between a master and his slave”. Here it seems we have much hard work to do in “averting” the subjective and real violence that characterises social relations between the racialised subjects that (still) constitute contemporary South Africa.

The effect of not doing the necessary work to unravel the politics of identity means that the road from the subjective violence of real and psychological subordination to violent acts becomes very short. This, as I read it, is one of the main pivots of Manganyi’s argument concerning the *creative* potential of the violent reverie if given expression in socially recognised forms of representation.

However, here are some instances of what Manganyi wants us to consider regarding the short road to violence:

“The central dilemma in the psychology of subordination both in its infantile (natural) and adult forms is the fear of losing ambivalence (subjective violence) for violence as social act – a transformation considered by the subject as possible both within the realm of unconscious fantasy and in reality.” (Manganyi, 1977: 59)

And,

“The ambivalent character of adaptation under conditions of subordination is maximised by its psychic precariousness – the anxiety about talion (retaliation) and the lingering possibility that subjective violence may without sufficient warning be transformed into violence as social act.” (Manganyi, 1977: 59)

And, finally,

“For the rank and file, the path from subjective violence against the self to violence against others, in particular super-ordinates and their *symbolic representations*, may on occasion be a very short one.” (Manganyi, 1977: 64).

The intention of reprinting Manganyi’s essay on the violent reverie is not to suggest that his thoughts on violence haven’t changed since this 1977 text, as amongst other things he has edited a collection on political violence in South Africa with Andre du Toit (Manganyi & du Toit, 1990). But rather **PINS**’s intention is to solicit contributions about violence of the sophistication and analytic rigour that is evident in Manganyi’s “The violent reverie”. Another related and important reason for reprinting this early work of Chabani Manganyi is to (re-)introduce his psychological work and other writing to a new generation of South African scholars and thinkers.

PINS first introduced its readers to Manganyi in 1985 through a long critical essay by Cyril Couve (then at UCT, and at the time an editor of **PINS**), entitled, “Psychology and politics in Manganyi’s work: A materialist critique”. This was followed by a review of Manganyi and du Toit’s 1990 edited collection, **Political violence and the struggle in South Africa**, by Etienne Marais (1992). And then the last review we did was by Leslie Swartz (1994) of **Treachery and innocence** (1991). Given that it is 17 years since we last featured Manganyi’s work in **PINS**, it seems appropriate to re-introduce him to our older readers, and introduce him to our new readers.

Chabani Manganyi is a writer of prominence, and yet is a little known figure, and hardly studied, in contemporary South African psychology circles. Most of my postgraduate students, both black and white, over the last 5-10 years had never heard of Manganyi, let alone having read any of his work, until I introduced them to some of his essays in his **Treachery and innocence** (1991) collection. There are many reasons for this relative “invisibility” of Manganyi’s work in psychology and related human and social studies disciplines. Firstly, much of his earlier work is out of print, and it is this early work that was more directly psychological in its focus. For instance, the range of books starting with the highly influential 1973 publication **Being-black-in-the-world**, followed by **Mashangu’s reverie and other essays** (1977), **Looking through the keyhole: Dissenting essays on the Black experience** (1981), and **Treachery and innocence: Psychology and racial difference in South Africa** (1991).

Secondly, much of his work has not particularly been directed at a psychology audience. However, his impressive biographies are profoundly psychological, but biography is not seen, or much practised, as a psychological genre in this country. I am thinking of his biographies of Es’kia Mphahlele, the novelist and literary theorist (Manganyi, 1983), the painter Gerard Sekoto who spent most of his adult years in exile in Paris (Manganyi, 1996; 2004a), and the soon to be published (2011) biography of the artist, Dumile Femi (1939-1991). Furthermore, it seems that Manganyi’s style of writing is too discursive, literary, and urbane for it easily to find a place in the rather restrictive discourses of much academic psychology, which even in its critical psychology incarnation, still pays homage to neo-positivist conceptions of rigour.

And thirdly, that while Manganyi has held some highly prestigious appointments in educational and academic spheres, he seems to have intentionally, wilfully kept aloof from “psychology in South Africa”. He has been the Director-General of the national Department of Education, a vice-chancellor of the University of the North, both a vice-chancellor (1999-2003) and vice-principal (2003-2006) of the University of Pretoria, and is the current chairperson of the Council on Higher Education (CHE).

Psychology in South Africa has certainly changed for the better since 1994, and there are a range of interesting, socially engaged, and intellectually challenging projects going on, but they are still a minority and often operate on the margins of current “psychology proper”. It seems that professional psychology has changed little since 1994, and besides some tinkering with increasing the numbers of black candidates for professional training, the content and practice of much professional psychology remains politically conservative and complacently bourgeois. Another area of post-1994 psychology that has been disappointing is how little the content and processes of curricula have been transformed. Again, besides a bit of tinkering with the so-called “Africanisation” of course content, not much else has substantively changed. And so keeping a distance from Psychology, especially during apartheid, and even now in the early post-apartheid period, seems understandable on the part of Manganyi. And of course I haven’t spoken to him about his somewhat removed stance towards Psychology in South Africa, and hence I am sure he has his own story to tell that may or may not overlap with what has been said here. But in the meantime there is a lot to think about in the complex “story” that Manganyi presents in his subtle and penetrating analysis of “the violent reverie”.

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