

---

# FALLING RAINBOWS

## ANATOMY OF A FALSE CHOICE

By *Claire-Anne Lester, Carilee Osborne and Michael Nassen Smith*

---

The authors are graduate students at the University of Cape Town and associates of the Institute for African Alternatives

**T**he events taking place on South African university campuses during the past year reignited vigorous political debates on race, transformation and decolonisation. The students at the forefront named themselves “Fallists”, from the 2015 protest hashtags of #RhodesMustFall and #feesmustfall. Although their immediate concerns relate to higher education, their grievances are far broader. Put simply, Fallism is a rejection of the post-apartheid condition.

The Fallists’ immediate goal is to expose the faultlines in so-called “Rainbowism”, the dominant post-apartheid paradigm that fuelled the transitional state-led project of nation-building. They point to its illusory conflation of *formal equality*, declared with the adoption of the 1996 Constitution, with *material equality*. “Rainbowism” tends to draw a thick line between South Africa’s apartheid past and the democratic present, invoking images of a new “rainbow nation” imbued with a sanitised ethic of “ubuntu”. By falsely implying that the social and economic legacies of apartheid and colonialism have been overcome, it claims a premature resolution of the real demands of justice and reconciliation.

Fallism – a term that covers multiple strands of the student

movement across the country – challenges this notion by identifying and highlighting the economic, cultural, psychological and aesthetic vestiges of the past. Calling for the residues of colonial and apartheid injustices to fall, it wants to initiate the end that “Rainbowism” suggests is already here. In the process, it rejects “Rainbowism” and its associated components of “peace”, “reconciliation” and “ubuntu”.

It is important to emphasise that we agree with the starting point of Fallism. Like the authors of this article, Fallists desire a non-racial society based on substantive equality. Clearly, it is necessary to interrogate the post-apartheid consensus. Clearly, South Africa has failed to deal adequately with the consequences of the past. However, we take issue with the ideological and theoretical toolkit



**It becomes very difficult to talk about ideas when you first have to agree on the thinker’s lineage.**

employed to understand the causes of our contemporary situation. We believe that it supports a regressive political praxis that undermines the ability of South Africans to reach a non-racial and economically equitable society.

### SHAKY GROUND

Fallism grounds its critique of the post-apartheid condition in a *particular* interpretation of a combination of ideologies. Formally, it draws upon black radical feminism, black consciousness and pan-Africanism. Each of these has a rich and nuanced history with many valuable contributions to progressive thought and political praxis. However, the Fallists’ view is shaped more conceptually within the horizons of postmodern and postcolonial theory and tends to manifest as vulgar identity politics.

The politics of identity is not problematic *per se*. In fact, a lot of what it has propagated is useful. Concepts like “white privilege” and “intersectionality” open up complex human interactions in a way that makes understanding and deconstructing them more accessible. However, blending identity politics with a vulgar standpoint theory makes for a crude and unhelpful guide for social change.

Standpoint theory is premised on the belief that a person's identity, understood as a socio-political-historical subject position, is *epistemically salient*, meaning that their way of knowing and validating knowledge is determined by their identity/position. When combined with identity politics, this can result in a person's arguments or analysis being dismissed *purely* on the grounds of their identity (itself defined externally). Under the sway of these ideas, students have dismissed the work of Frantz Fanon or Stuart Hall – until they discover that they are not the white, European men their names imply. It becomes very difficult to talk about ideas when you first have to agree on the thinker's lineage. In this way, Fallism tends to reify the very identities that it sets out to deconstruct, giving the impression that there is an essential difference between people of different races, genders and sexualities. Ironically, it also replicates the machinery of any patriarchal, racist or class-based hierarchy that dictates whose voice may be heard and whose ignored.

There are some Fallists who argue that this overt essentialism is a strategic move. Let's take the example of racial identity. Some argue that overt racialisation is a necessary stage to pass through to reach the final goal of a racially and economically transformed South Africa. Only then can the second stage of non-racialism begin. In practice, however, the first stage can take on an autonomous force, such that it is impossible to say when the "temporary project" of racialism will end and that of non-racialism begin.

More seriously, for racialism to work at all, racial identities must be fixed. Fixed identities, especially when they are attached to some kind of entitlement, also tend to convert "difference into "otherness", such that the "other" can be characterised as evil, inferior, undesirable and eradicable. As

Neville Alexander said, "by insisting on racial categories [as the only criterion guiding redistribution]... you are simply perpetuating racial identities, which means racial prejudice, race thinking and so on. The very opposite of what you want to do in the longer term, which is to get to a non-racial ethos" (Barron, 2010).



### **Fanon's transcendental humanism explicitly contradicts the ideals of Negritude and nativism that Fallism increasingly ascribes to.**

The idea of "essential difference" is both a product and key tenet of postcolonial theory, particularly subaltern studies, that appears to have taken hold in student politics. Since the 1980s, this theory has been increasingly influential in certain humanities disciplines (especially anthropology and gender studies) in the global – and South African – academy. Authors of the postcolonial canon, like Partha Chatterjee, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Dipesh Chakrabarty, base much of their analysis on the assumption that so-called "non-Western" societies are fundamentally different from those in the so-called "West" (Chibber, 2013). In so doing, they continue the discourse of "the West and the Rest", despite this binary being at the core of what they claim to take issue with. It might also be worthwhile to point out that this fetishisation of difference belongs to a postmodern project, informed

by arguably poor readings of "white males" from Nietzsche to Derrida, that valorises the particular in order to denounce "Western universalism".

We reject this notion of essential difference and assert that it ought to be abandoned as a mechanism to advance a truly emancipatory politics.

### **NO WHITE WORLD, NO BLACK WORLD**

Perhaps ironically again, the most powerful arguments against this line of thinking have been made by the same theorists the Fallists use to advance their conception of the "decolonisation" project. Fanon's transcendental humanism explicitly contradicts the ideals of Negritude and nativism that Fallism increasingly ascribes to (Gilroy 2011). In *Black Skin, White Masks* for example, he writes:

I have no wish to be the victim of the Fraud of a black world. My life should not be devoted to drawing up the balance sheet of Negro values. There is no white world, there is no white ethic, any more than there is a white intelligence. There are in every part of the world men who search. (Fanon 1952)

Fanon is not discounting any historically contingent differences between black and white people. *Black Skin, White Masks* does, after all, explore the phenomenology of black experience under white supremacy. Yet it is guided by a clear commitment to the fact that there is no essential difference between white and black. Fanon's point is reinforced by Edward Said (1993, 336):

No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which, if followed into actual experience for only a moment, are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and >>

identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively white, or black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about.

Said (ibid.) was no naïve celebrant of cultural diversity and humanism, as he continued:

It is more rewarding – and more difficult – to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others than only about “us”. But this also means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify them or put them in hierarchies, above all, not constantly reiterating how “our” culture or country is number one (or not number one, for that matter).

In some academic circles, the positions of Fanon and Said have become increasingly garbled by their assimilation into a hodgepodge postcolonial theory that is obsessed with colonial representations of the non-European “native” or “Oriental”. Vivek Chibber’s (2013) critique of postcolonial theory powerfully accuses such postcolonial theorists of reproducing the same Orientalism they purportedly hate.

A recent local example was the UCT Fallist who declared that science must be done away with, which gave rise to a #ScienceMustFall trend on



## **Postcolonial theory – at least, as is currently taught and understood in student movements in South Africa – does not allow us to emancipate ourselves from the colonial imaginary.**

social media. Clearly, when European colonialism falsely attributed all meaningful knowledge production to the “West”, it promoted the corollary that Africans have had no part to play in scientific progress. However, postcolonial theory’s flirtation with relativism has also served to support students’ bifurcated reading of history. In short, postcolonial theory – at least, as is currently taught and understood in student movements in South Africa – does not allow us to emancipate ourselves from the colonial imaginary.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is important to note that one can acknowledge the hypocrisy of “Rainbowism” without falling into the particular ideological morass that informs Fallism. The Fallist theoretical framework must be put to serious critique by students, academics and the progressive public alike, not least to interrupt the institution of a vanguardist dogma. In the history of social and emancipatory movements, such dogma has always been the

enemy of progressive social change. The twentieth century provides a surfeit of evidence of this.

We need to open up the space for a more generous and more fruitful debate. It is imperative for everyone who is interested in realising the needed social and political shifts in South Africa to take up this conversation in earnest. We can no longer accept “identity” as a mediator of “allyship”, but should instead advance a politics of solidarities and comradeship based on principle, and a movement of people working to build something together. One that would affirm the reality of continued injustices across the spectrum and embrace calls for decolonisation without slipping into exclusivist nativism or narrow nationalism. On our campuses, one need not be a Fallist to support the creation of historically grounded and ethically responsive curricula, free education, and the dismantling of outsourcing.

The Fallists are also right to complain that our education has not provided us with the rich history of progressive thought in this country. Perhaps revisiting and rehabilitating this living archive is a first step towards opening the space of discussion, and towards a deeper political movement to dismantle the legacies of apartheid and colonialism. NA

#### REFERENCES

- Barron, C. 2010. “So many questions (Interview with Neville Alexander)”, *Sunday Times Review*, 20 June. Retrieved 8 December 2016 from <https://www.uct.ac.za/downloads/uct.ac.za/news/media/oped/CBarrononNevAlexander.pdf>
- Chibber, V. 2013. *Postcolonial Theory and the Spectre of Capital* London: Verso
- Fanon, F. 1952. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press
- Gilroy, P. 2011. “Fanon and the value of the human,” *The Salon*, 4. Retrieved 8 December 2016 from [http://www.jwtc.org.za/resources/docs/salon-volume-4/2\\_Salon\\_Vol4\\_Gilroy.pdf](http://www.jwtc.org.za/resources/docs/salon-volume-4/2_Salon_Vol4_Gilroy.pdf)
- Said, E. 1993. *Culture and Imperialism* New York: Knopf