



# Nation on the Couch:

Extract from a book by Wahbie Long

In the world beyond therapy, however, intersubjective hope demands nourishment at two levels — first, at a social-psychological level defined by reciprocal recognition, and second, at a social-material level involving an equitable distribution of the resources required for dignified living. This is easier said than done: what I am describing, after all, is a virtual utopia in which each of us feels recognised in our humanity, and in which our basic needs are adequately satisfied. In fact, when placing this quandary in proper historical context, one realises that the history of our *species* — never mind South Africa — is a history of masters and slaves.

In his account of social organisation from the Stone Age to the present, Stanford historian Walter Scheidel contends that a combination of domesticated food production, sedentism, state formation and hereditary property rights ensured that material inequality became a central feature of human coexistence.<sup>1</sup> A fundamental part of the civilising process, in other words, was inequality itself — but history has not been without surprises. What Scheidel calls the *Four Horsemen of Levelling* is proof that unequal societies can be levelled — in exchange for a monumental loss of life.

Mass mobilisation warfare is one of those horsemen involving the kind of killing contract that more or less seeps into every segment of society. The two world wars are fitting examples of where industrial-scale warfare, aggressive taxation, rising costs of living, state involvement in the economy and trade disruptions ravaged the wealth of the rich, leading to unionisation

and the creation of welfare states that would level inequality on a scale almost unparalleled in human history. Transformative revolution is another notable leveller. Communist takeovers — exemplified by expropriation, redistribution and collectivisation — succeeded in challenging inequality in extraordinary ways, rivalling even the world wars for number of fatalities and human suffering in general. State failure is the third horseman: when states fall apart, the rich simply have more to lose, so the playing fields get evened out. And finally, there are lethal pandemics: when sufficient numbers of people die, the balance between capital and labour can shift so dramatically that one can be left with Black Death-type situations where the workers make merry on meat and beer while the nobles run around trying to maintain appearances.

Acts of God aside, Scheidel is clear that exemplary violence alone has been shown to address inequality in tangible ways — not democracy, not macroeconomic crises, not modern economic development, not even radical policy reforms.<sup>2</sup> Fanon may well have intuited this when he declared that “decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon”.<sup>3</sup> Naturally, the irony of seeking to end structural and symbolic violence with revolutionary violence is not lost on anyone; indeed, the wellsprings of life-giving hope may have to be sought elsewhere. But the basic point is this: the intersubjective cultivation of hope — in the absence of actual material prospects — amounts to little more than another cheap *kumbaya* moment for the masses. Hope cannot exist within a psychological matrix of shame, envy and impasse while

a material base marked by rampant inequality remains locked in place. As for the observable correlates of everyday violence, *ressentiment*-driven value delusions and alienated consumerism, these should remind us that nothing less than our shared humanity is at stake.

To be clear, the only way to dissolve the master-slave dialectic is to resolve the problem of unreciprocated recognition in which the master insists on remaining the master. Fanon, again, envisioned a certain breaking of the deadlock, but it is not a strategy that inspires hopefulness. As for psychologists, they tend to treat misrecognition as a “psychical deformation”, whereas philosophers regard it as a matter of “ethical self-realisation”.<sup>4</sup> Neither of these positions will suffice either. Instead, the question of misrecognition has to be reframed as a question of *justice* — because misrecognition involves “an institutionalised relation of *subordination*”,<sup>5</sup> a relation that prevents South Africans from participating as peers in a dignified social life.

What, then, constitutes a life of dignity, what makes a life incontrovertibly human? One can hardly do better than Martha Nussbaum’s catalogue of ten central human capabilities.<sup>6</sup> This is not the occasion to repeat the entire list, so allow me to quote only those of her reflections that are of immediate relevance. For Nussbaum, being human means: “... Being able to move freely from place to place ... Being able to use the senses; being able to imagine, to think, and to reason and to do these things in a ‘truly human’ way, a way informed and >>

cultivated by an adequate education ... Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's own life ... Being able to live for and in relation to others, to recognise and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; being able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation; having the capability for both justice and friendship ... Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others ... being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life ... being able to hold property ... being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers."<sup>7</sup> Anything less — and the life under consideration is no longer a human life.

Notice Nussbaum's emphasis on *material* space: the freedom to move from one place to another, the experience of owning property. These are among the attributes that not only make us human but also allow for the promotion of intersubjective hope. For the millions of disenfranchised South Africans, that is, the question of landlessness is not only of practical importance: it is an existential question. To own land is to own oneself, to live with confidence in the world, to have the freedom to pursue questions of meaning rather than survival, to have the sense that one is ontologically real, and to find within oneself the wherewithal to create networks of life-giving hope.<sup>8</sup> To deny a people their land, therefore, is to deny them all of these potential achievements. Ominously, Scheidel makes the point that land reform — when accompanied by violence or the threat of violence — is an effective strategy for levelling inequality, because no one will give up anything worthwhile without a struggle.

One can only hope that it does not come to that, that the power elites in this country will recognise that the interests of the dispossessed are the interests of us all.

But Nussbaum also discusses *psychological* capacities in her account of what it is to be human. We should not make the error, therefore, of imagining that the psychological is trivial in contexts of massive material deprivation. The land question is critical — and its resolution will go some way towards restoring dignity to the lives of South Africans — but we must not underestimate the political relevance of recognising and validating the mental states of others. Treat others as you wish to be treated and do not treat others in a manner that you do not wish to be treated: this is the so-called 'Golden Rule' that underpins almost every religious, cultural and ethical system known to humankind.

Yet one cannot realise this principle without the capacity for empathy — a cornerstone in any helping relationship. Psychotherapists are experts here, at holding minds in mind, at perspective-taking — a prerequisite for ethical living. But it is just as true that empathic sensitivity becomes damaging when it is oblivious to the political struggles of ordinary people. Indeed, the splitting-off of the psychological from the social domain weakens the moral authority of psychotherapists in the struggles of the everyday. On the other hand, the tendency among many activists to dismiss psychotherapy as false consciousness is premature to say the least. As Johanna Hedva asks in her essay, *Sick Woman Theory*, "How do you throw a brick through the window of a bank if you can't get out of bed?"<sup>9</sup> In the pursuit of collective hope, the bottom line is that personal change and social transformation are inseparable: as much as we need programmes for social improvement, we also need to remember that the small things still matter.

The relational school in psychoanalysis teaches us valuable lessons about the exercise of power — and its democratisation — in settings rife with inequality. It all begins with a therapist wielding real authority over a patient who — if they are not to be frozen into a relationship of dependency — must attack the therapist's understanding of them at some point in the process. The therapist, in turn, needs to show up consistently in receiving those attacks if they are both to live freer, fuller and richer lives. Similarly, whatever our current station in life — be it master or slave — each of us has to front up for the battle with the Other, over and over again. And just as therapist and patient must negotiate their hopes in dialectical conversation with one another, we, too, have to nurture between us that most fragile of cargoes, with the realisation that what each of us does in our lives on a moment-to-moment basis will ripple through the ages. There has to be a revolt and a sincere engagement with it — failing which there can be no shared hopes, only selfish ones.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Scheidel, W. 2017. *The Great Leveler: Violence and the history of inequality from the Stone Age to the twenty-first century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
2. *Ibid.*,
3. Fanon, F. 2001. *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin Books, p. 27.
4. Fraser, N. 2003. *Redistribution or recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. London: Verso, p. 29.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 29, original emphasis.
6. Nussbaum, M. 1999. *Sex and social justice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 41-2.
8. Long, W. 2017. "Essence or experience? A New Direction for African Psychology," *Theory & Psychology*, 27, pp. 293-312.
9. Hedva, J. 2016. "Sick woman theory," *Mask Magazine*. Accessible at <http://www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory>

IFAA thanks Melinda Ferguson Books, an imprint of NB Publishers, for permission to publish this extract. NA