
AN AFRICAN CHALLENGE TO THE WESTERN LOGICS OF EXCESS¹

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The relentless desire of Western states to create true world citizenship is currently the focus of a number of major studies in economics, politics, information sciences as well as philosophy. The challenge of the global village is to find those norms and virtues that will lead us to greater efficiency and interconnectedness. If these norms do not already exist, new values have to be developed in order to reach true global citizenship.

This paper is not an assertion of the politics of global citizenship. I will however focus on those commonalities that are presented as the natural course of globalisation. The most apparent of these is the question of excess which in its most basic form becomes a question of access. This is mainly access to what has become the most valued commodity in the West: information. It is the contention of this study that the predominant quest for information in the West has once again degraded non-western regions to mere reactive or adaptive regions. This is, however, not a call for the damnation of West as a dominating power. Domination by the West over what we will call marginalized regions has been counteracted for the past several decades. This question of excess is first and foremost a challenge to the West itself. This paper will therefore first deal with what is understood as excess and the problems that the West is facing because of its relentless pursuit of this concept. The latter part of the paper will attempt to give a voice to Africa's challenge to excess, which in her case is the lack of access.

This paper is a cautious reflection upon western ways. It is not a study of a purely economical or political nature. The reference to logics rather than politics is in order to distance myself from the collective establishment of man as a political animal and rather examine the prevailing attitude of the western man towards himself.²

In our continuous reflection on western logics it is important to take into account the shift that took place in the past century or so. The

traditional logics of identity and non-contradiction (I will henceforth refer to this as the logics of bivalence) that were so prevalent in western philosophy for centuries have been challenged by the more recent logics of multivalence and inclusion. The principle of non-contradiction is replaced by the principle of un-contradiction. Paradoxes are no longer seen as paradoxes. And yet hidden in this shift is a paradox that so besieges the current debate in philosophy: Rejecting the traditional logics of bivalence and replacing it with the logics of multivalence is a bivalent act in itself. The followers and propagators of multivalence may contend that this paradox is not a paradox at all but rests upon a misunderstanding or naive approach to their work. And, although this may be true for the most part, this study's proposed focus is the challenge by marginalized regions to western states and the ideas that they propagate.

The characteristics of bivalence are among others that of the maintenance of the prominent identity and the demand for adaptation to this identity by subalternate identities. If we follow up the argument of the stated paradox, then this move to multivalence did not free us of the expectation that subordinate identities should adapt to the prominent identity of excess.

Before examining the concept of the logics of excess, it is important to chart the development and transformation of the traditional Western logics of identity and bivalence. The most important shift came with the linguistic turn. We find specific reference to this linguistic turn in the works of Lyotard and already latently implied in the works of Nietzsche. It is however only with the publication of the later works of Ludwig Wittgenstein on the linguistic community, that the concept of language as a fundamental part not only of the *explanation* of the world, but also as a fellow *instigator* and *creator* of experiences, is acknowledged.

This position is taken up by the hermeneutical thinkers in the persons of Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur and reaches a pivotal culmination in the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. With Derrida we find the clearest indication of what is understood to be the linguistic reality. In its most elementary understanding, this is a reality where representation is replaced by interpretation. Although this may seem as a overly simplified understanding of the many works of Derrida, for our study this will suffice.³ A linguistic reality replaces the original one-to-one correlation that exists between reality and the idea, with a more complex multitude and always already deferred

interpretation of signs. Once fundamental meaning is exchanged for interpretation, the subsequent traces of excess are exposed. The absence of fixed meanings opens the field up to a multitude of opinions. The traditional divide between facts and opinions are replaced by an all inclusive pragmatic truth of interpretation and application.

Those who oppose what they see as an onslaught on the traditional concepts of truth usually slate identity as being the first to fall in this battle. Lack of truth, for them, leads to a lack of self-understanding. Identity in its generally understood form is commonly regarded as being simply personal, group based or cultural. For the purposes of this study it is important to focus on personal identity in the western sense and the challenges that it faces in order to fully understand the challenge from non-western states.⁴

Personal identity is regarded as the most important virtue of any human being. We find that philosophy in particular has taken up the question of the workings and nature of identity. Traditionally, identity has been regarded as a wholeness of being or oneness between the self and its intrinsic nature. No void should exist between the nature of man and its presentation to the world. Personal identity and even group or cultural identity are always in reverence to that which is united. The quest has become to present yourself as completely one with your group, culture and in its most respectable sense, with your own truly human nature. Adherence to the nature of man is recognised as a virtue beyond the common call of simply living to that of a truly fulfilled life. One should be guided on this tour to the discovery of true identity by those who are trained and equipped for this journey. Michel Foucault has shown us how elusive this entire action to self discovery can be, but also how open to influence and subsequently receptive to domination we have become because of the technology of discipline and confession.

The reaction by twentieth century philosophy and social study to fixed identities have led us to doubt the nature of man as anything other than another concept invented by man. The existentialists maintained that man is free but nothing more - that nothing is to be found hidden within ourselves (existence over essence). Hermeneutics and deconstruction have taught us that interpretation and counter interpretation will lead to fleeting moments of insight and pragmatic truth. This, it is contended, is the postmodern - that moment of clarity which should be a constant moment. Identity is constituted and

transmitted, but never discovered. And once you become entirely aware of this idea you are severed from the constraints of that which have bound you to your state of a nihilistic culture of imitation and discontent. The *confrontation* with that which you cannot fit into your predisposed schemes of explanation, is replaced by the continuous moment of saying yes to that which is completely different.

This wonderment of saying yes, found already in the works of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, results in the desire to leave reality in all of its amazement and contradiction. In this hands-off approach to the other western identity has once again failed. The fragmentation of identity has become the unfortunate conclusion of a misunderstood existence in wonder. In the absence of fundamental truth to which all human kind should adhere, identity becomes more receptive to the influences of the multitude and excess.

To comprehend the existence of everyday life, it has become inevitable that a person should adapt to the environment he or she is confronted with. In the western world it has become the adaptation to excess. This, of course, is not the result of recent developments, but is to be recognised in the first notions of a divergence of trades and specifically those of the social and human sciences. You are attended to as a judicial person seeking justice, a communitarian person in relationship with your friends and neighbours, the bureaucratic and moral person. These spheres of identity may overlap and influence one another but with the development of the world as a technological hybrid, fragmentation will become ever more apparent.⁶ This state of affairs leads to the ultimate pursuit for comprehension: How am I to exist in a fragmented society with a fragmented identity? What follows is the reciprocal aspect of the social sciences. Those who contribute to the fragmentation of society and identity are those who are willing to supply you with some presumption of understanding of your position in society. This understanding should be reached by the full disclosure of your life. Finally, the circle is closed in on itself with the desire to not only have total self knowledge, but also the desire to know everything about everyone else.

The fragmentation we have been lulled into must be satisfied by our own increasing desire for meaning and knowledge, and this can only be achieved through our submission to excess. Information becomes the most worthy commodity. The age old saying "knowledge is power" becomes a disturbing reality in our every day lives. Truth, I have already stated, has become pragmatic, shedding its universality. This

pragmatism, together with the desire for excess, has brought us to the next step in the evolution of knowledge - the mediation of both truth and knowledge.

The knowledge that we possess has either been gained through personal experience or for the large part been transmitted to us. Mediated by some measure, either through tradition, authority, the media or some scientific results and statistics. We accept what is laudable through that which is transmitted to us by these mediums. We do not doubt these mediums because we do not believe their messages to be universally true, only that it is fitting for the specific situation.⁷ And the situation at this moment calls for globalisation and the inclusive desires with which all groups and regions should be viewed. It is therefore clear that the result of western efforts to include formally marginalized regions in global decision making are an attempt to find a standard by which to judge diversification. Although the western desire for inclusion cannot be expressively faulted, the question still remains as to the effect of the meeting between the western logics of excess and the logics of traditionally marginalized regions.

It is my contention that despite the efforts of the prophets of postmodernity and their message that we should be receptive and stand open to the unfamiliar, not annexing it and making it fit our schemes of explanation, the result of the fragmented lifestyle and politics of the West, for the most part, has been to employ the logics of excess as the new measure for human interaction and comprehension. We have once again closed down on the other - that which is not us or not fitting to us. This time attempting to include in a scheme of understanding those aspects of life and politics that have been left unattended in the past. Recognising that it is a much grander scheme of understanding, it is still, however, characterised by the same nihilistic intent of appropriating everything to the personal. And once again non-western regions have to *react* to this desire for the inclusion of excess opinions or even more preferably for the West - *adapt* to it.

II

Is the notion of excess so imbedded in the West truly incommensurable and inaccessible to non-western states? Non-western cultures have, ever since the first contact with western powers, been expected to adapt to the imported identity. If they did not

wish to adapt, they had to react to it usually with oppressive results. Can there be any sense of identity in for instance, Africa, other than that of adaptation or reaction? The more recent efforts of globalisation and the inclusion of non-western regions in this movement have been based - as I have tried to show, on excess. In the following passage I will try to indicate why it is largely impossible for especially Africa to adapt to this concept of excess.

There are three main reasons for my decision to utilise Africa as a challenge to western excess: Firstly, I am from Africa. Although not an African in the true sense of the word, I have been exposed more than most westerners to the effects of western culture on Africa.⁸ This conference of course is also held in Africa - a unique opportunity and venue for an African challenge to the West. Secondly, other non-western regions, specifically the East, have received some attention from the West in recent years through a cultural and especially religious fascination with these regions. Thirdly, on a purely economical basis, Africa is in the most dire need for assistance due to its general lack of a first-world standard of living.

Establishing Africa as the most desired region to level a challenge to western logics of excess should, however, never lead to that age old working of the West; the "transcendental ego" maintaining the African point of view as a unified perspective. This unfortunate attitude by the West towards other regions makes it much more convenient to perceive the other as precisely that - the "other". No apparent relation can be struck with the other except by demanding an adaptive attitude towards the dominant culture - in this case the West. The African style of living is as divergent as any. Cultural, political and religious differences in Africa, just as in other parts of the world, are the corner stones for major conflicts on this continent. Differences are apparent and will probably persist for years to come.

With this said, this paper may be accused of the same regional oneness that it holds towards the West as it tries to avoid in its perspective on Africa, stating that the West is nothing more than a region defined by individuality and excess. However, this can be defended by observing the West as a region that wishes to export its ideas of individuality through excess to other parts of the world as the preferred logic. It can therefore be contended that the West has been reduced to an idea entirely measured in its own political and cultural exports. By the same standard, Africa being on the receiving end of this export through colonialism and the current dialectic world politics,

is reduced in the eyes of the rest of the world and even by a large part of Africans, to a mere adaptive or reactive identity. This becomes the focus point of many discussions on the future of Africa. Once again Africa is marginalized as not having a constructive identity of her own. Of course Africa also carries within her many concepts of excess. However, as stated in the beginning this is not a mere question of excess, but rather of access. Access in the West is not much of an issue. To be bombarded by information has become not only a reluctant part of certain aspects of people's lives, but has become to a large extent the acknowledgement of a worthy life. "Be a well informed human being. Be part of the political process of your country, state or community. Become fully aware of yourself as a well informed human being and understand that your humanity is the result of understanding and knowing the world around you. Furthermore - seek self-knowledge in the abundance of your given world with all of its well informed specialists." What becomes apparent in this rhetoric is that the western concept of excess carries through only in as far as it focuses on the individual. The individual standing in the downpour of the multitude, and able to know as much as he or she possibly wants to know through the ever-expanding information and communication technology.

In the logics of excess this has become the new freedom - having epistemological choices (as opposed to the ontological choice), not whether you want to be informed, but how much information you wish to access. As with any freedom, this freedom is not absolute - the individual will still be confronted by information, even that to which he or she does not wish to be exposed - but at least he or she can live in the appearance of taking it all in vain. And this is perhaps the greatest absence in Africa - the absence of choices for or against excess because of the lack of access.

The excess that does exist in Africa is for the larger part the pure negative excess of the shortage of food, medicines, education and housing. And in this lack of access to nutrition and proper infrastructure, the people of Africa are seen as masses, not individuals. The plight of one hungry child becomes the plight of an entire region. The terrifying face of one man dying of AIDS becomes the face of an entire nation without proper medical resources. Western democracy and justice have become the way by which the individual can stand his or her ground against the state machinery. This balance of the one against the many is something that is not to be found in

Africa outside of its western-based hierarchical and bureaucratic establishments. Adaptation to individualisation through excess is futile if access is not forthcoming. Reaction to this lack of access may lead to civil wars and the formation of totalitarian states. This observation may be naive, but I am not trying to disclose a political assessment on African conflicts and governments. However, the inability to fully adapt and the prerequisite to react to the logics of excess, are both based on the socio-political and economic realities of Africa.

The contention of this paper is to move beyond the obvious questions of lack of access and focus on the *logics* of excess, rather than the *politics* of excess. Does Africa, because of her historical and socio-political situation, have any claim against the West for relief of suffrage? Most probably. Are the western nations inclined to support such relief? They have in the past and will most likely continue to do so in the future. Support, however, may vary and be conditional to certain demands being met. This, however, is a political and economic solution. The problem with political solutions is that their virtuous effects often fall through the cracks of administrative bureaucracy. Western individuals often feel uninvolved in their governments' efforts to support non-western countries. Political solutions are just that - political.

III

It has been the effort of this paper to challenge the West - its people not its governments. The attitude of western people of encouraging the concept of excess has been shown to be based on individualisation and the freedom to make epistemological choices. Excess in the West, although the result of the turn from bivalent to multivalent logics, has now resulted in the nihilistic affixation of the other. Bivalent logics called for the rejection of the other. An attitude that left the individual in total discontent over their inability to understand and explain reality through their prefixed schemes of the world. It is therefore necessary to formulate a new logics that will withhold itself from both rejection, affixation and integration.

What this paper proposes is actually a return to the understood attitude of the so called poststructuralist and postmodern thinkers -Derrida, Foucault and Nietzsche, among others. They called for the constant challenge to limits without ever eradicating them. Transfixing limits results in the rejection of the other. Crossing or wiping out borders leads to integration of the other. Both positions fail to be amazed by the other, to be constantly critical of their own position. It is

my belief that the adoption of a logic of *possibilities*, rather than *excess*, will effectively lead to an appreciation of the other. In this attitude, choices, the virtue of a life of excess, becomes redundant. You no longer have to make the epistemological choices between a multitude of information so as to construct a human being coping in a fragmented society.

The commitment to the logics of possibilities asks that you accept nothing, but constantly expect everything. In the realm of expectation there is no room for nihilistic discontent because there is always a new challenge to be met. And it is in this constant expectation that Africa positions herself as the physical reminder of the possibilities of the other. Do your part for the relief efforts in Africa and other impoverished regions of the world. Give your support for the initiatives of a global information service. The fact of the matter is that without the political will and the economic means, Africa's struggle for recognition will persist. But not every human being needs constant intervention by a helping hand. The logic of possibilities supply you with the means of gaining respect through an unaffiliated amazement for the other. This is a life-affirming position rather than a political commitment. A reaffirmed choice for that constant moment of wonder rather than the constant choices longing for those chunks of meaning that might sustain a fragmented identity.

The challenge to Africa is to not let herself be forced into the silence of integration. She should state her claims against the rest of the world. And the rest of the world should respect her differences, not because it is politically correct, but because it is logically sound.

When the logic of possibilities becomes a way of life, it will be reflected in the acts that you commit. There is a growing need for philosophers and other academics to bring practical solutions to the public. If not as Philosopher Kings, then at least as one of their public relations officers. Philosophers can only negate the desperateness with which the third millennium is anticipated if their messages are relevant and they themselves are committed to a life of love for understanding, care and appreciation for the other.

Be self-critical. Examine your life and your deeds. Not because it will lead to self-knowledge and individualisation but because it will supply you with the virtues of living in a fragmented world. Let Africa be your constant reminder of the possibilities of the other, for then it would be

difficult to fall into a slumber of discontent. And this would enable you to commit to what is just and virtuous as a true global citizen.

Notes

1. This title suggests correctly that the implication of this paper is to reflect on western culture and not to be an exploration of African life styles. This is not an anthropological study, nor economic or even political. The West's attitude towards itself will be challenged.

2. The reference to *logics* holds specific implications for this paper. It is important to note that the plurality of the term suggests a break with pure logic although not rejecting it in total. It is my goal to refer to the underlying attitude of western man and reflecting on this without the interference of political, economic, or even social implications. Understanding that this is not entirely possible, I do however find some degree of purity of thought in a reflection on logics rather than politics or economics. The plurality of the term further suggests the excess in which western man finds himself.

3. My use of these writers may seem an over-eager way to lend some weight to my argument. However, this archaeological method is utilised due to the lack of space in which to reflect entirely on the links between the works of major thinkers of the twentieth century, and the rise of an identity through excess. A concise but complete assessment of contemporary philosophy can be found in Sim, *Postmodern thought*.

4. This reflection on the personal implies an understanding of one of the major philosophical disputes in recent times; the divide or inclusiveness that exists between the private and the public. This ethical dispute is also apparent in this paper. The implication of this paper is mainly private. It calls for, what Foucault might refer to as an aesthetization of the self, rather than Habermas' contention of the community. For a more reflective study of this entire dispute see Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, as well as Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*.

5. See Critchley, *Very little...almost nothing*, for a clear understanding of nihilism in contemporary society. The discontent that western man experiences is the result of its culture of affixation. His schematic explanation of his world cannot cope entirely with the complete difference of some of the experiences and worlds that he encounters. This results in an epistemological discontent.

6. This hybrid once again proclaim the excess of the West against the lack of access in Africa. For and in depth exploration of the western man as a creature inhabiting a world of technology see Kroker, *The possessed individual*.

7. See Debord, *The society of the spectacle*.

8. I am not an African in the true sense of the word. I believe it pretentious to utilise the locality of birth or residence to assume knowledge of an entire continent and its people. My appreciation and amazement for the culture of Africa can never match the imbedded understanding of it as it does for Thabo Mbeki for instance, neither should it. The affixation of cultures is one of the major reasons for the growing nihilism in the West, see Bauman, *Op ext*. To be a true African and aware of her power over the souls of men is something that I can never fully understand. See Mbeki, *Africa. The time has come*.

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