

## **Racism, resentment, and the reinvention of truth – tracing the contours of the decolonial turn**

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### **Abstract**

The basic hypothesis of this essay is that racism breeds resentment and resentment reinvents truth. But the dialectical relationship between these phenomena calls for a particular understanding of racism, that is as non-recognition, and a particular understanding of resentment, that is, that it leads to the reinvention of truth in the Nietzschean sense of an epistemological reaction against a dominant epistemology. This essay establishes a theoretical basis for the relationship between these phenomena using recognition theory as it originates in Hegel and is adapted to the colonial context by Fanon. Nietzsche's concept of *ressentiment* and Scheler's interpretation of this are used to develop the contemporary understanding articulated by Elizabeth Morelli. The essay then explores these ideas in the contemporary South African context in the light of the decolonial turn. The essay concludes with a short theological reflection.

### **Keywords**

*Racism; recognition; resentment; reinvention; truth; epistemology*

*The Other holds a secret – the secret of what I am.*<sup>1</sup>

*Not only does the white man project all that is bad on to the black person ... but his gaze annihilates that person, turning her or him into “nothingness”.*<sup>2</sup>

*I bear my grudge for reasons of personal salvation.*<sup>3</sup>

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1 Sartre (1991:364)

2 Vaughan (1991:14)

3 Amery (1980: Kindle Location 80)

## **Introduction**

When the first European adventurer, Christopher Columbus, stepped off his vessel onto the Iberian insula on October 12, 1492, the first question he asked himself was whether the indigenous people who lived there were human beings. For him, and for all his kind, human beings were identified as such if they had a religion. If they had no religion, they had no soul. If they had no soul, then they were not human beings. And if they were not human beings then they must make way for people who were human beings, even if it meant extermination. And there was, in the minds of the first conquistadors, no proper religion among the indigenous people of South America.

The rest, as they say, is history.

The question that this essay attempts to ask is not so much what constitutes a human being but what is the experience of human beings when they are not recognized as human? How did the indigenous people on the Iberian Peninsula, for example, experience the question that Columbus was asking of them? How did they receive, in their bodies, the belief that they were less than human? When racism is understood in these terms it throws a completely new light on what it means to be racist and to experience racism. What brings us to the heart of racism is what brings us also to the heart of what it means to be recognized, or not recognized, as a human being. The making and unmaking of human beings by other human beings and the effects on the human condition of not being recognized as human is therefore the burden of this essay. Recognition theory provides the theoretical basis for the essay because it traverses the terrain that we as human beings cross when we engage in the process of humanizing or dehumanizing each other. The first question that needs to be asked, therefore, is: What is recognition?

## **Recognition theory – a brief overview**

Recognition has, in recent years, become the paradigm of choice for a number of thinkers working in the area of identity construction, dignity, and human rights. Charles Taylor (1994), Axel Honneth (1995), Francis Fukuyama (2018), and Sybol Anderson (2011), to name a few. The interest

in the topic is because of the realization that recognition is more than a fundamental human right; it is a fundamental human necessity that people are prepared to struggle and ultimately die for. Central to this discussion is Hegel's theory of mutual recognition. Axel Honneth's seminal work on the struggle for recognition, for example, is based almost entirely on Hegel's theory and Frantz Fanon (1952), in his wrenching existential description of racism as a colonial phenomenon, uses Hegel's Master/Slave fable as a departure point for his discussion. Nietzsche also uses this fable as his departure point in his genealogy of morals (1887). The ubiquity of Hegel's ideas in this discussion may appear ironic, given that decolonialism is the context in which it takes place and Hegel had neither sympathy for nor understanding of the colonized peoples of the South. And Nietzsche's contempt for what he called the "slave mentality" was completely undisguised. Yet their insights resonate throughout the debate and cannot be ignored.

## **Hegel's theory of mutual recognition**

Hegel inaugurated a massive paradigm shift in what it means to be self-conscious. His theory of intersubjectivity, later taken up so powerfully by existentialism, is based on the assertion that self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is it exists only by being acknowledged. This, of course, was not new. African philosophers could have told him that from time immemorial. But certainly in the history of western philosophy it was new. Prior to this the model of particular, self-existent, completely autonomous monads, posed by Leibniz a century earlier, was the paradigm in which philosophers such as Rousseau, Locke, Kant, and, quintessentially, Descartes, operated. In the tradition that these philosophers worked the self, the "I", was everything. The existence of other people mattered not at all. "I am wholly my own creation", exclaimed Fichte, "whatever has an existence for me has it through myself" (Solomon 1983:430). With Hegel the Cartesian cogito is made absurd, the "I" in "I think" a myth. There is no possibility of consciousness of the self without the existence of other consciousness seeking selves. The self can only exist through others, another profoundly African insight. "[W]ithout

interpersonal interaction” says Robert Solomon, “and the mutual demand for ... recognition there is no self and no self-consciousness” (1983:430).

Hegel’s departure point is the desire of human beings for self-certainty which is linked with the desire to be free from all constraints and come to full realization of their potential. But freedom in any absolute sense is impossible because as each strives for absolute independence their desires conflict with each other. The paradox of the struggle for self-consciousness is that the existence of the self is under constant threat of annihilation by other selves but at the same time cannot be a self without the presence of other selves. According to Hegel, this is the essence of the strait in which human beings find themselves. We cannot be ourselves without others and we cannot be with others without them being a threat to our selves. This is the extremely unstable, precarious, and dynamic situation in which all of us find ourselves in our search for self-realization. The self is constantly being created, and destroyed, by other selves. It does not, and cannot, exist by itself. But, at least in the west, because of the influence of philosophers such as Descartes and Kant, it continually tries to, indeed has to for the sake of its own survival.

To understand the reasoning behind this one has to understand Hegel’s theory of intersubjectivity and mutual recognition. And this is where Hegel’s famous fable comes in.

Two people, ostensibly men, meet for the first time and immediately begin to fight for recognition (*Anerkennen*). One wins, one loses. And then, ironically, the loser emerges the winner. It [seems] simple, straightforward, striking, prophetic (Solomon 1983:426).

The potency of the fable lies in the fact that the entire history of unequal relations between peoples is condensed into one particular interaction between two people and at the same time each dialectical moment of the interaction is captured and scrutinized, each stage of the development of self-consciousness revealed.

Time does not permit a full description of the processes involved, as fascinating as these are. Suffice to say that it involves a life and death struggle, it progresses via the recognition by the slave not only that he is the object of the master’s contempt but of the master’s need for the

recognition of himself as the master, and that it leads ultimately to a state of interdependence, intersubjectivity, and mutual recognition. This is a state where two subjects “are able to relate to each other so that they are both genuinely independent with regard to each other and also conscious of themselves in the Other in the more exact sense of affirmed by the Other’s intentionality” (Solomon 1983:442). It is the state of knowing that you are known by the Other. Of realizing that you are present in the consciousness of the other in such a way that your humanity is acknowledged and affirmed by the Other. That your well-being is represented in the Other, as his is in you. That you desire her well-being as you desire your own, and, most importantly, that she knows this.<sup>4</sup> This is, for Hegel, the ideal state of intersubjectivity and mutual recognition, the telos, if you will, of the entire dialectical process of the encounter between selves and the eventual finding of yourself through others.

### **Fanon’s interpretation of Hegel in the context of colonial racism**

Fanon’s interpretation of the fable in the colonial context results in a completely different set of outcomes and highlights the racial dynamic in the encounter (Villet 2011). He accepts Hegel’s basic master/slave hypothesis in the struggle for self-consciousness and agrees with Hegel that one’s own human worth is dependent on the recognition by an-Other. But he sees the colonial slave in a completely different light to the Hegelian slave. The

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4 Functional psychologist George Herbert Mead (1934) has a fascinating psychological counterpart to Hegel’s theory of the development of self-consciousness. When we encounter a problem in the world which is obstructing us from moving forward in some way, we ask ourselves what it is about ourselves that is preventing us from overcoming this problem. The “I” that is the subject needs to become aware of the “me” that is the object in which there lies something that is preventing the I from overcoming the obstacle. The relationship between the “I” and the “me” becomes comparable to a relationship between two partners in a dialogue. The original problem is equivalent to Hegel’s first negation. The dialogue that takes place within the self, that is between the “I” and the “me” and the subsequent resolution of the problem equivalent to Hegel’s second negation. Through the process of experimenting with different solutions to the problem the “I” discovers a range of “me’s” that could deal with the problem. The emergence of the self through a dialectical process of intersubjective dialogue within the self is highly reminiscent of Hegel’s theory of the emergence of self-consciousness through interaction with others (Honneth 1995:71f).

crucial moment in the Hegelian dialectic is when the slave recognizes that the master has recognized his need of the slave's recognition. This sets off a whole chain of events in the slave's mind that eventually leads to his liberation. The colonial slave, however, never gets to this point because he is continually trying to mimic the Master, and thus does not come to the point of recognizing that the Master is treating him like an object. He needs to recognize the master's need to recognize him. But he never gets to this point and the process of humanization, that is mutual recognition, is never accomplished. The more he tries to be like the master the further he drives himself away from humanizing himself, and, in the process, humanizing the master. This leaves him in a "a zone of nonbeing ... stripped bare of every essential from which a genuine new departure can emerge" causing him to be unable, in most cases, "to take advantage of this descent into a veritable hell" (Fanon 1967:86). The classic black consciousness remedy for this state of affairs is to emphasize the state of blackness as an antithesis to whiteness and thus appropriate for himself the necessary dignity of a human being. But Fanon asserts that the thesis of whiteness cannot find an antithesis in blackness because blackness has already been destroyed by the white man's prior rejection of the metaphysic in which blackness is embedded.

Not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. ... the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. From one day to the next, the blacks have had to deal with two systems of reference. Their metaphysics, or less pretentiously their customs and the agencies to which they refer, were abolished because they were in contradiction with a new civilization that imposed its own (Fanon 1967:90).

To put it another way, how is it possible, Fanon asks, for the black man (sic) to assert his identity when the very basis of this identity has been annihilated. The only alternative under these circumstances is the "denegrification" of the black man, that is "to rinse out the test tubes" and "begin research on how the wretched black man could whiten himself and thus rid himself of the burden of this bodily curse" (1967:91). In other words, to become like a white man.

The profoundly complex psychology involved in the process of “becoming like the white man” is captured very succinctly by Albert Memmi (1991). The colonizer is in constant and gross denial of the unacceptability of his invidious position of being the master of a foreign country. Conversely the colonized is in constant denial of the fact that he has surrendered to that control. Then there are the images that each constructs of the other – the colonized’s image of the colonizer and the colonizer’s image of the colonized. And each constructs an image of the image he believes that the other has of him. The colonized internalizes the image that the colonizer has but denies that he has done this. He denies it because to admit it would be to admit that at best, he/she has become a mimic of the colonizer and at worst he/she has allowed him or herself, in succumbing to this image, to be dehumanized. The situation becomes fraught with resentment, anger, and malice.

So what is resentment?

## **Resentment**

If Hegel is the guru of recognition theory Nietzsche and Scheler are the gurus of resentment theory. But there is a significant difference between what they were talking about and what we understand by the term and since it is their understanding that is being used by many contemporary scholars, we need to be clear about it. Very briefly the word we use, “resentment”, has to do with feelings of bitterness, anger, envy, revenge, whereas the French word *ressentiment* includes the inability to express these feelings, for example take revenge on the people you feel bitterness towards, and therefore suppress them into the subconscious from where they manifest themselves in a multiplicity of ways in society. Unless citing an author, who uses the original word, I will continue, to avoid confusion, simply use the commonly used word “resentment”. Scheler’s definition is as follows:

Ressentiment is the repeated experiencing and reliving of a particular emotional response reaction against someone else. The continual reliving of the emotion sinks it more deeply into the centre of the personality, but concomitantly removes it from the

person's zone of action and expression. It is not a mere intellectual recollection of the emotion and of the events to which it "responded" – it is a re-experiencing of the emotion itself, a renewal of the original feeling (1972:2).

Nietzsche took the topic onto a whole new level of significance when he discerned the role that it played in altering what he called the "tablets of value". In his *Genealogy of Morals* he argues, once again using Hegel's fable, that the slave cannot have what the Master has so the slave, as a kind of psychological defence mechanism, invents a whole system of right and wrong which declares the master's pride, arrogance, and greed to be bad and the slaves' weakness, humility, and self-denial to be good. It is simply a form of sour grapes. You can't have the good things of life, so you declare them bad. So what is good (power, goods, fame) is in fact bad and what is bad (weakness, poverty, humility) is in fact good. So Jesus, as the ultimate "Man of resentment" invents a new morality, Christianity becomes the religion of slaves, and the rest is history. But this does not mean that Christians give up on the nice things that the master enjoys it is just that they project them into an afterlife, where the tables will be turned, and the slaves will become masters.

Scheler rejects Nietzsche's theory of the relationship between Christianity and resentment and also disagrees that it is exclusively a trait of slave mentality, demonstrating that everyone has it at some stage in their lives. However he recognizes Nietzsche's insight about the propensity for resentment to reinvent reality, though he does not use those words. "Ressentiment brings about its most important achievement" he says, "when it determines a whole 'morality' perverting the rules of preference until what was is 'evil' appears to be 'good'" (1972:28). He was a convert to Christianity from Judaism and argued that Nietzsche missed the entire *raison d'être* of the Christian message. Although he is not a theologian his dismantling of Nietzsche's interpretation of Christianity as a religion based on resentment and his exposition of the radical nature of Christian love is profound. Nevertheless he recognizes Nietzsche's basic thesis of the potent psycho-social effects of resentment and builds on it to develop a most brilliant phenomenological analysis of what it is and how and works.



Elizabeth Morrelli offers a composite definition that recollects some of the most important aspects of Nietzsche and Scheler's analysis of the phenomenon.

*Ressentiment* is a state of repressed feeling and desire which becomes generative of values. The condition of resentment is complex both in its internal structure and in its relations to various dimensions of human existence. While it infects the heart of the individual, it is rooted in our relatedness with others. On the one hand, *ressentiment* is a dark, personal secret, which most of us would never reveal to others even if we could acknowledge it ourselves. On the other hand, *ressentiment* has an undeniably public face. It can be creative of social practices, mores, and fashions; of scholarly attitudes, academic policies, educational initiatives; of political ideologies, institutions, and revolutions; of forms of religiosity and ascetic practices. (1998:80)

While this definition highlights its existential origins and uses the word “infect” which has negative connotations, and “dark secret” which is suggestive of something malevolent, she also strongly emphasizes its relatedness with others, which resonates with Hegel's theory of mutual recognition, and the way it creatively manifests itself in a multiplicity of ways across the social spectrum. In the Hegelian scenario, recognition comes only at the end of a life and death struggle which is energized by the resentment that comes out of dehumanization and contempt. “I bear my grudge” said holocaust survivor Jean Amery, “as a matter of personal salvation” (1980: Kindle location 80). Didier Fassin (2013) has argued for the moral appropriateness, indeed imperative, of resentment as a justifiable response to gross and dehumanizing injustices that have been perpetrated in a systematic way over a long period of time and cites Amery's resentment toward the holocaust and Mbeki's resentment toward apartheid as cases in point. There might, however, be potentially disastrous consequences along the way, as I will argue below. On the other hand, as I will also argue, there might be very creative consequences as well. I am concerned specifically with resentment's relation to racism as non-recognition and how this has epistemological consequences within the South African context. So what Nietzsche calls the “falsification of the tablets of value”, and Scheler calls “reinterpretation”, or “transvaluation”, I have called the “reinvention of

truth”. Although this term is suggestive of something nefarious, as in lying, this is not how I am using it. I am trying to capture the idea that the dehumanization caused by racism leads, justifiably, to resentment which has, by definition, an epistemological dimension which could have profound consequences for our society.

Which brings me to the third phase of the racism/resentment dialectic – the reinvention of truth.

### **The reinvention of truth**

I interpret the notion of the reinvention of truth in three ways. Firstly resentment can create a psychological condition with the propensity to anticipate and avoid nihilation and thus reinvents truth as a defence mechanism against this; secondly it can alter the rules of right and wrong in order, in Scheler’s words, to “determine a whole ‘morality’, perverting the rules of preference until what was ‘evil’ appears to be ‘good’”; and thirdly it can make a deliberate decision to reformulate truth on the basis of the recognition of the difference between suppressed and dominant epistemologies in the interests of equality and justice. I wish briefly to unpack these three alternatives on the understanding that the boundaries between them are not always fixed.

While postmodernity has provided an epistemological climate based on the notion that truth is not absolute but relative resentment formulates truth on the basis specifically of the nature of the relationship between the resentful and the resented. In other words, resentment is relational and the nature of the relationship determines the nature and extent of the truth that is to be reinvented. Let us not forget that deep, repressed emotions are at play here – so deep that we are often not even aware of their existence within ourselves in the first place and in any case, it might have become detached from the original object of resentment and has taken on a life of its own. The emotions we are talking about are anguish, anger, revenge, bitterness, rancour, envy, and the like. The more you repress these feelings the more justifiable they appear. The more justifiable they become the more a new value system builds up around them and the more rational this system appears. Even if the original cause of resentment disappears

the value system remains, and the rancour remains. The level of intensity of these emotions will determine the level of the extent one is prepared to go to reinvent the truth. I would like to mention examples of how these are playing out in our present situation.

So to my first thesis which is that the epistemological bias that accompanies resentment will always, consciously, or unconsciously, be in the opposite direction from one which is seen to devalue the dignity of the person who bears the resentment. This is a major principle governing resentment's proclivity towards the reinvention of truth. The defensive fire wall that is erected in the interests of protection against the assault on the dignity of the human being will resist, like the same poles of a magnet resist each other, any ideas that reinforce the notion that a person is less than a human being. This resistance will be a matter of life and death. And because the postcolonial and post-apartheid situations are so fraught with resentment, they provide rich breeding grounds for this particular form of reinvention. Classic examples of this are to be found in two of the best-known Africans on the continent – Wangaari Mathai and Thabo Mbeki. How is it that a Nobel laureate with a PhD in biology and an urbane President educated in the west both blame the west for the AIDS pandemic? The answer is simple; they reject the accepted scientific account that AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease because in their minds it fed into the dehumanizing image of the black savage that is deeply embedded in the colonial and apartheid consciousness and anything that reinforced that image was unacceptable. Mandisa Mbali, using Megan Vaughan's work, has argued that at the heart of Mbeki's denialism is the fact that he is "fundamentally constrained by the ghosts of apartheid and colonial discourse around Africans, medicine and disease" (2002:8). When he was president almost every time Mbeki opened his mouth about the orthodox understanding of the cause of the pandemic, that is that it is a sexually transmitted disease, he could not help himself from raising the spectre of this image.

Thus does it happen that others who consider themselves our leaders take to the streets carrying their placards, to demand that because we are germ carriers, and human beings of a lower order that cannot subject their passions to reason, we must perforce adopt strange opinions, to save a depraved and diseased people from perishing from self-inflicted disease ... Convinced that we are but natural-

born, promiscuous carriers of germs, unique in the world, they proclaim that our continent is doomed to an inevitable mortal end because of our unconquerable devotion to the sin of lust (Mail and Guardian 2001).

The image of the disease ridden, depraved and promiscuous African savage made its appearance in those days in the so-called Castro-Hlongwane document widely believed to be where Mbeki was getting ideas for the kind of language he was using. In it we find these words:

Yes, we are sex crazy! Yes, we are diseased! Yes, we spread the deadly HI virus through our uncontrolled heterosexual sex! In this regard we are different from the US and from Western Europe. Yes, we, the men, abuse women and the girl-child with gay abandon! Yes, among us rape is endemic because of our culture! Yes, we do believe that sleeping with young virgins will cure us of AIDS. Yes, as a result of all this we are threatened with destruction by the pandemic! Yes, what we need, and cannot afford because we are poor, are condoms and anti-retroviral drugs! Help! (Quoted in Balcomb 2006:106)

The anguish behind this sarcastic hyperbole resonates startlingly with Fanon's descent into the "veritable hell" of the "zone of nonbeing". Mbeki made the astonishing decision to reject the scientific evidence of the Aids pandemic because he recognized in it an image that the west had of himself and others like him that was too painful to entertain. The rest, as they say, is history.

There is one other example of pain avoidance at the epistemological level that needs to be mentioned – evolutionary theory.

Evolutionary theory came to Africa at a time when Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism which taught that some races were more advanced than others was commonly held. No prizes for guessing who was the most advanced and who was the most primitive. In Francophone Africa, the name given to Africans who were educated in the western system was "evolue", literally those who had evolved. It has been argued that the concept of race was non-existent prior to the period of European and American imperialism. It is a social construct established in order to justify the necessary subordination of colonized peoples (Pressman 2017). This remains deeply embedded in

the consciousness of blacks, given to them by whites, from where painful images elicit anger and anguish whenever the memory of their humiliation is ignited.<sup>5</sup> Evolution is another classic example of how a widely accepted scientific theory has been perverted to justify racism then simply scrapped altogether by those on the receiving end of the perverted version. Once again it is a choice between denial or annihilation.

The second way the invention of truth works itself into our society revolves around the principle that resentment “brings about its most important achievement when it determines a whole ‘morality’, perverting the rules of preference until what is ‘evil’ appears to be ‘good’” (Scheler 1972:28) There are three particular aspects to this remarkable assertion of Scheler’s that demand attention. Firstly it underscores the propensity, suggested earlier, for resentment to take on a consciousness of its own, separate, almost, from the person who bears it. It becomes a subject, and not merely a phenomenon. Secondly that it has the power to reinvent the rules that determine what is right and wrong in a society so that these are aligned with the particular preferences of the “man of resentment”. And thirdly that this constitutes some sort of telos, end goal, or what Scheler calls an “achievement” of resentment. It creates, in other words, its own moral universe. The language used to describe this universe is that of “previously disadvantaged” and “radical economic transformation”. The principles that determine it are the economic and political circumstances that pertained prior to liberation. With political empowerment comes the opportunity to rectify historical economic imbalance and the requisite moral justification that accompanies this. There needs to be a transferral of goods from the “previously advantaged” to the “previously disadvantaged”. Under a moral regime that is driven by resentment the concept of corruption is brought into question, a sense of entitlement begins to prevail, and the transferal of goods from the previously advantaged to the previously disadvantaged by whatever means necessary becomes justifiable.

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5 An example of this is when a clothing manufacturer with an advert of a young black boy wearing a T shirt with the words “coolest monkey in town” had to withdraw the advert and apologize for it when a furore was created and demonstrations were held at its stores nationally, led by the EFF. The New York Times carried the story (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/08/business/hm-monkey.html>).

The implication of Scheler's principle here is that the proclivity to reinvent truth on an economic level begins with its reinvention on the moral level. To the extent that morality is fundamental, and not just tangential, to legality then there always remains the possibility, should resentment gain access via human agency, into the institutions of law itself, that not just politics and the economy become infected with resentment, but the judiciary itself. That the law is open to interpretation and that it is part of the brief of lawyers to "bend" it in accordance with the interests of their clients is one thing, that the ultimate arbiters of the law, the judiciary itself, becomes influenced by resentment is another altogether. And there are clear signs in this country that there is a huge struggle going on at this level with more and more cases being taken to court as a result of the enormous mistrust that exists throughout our society and the need for an absolutely impartial, demographically representative judiciary.

Another arena which ideally lends itself to the reinvention of truth is academia. Morelli's definition specifically identifies the arenas in which resentment exercises its creative potential and these include scholarly attitudes, academic policies, and educational initiatives. For centuries the academy has been dominated by white males with a Eurocentric orientation, indeed one could argue that the academy is itself an invention of the white male. This has inevitably, some would argue necessarily, produced resentment which has been generative of some of the most creative and brilliant epistemological challenges to white male, western, hegemony, feminism being one of the most obvious. The subaltern epistemological revolution is at the heart of the decolonial project that attempts to challenge, and if necessary, turn on its head, the entire edifice on which western epistemology is built. This challenge departs from the premise that western epistemology is based on the conviction that the Cartesian system on which the western paradigm is based is fundamentally flawed and needs to be replaced by a more holistic understanding of reality that is inclusive of a whole spectrum of factors, including race, class, gender, and culture. But the challenge has come in various forms, from the fundamentalist which is intent on an entire rejection of the western colonial paradigm to a more nuanced perspective which recognizes that such an approach is impossible because it is premised on the possibility of disentangling the complex hybrid that is the consequence of the collision of forces that

have emerged from the North/South encounter. They advocate a “world system” approach that recognizes a “heterarchy” as opposed to “hierarchy” of forces and the necessity of a more nuanced approach to dealing with the epistemological challenges of decolonization (Grosfoguel 2011). Grosfoguel contends that the postcolonial approach to decolonization focuses on the humanities, for example literature and cultural studies, while the world system approach includes the social sciences of anthropology, economics, and political studies. One can only assume that calls for the decolonization of the curriculum at tertiary level in South Africa will include these insights in the debate around the issue.

### **Towards a theology of recognition – some concluding remarks**

This essay has attempted to “connect the dots” between racism, resentment, and the reinvention of truth within the South African context. Racism has been at the heart of South Africa’s problems ever since whites arrived in the southern tip of Africa. While its structural expression in the form of apartheid is no longer on the statute books it continues to be at the nexus of our lives, politically, economically, and existentially. This essay has attempted to demonstrate that racism is to do with non-recognition and that because recognition is the means through which humans gain consciousness of themselves as intersubjective beings, such non-recognition can have dire psycho-social consequences because of the resentment that arises out of this. Resentment, however, can manifest itself on an epistemological and structural level that can be positive and necessary.

Recognition is so fundamental to the entire dialectic that it needs itself to be further unpacked, though space does not allow this here. Suffice to say if recognition is not given it will be taken, violently if necessary. Fanon’s departure point concerning recognition is that it is never given without a struggle. This is in line, of course, with Hegel’s theory that it involves a life and death struggle. His response to the question of how one regains one’s humanity in the face of its annihilation is as famous as it is controversial. “Man (sic) is human”, he says, “only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him” (Fanon 1967:191). The implication of this is that the extent to which one can impose one’s existence on another is the measure of one’s humanity.

So if the misrecognition or the non-recognition of your Self by an Other is intolerable then you need to make it physically intolerable for the Other until he or she recognizes you correctly. This assertion of Fanon's highlights the nexus between recognition, self-consciousness, humanization, and life and death struggle. It is one of his most controversial statements because it suggests that one regains one's humanity through violence. He has been both criticized and defended on this issue. Criticized for focussing too strongly on the nihilistic dimension of the Hegelian dialectic and not enough on the intersubjective and defended by those who assert that his contention that recognition only comes through the imposition of one's existence on the Other, violently if necessary, is historically accurate (Stewart 2018).

This contention, however, is actually not altogether accurate. The non-violent anti-colonial struggle against epistemological domination taking place in intellectual circles in the south mentioned above is a case in point. And feminism is a classic case of how a subaltern non-violent revolution energized and directed by legitimate resentment can successfully challenge and even overturn hegemonic regimes of intellectual, and social dominance inherited from mindsets that are ensconced in institutions of higher learning and are reflected across the spectrum of structures in ordinary society.

Feminism provides us with a model of strategic struggle against domination at every level of society, beginning with the sources of the production of knowledge. And feminist theology is key to this struggle. The importance of theology is brought into stark relief by the notion that the Cartesian system assumes the God-like stature of the Cartesian Cogito in the western episteme. To put it another way, Cartesianism recognizes, as Enrique Dusserl argued, only one form of epistemology, that of the subject ("I am"), the master, the conquistador. Rene Descartes the founder of Modern Western Philosophy, says Ramon Grosfuguel,

[I]naugurates a new moment in the history of Western thought. He replaces God, as the foundation of knowledge in the Theo-politics of knowledge of the European Middle Ages, with (Western) Man as the foundation of knowledge in European Modern times. All the attributes of God are now extrapolated to (Western) Man. Universal



Truth beyond time and space privileges access to the laws of the Universe, and the capacity to produce scientific knowledge and theory is now placed in the mind of Western Man. (2011:7)

Feminist theology calls this bluff and demands equal recognition of the female gender, starting with the deity itself (“She is”). What proceeds from here is Hegel’s age-old struggle “to the death” with the resultant *quid pro quo* of intersubjectivity, where the female self gets to the point of knowing that she is being recognized by the Other and experiences the effects of this recognition in the affirmation of her dignity and humanity. The point here is that this struggle “to the death” has taken place non-violently over the past fifty years or so in western society and is having an effect globally.

A theological question that emerges from this discussion is whether the experience of recognition by God is the ultimate form of the experience of recognition by an Other, and prepares the way for recognition of the self in others in the penultimate realm. The biblical story of Jacob wrestling with God makes a rather appropriate theological departure point for this possibility (Gen 32:22f). Jacob is desperately concerned about the pending meeting with his brother Esau, who has a huge grudge against him because of his trickery (Gen 27:41). He wrestles all night with a being who turns out to be God, he is overcome but demands recognition, gets it, and is known from that time forth as Israel, the man who has striven for, and received, recognition by God. This was the struggle also of Saul of Tarsus who, after his Damascus Road experience, becomes the apostle Paul, as it was the struggle of Augustine who claimed that he could find no peace with himself until he found peace with God. But it was the struggle for assurance of salvation by a certain obscure monk by the name of Martin Luther that, according to Francis Fukuyama, led to one of the most significant revolutions in history. Fukuyama links Luther’s struggle against the Catholic Church in his search for assurance of salvation with the modern self’s struggle for recognition over against the wider society’s tendency to deny it. When he found recognition from God, he went to war with the Catholic Church which, at the time, held complete sway over the whole of society. His insistence that it was only and entirely his faith in the finished work of Christ that could save him effectively repudiated the entire magisterium of the Catholic Church. “In one stroke”, says Fukuyama, “he undercut the *raison d’être* of the Catholic Church”. He had started a fire that could not be put out, that

swept through the entire society, reverberated through history, and paved the way for the modern notion of the will of the individual over against the will of the society. It brought about, according to Fukuyama “the decline of Rome as the Universal Church, the rise of alternative churches, and a whole series of social changes in which the individual believer was prioritized over prevailing social structures” (2018:27).

Finally, in his rejection of Nietzsche’s portrayal of the Christian ethic of love as based on resentment Max Scheler (1972) makes a startling comparison between the Greek and Christian understandings of love. Nietzsche’s mistake, says Scheler, is that he bases his understanding of love on the former and not on the latter.<sup>6</sup> The Greek notion of love is based on the notion of a perfect deity, the Unmoved Mover, towards which everyone strives in the race toward perfection. The movement of this kind of love is always upward, from the imperfect towards the perfect, the weak towards the strong, the ugly towards the beautiful, the lesser towards the greater, the small towards the great. It is a love that is based on the principle of achievement, excellence, and effort. No wonder, then, that resentment always lurks in the hearts of those who cannot achieve such heights. Christian love, on the other hand, is based on a complete reversal of the direction of movement of love’s affection. It is from the higher to the lower, the greater to the lesser, the powerful to the powerless, the thing that has to the thing that does not have. The plenitude of God’s love means that its trajectory is always outward towards God’s creation in the giving of life, strength, sustenance, and sympathy. It is inspired not by power but by pathos. It survives not by taking but by giving. According to Scheler there is no possibility of resentment in such an understanding of love because it takes away the root causes of resentment. There can be no envy when the only desire that exists is for the fulfilment of the Other and not the Self, where plenitude is based not on receiving but on giving, where success is not measured in gaining but in giving. This is the essential paradox that is at the heart of the Christian faith and that is continually overlooked or misunderstood.

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6 The influence of Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy, which is determined by the notion of the will to power, clearly resonates throughout Nietzsche’s work and is probably responsible for this emphasis.

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