



Guyana's Ethnic Security Dilemma: Positing an Alternative Reading

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Introduction

The ethno-political problem currently affecting Guyana has occupied the attention of many Guyanese. The pre-occupation with this problem results from the fact that after forty six years of independence, Guyana is, by and large, stuck at the same place in terms of its political and racial engagement. The reality of race-based politics has become so ingrained in our collective psyche that every aspect of our social interaction is becoming increasingly defined and colored by our political/racial polemic. My occupation with the problem, however, goes a little further. I am interested in how our political/racial polemic serves to buttress regimes that are guilty of numerous totalitarian excesses; how the cleavage in our ethnic interaction produces negative externalities that affect the country as a whole; and how the purported fear of each other, base on fictitious premises, is creating a real monster right before our eyes. To assist me in exploring this tragi-comic situation, I will draw upon the resources of two of our Guyanese thinkers, viz., Wilson Harris and Ravi Dev, along with Slovenian Philosopher, Slavoj Zizek.

Ethnic Security Dilemma – Ravi Dev

Ravi Dev, among other Guyanese thinkers, has posited an Ethnic Security Dilemma (ESD) as a means of explaining the political behavior of Guyanese political actors. According to this postulate, Guyanese of the two major race groups, namely Africans and Indians, vote for the parties which they think would, or is more

inclined to, confront and resolve their respective (ESD). The African Security Dilemma (ASD) has to do with the numerical dominance of Indians. In a political structure that prioritizes majoritarian democracy, Africans can be locked out of political power in perpetuity (Dev 2008: 113). On the other hand, the Indian Security Dilemma (ISD) has to do with the dominance of Africans in the Armed Forces. In the event of ethnic strife, Africans have the upper hand based on their control of the arms and ammunition in the country. Grounded on these 'real' situations, and unfortunate historical experiences, Africans and Indians vote to this day in a way that is perceived as prioritizing 'race', but which Dev, et al, argue is determined by their respective security dilemmas.

A Different Reading of Reality –Wilson Harris

Wilson Harris, the Guyanese writer and literary critic, of course, pursued a radically different reading of reality. He was not interested in the simple explanation and justification of the status quo; he was interested in how the reality (African dominated armed forces and bureaucracy, Indian numerical (political) and economic dominance) could result in the minting of the many bizarre currencies of the imagination that are experienced in Guyanese history; he was interested in why out of the infinite number of possible ways to deal with, confront or neutralize these (real) imbalances, Guyanese choose the one possibility that result in a crudely political and racially divided society. And, it is in exploring this question that Wilson Harris, the Guyanese writer and literary critic, converges with the Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic, Slavoj Zizek while at the same time exposing us to creatively new approaches to the reading of reality.

ESD results in a Stalled Dialectic

Harris introduces the concept of the 'backward-flowing stream of consciousness'. Existing in this state of consciousness, Guyanese, by and large, allow the past or past experiences to gain a type of militant occupancy over their current liveliness, a militancy which should otherwise be reserved for the future or present.

The future and present which are usually pregnant with limitless possibilities have been, in Guyana's case, static. This reveals a comic inversion of reality and progress in the Guyanese political and ethnic engagement. Our future takes the place of our past while our past assumes the role of our future. What is being witnessed in Guyana is not even a negative dialectic in Adorno's or Harris' sense whereby there is a progressive negation of the totalizing structures which come with the Marxian and Hegelian dialectics. On the contrary, it is a stalled dialectics in which the synthesis is already made impossible by the thesis and antithesis. This stalled dialectics has been referred to by someone (Walter Benjamin I think) as 'dialectics at a standstill' - dialectic, in that, what is being witnessed are persons of the same racial group but of various classes and religions overcoming their religious and class differences in order to achieve a unity and identity which Harris refers to as 'pigmented identity' (an identity based on skin color and hair texture); stalled because the dialectical positing of unity in diversity fails to move beyond skin color and hair texture. Guyanese are stuck in history as prisoners of history whereby history forecloses any possibility of freedom. So instead of achieving 'the future in the present' in C.L.R. James' sense, Guyanese are stuck with the past in the present. This backward-flowing stream of consciousness and prisoner-of-history psyche reveal a lot about the psychic states of Guyanese. It is only a pathological psychic condition which would allow the subjection of a living being to a hardened social practice that goes against his/her own well-being.

This psychic condition is what Harris referred to as a 'lust for symmetry'. This lust is highlighted rather clearly by the Christian existentialist Kierkegaard in his 'The Sickness unto Death'. According to Kierkegaard, the self is made up of the synthesis of finitude and infinitude. The development of the self therefore 'must accordingly consist in infinitely coming away from oneself [that is one's finite self]...and in infinitely coming back to oneself in the finitization' (1989: 69). Despair occurs whenever there is a short-circuit in this process, that is to say, whenever there is a failure to check the infinitizing tendency of the self or to break out of the confining and constraining tendency. Zizek, in his 'The Ticklish Subject' gives a clear explanation of the Kierkegaardian despair

(Harrisian lust for symmetry). According to Zizek, '...Kierkegaard inverted the standard despair of the individual who is split between the certainty that death is the end...and the unquenchable desire to believe that death is not the last thing...Kierkegaard's sickness unto death involves the opposite paradox of the subject who knows that death is not the end....but cannot face the exorbitant demands of this fact' (1999: 292-293). Whereas for Kierkegaard, it is not death but life which becomes the ultimate horror for modern man for Harris it is not confinement but freedom which becomes the ultimate horror for the post-independence West Indian man. The Guyanese personality exemplifies this fear of freedom in its ideal. This fear of freedom is what buttresses totalitarian and authoritarian regimes.

The Art of Memory and the Re-membering of History

This prioritizing of history and historical experience lies at the heart of the conflict between Caribbean poeticism and historicism. For Harris, a 'historical stasis...afflicts the West Indian sensibility'. (Harris: 156). This historical stasis results from the prioritizing of history which according to Harris is equated with prioritizing of the dead (past acts that have lost their spontaneity) above the living (current acts of the spontaneous and creative imagination): the pitting of historical fact and experience against the currency of the radical and creative imagination. It is not even the prioritizing of history as such but only of one view or perspective of history, which in other words amount to giving permanent and totalitarian status to an historical account which could only be temporary and tentative. Against this tendency, Harris urges us to engage in the profound art of memory, to engage in various creative readings of reality and history. This art of memory entails not merely remembering but re-membering history, which entails first dismembering then reconstructing the *disjecta membra* of history. If one moves from Harris' metaphysics of history to history proper, one finds noteworthy attempts at applying Harris' Art of Memory to history. Two such attempts are Walter Rodney's 'A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881 -1905' and C.L.R. James' 'Black Jacobins'. Commenting in a foreword to Rodney's book, George Lamming stated that for Rodney '...history was a way of ordering [emphasis mine] knowledge which could become as active part of the consciousness of an uncertified mass of ordinary people and which could be used by all as an instrument of social change.' The phrase 'ordering knowledge' speaks both to the intentionality of the thinking

subject and the selective nature of history. It is this intentionality and agency of the thinking subject that Harris emphasizes in all his work. The following excerpt by Sharrad commenting on the task of the artist of memory is very instructive.

"He shuffles his notes in order to awaken memory and in the process reorders [emphasis mine] perceptions of the past, creating new possibilities for understanding the complex interrelationship of innocence and guilt via the breakdown of tyrannical biases of stratified social attitudes and linear documentary history" (Sharrad: 103).

With this ordering and reordering of perceptions of the past, Walter Rodney becomes the quintessential artist of memory. The main purpose of his book was to review history in order to bring to life those periods in our history in which both Africans and Indians were engaged in unified struggles against the system of oppression. 'Working people of African and Indian ancestry in Guyana have had a history of active struggle which it has been our habit to omit or underestimate in political discourse about the past' (qtd. In Rodney: xix). Walter Rodney, in a different reading of reality searched for those moments in the past in which the various races break down the racial barriers and engaged in acts of collective liberation. For him what we need more than the bland recollection of the unfortunate occurrences of the past is a profound confession of the selective effacing of the eruption of consciousness which is a necessary condition for a radical counter-history.

Ideological Substructure of Political Actions – Slavoj Zizek

Ravi Dev's ESD, while a sociologically valid construct, made the error of totally ignoring the ideological underpinnings of the political behavior of the two major races in Guyana by attempting to suggest that their political behavior is purely situational. For him there is no ideological undercurrents fueling the actions of Africans and Indians in Guyana – they merely react to pressing and threatening politico-economic realities. Dev's thinking is a classic manifestation of post-modern thinking which attempts to suggest that we are in post-ideological times. By doing so, Dev effectively separates political belief from political action and behavior. Political action, according to his theory, is not guided by inherited ideologies but by current political situation. To what extent is Dev's

conceptualization of the political culture of Guyanese accurate? This is where Slavoj Žižek might be of some value.

According to Žižek, political action is always driven by political belief. But, while in the past it was very easy to identify those beliefs because persons avowedly held on to those beliefs, in what is called the post-ideological age there is a great deal of denial and distancing from beliefs and ideologies. In the past, persons had no qualms about saying that they believe Africans are inferior or that Indians are coolies, or about subscribing to Marxism, or even Nazism. Paradoxically, what has happened in the age of tolerance and multiculturalism is not what would be logically expected, that is, 'I hold this view but I am still tolerant of those who do not share it'. What has happened in fact is that the prevailing attitude under multiculturalism is 'I cannot profess to hold this view because it would appear as being intolerant of another's view'. Because of the rule of this arch-ideology of tolerance, there is a reluctance to admittedly hold on to any belief which could be interpreted as promoting intolerance. This does not mean, however, that we do not, in spite of this dominant ideology of tolerance and multiculturalism, hold on to, albeit disavowedly, parochial, exclusive, ethnocentric, sexist and religious fundamentalist ideologies. We still do, but we do so quietly. This is what led Sarah Ahmed to remark that "multiculturalism is a fantasy which conceals forms of racism, violence and inequality" (qtd. In Žižek 2009). It deals with racist, sexist, and other such separatist ideologies in very superficial ways. For example, we are expected to be politically correct when addressing others. We can no longer refer to Africans as 'black dogs' or Indians as 'coolie crab dogs' because that would inspire the utmost disapprobation from 'civil' society. We can, however, be totally oblivious to the killing, suffering and oppression of the other. Not only can we be oblivious to it but we can also literally contribute to it, if we do so in a 'politically correct' manner.

Outsourcing of Ideology – The Big Other

Another way, according to Zizek, ideology plays out in our political behavior is by means of the Big Other. The Big Other is a technical term borrowed by Zizek from Lacanian psychoanalysis. According to the thesis of the Big Other, subjects need not directly subscribe to a particular political ideology; they can do so by means of their political representatives. In this way, their political ideology is proxied by another. This reduces the burden of knowing or being aware of the master signifiers current in the ideology while at the same time also reducing any kind of responsibility. Both the symbolic meaning and responsibility are outsourced to what is called the 'Big Other'. In our own Guyanese case, the 'Big Other' can be manifested in the personages of our politicians, priests, political parties or ancestors. Let's take the exhortation by former President Bharrat Jagdeo in the election campaign of 2011 as a means of clarifying the above. Jagdeo exhorted a cross-section of the Guyanese community to 'know your history'. The call by Jagdeo was not necessarily to study Guyanese history which would entail (re-)reading history from various viewpoints. On the contrary, it was a call to know what your ancestors or politicians say about history. In that case, your politicians or ancestors become your big other to whom you have outsourced the burden and responsibility of knowing history (the former Leader of the Opposition, Robert Corbin, was quick to urge his audience, after he gave them his version of history at campaign meetings, not to get overwhelmed by amnesia). The security of conscience offered by this outsourcing of ideology is made evident by the court case between Fredrick Kissoon and Bharrat Jagdeo in 2012. The case has so far revealed that the major bureaucratic and Government positions were disproportionately held by Indians, no Africans held Ambassadorial positions and that only 0.5 % of all the state resources that were privatized went to Africans. Because of the Big Other thesis, Indians who supported the PPP/C regime with their votes can rest with a free conscience because while they vote the party in, they were not directly responsible for the selection process that determines who become Ministers and Ambassadors. In a farcical manner of course, this is a wonderful manifestation of Kantian morality. Kant is the

philosopher who posited the categorical imperative. What he means is that moral laws are so absolutely imperative that if a killer breaks into your home with the intent to kill your wife (husband) and children and insist that you tell him where they are hiding you are obligated to tell him the truth. When you tell him the 'truth' you have discharged the entirety of your moral obligation. If the killer finds your family and kills them, he is the one, not you, who have to bear the entirety of the moral burden for his act: you have totally exculpated yourself from any moral responsibility by being truthful. While the Kantian morality prioritizes the moral law, existential morality prioritizes freedom and responsibility. For the existentialist, both concepts, freedom and responsibility, exist in a kind of Kantian synthesis – freedom is already presupposed by responsibility and vice versa. And because one is always absolutely free in an existentialist sense, one is also absolutely responsible. So there is no way that Indians in Guyana, from which the PPP/C obtains its votes, can be totally exculpated from the responsibility for the ideological racism of the PPP/C. Existentialist morality would also place no less a responsibility on Africans, Amerindians and other ethnic groups, because although they may not have voted for the PPP/C, they, by and large, legitimize the PPP/C's racism by choosing to fight only by means of ballot which is another way of conscience cleansing - 'I did my part by voting against the PPP/C, therefore I have fulfilled the entirety of my moral responsibility'.

This reading of reality, some might argue, places too much burden on the masses without understanding the structural constraints that influence their action. As a way of pandering to the masses, a structural reading of reality is preferable. This structural reading of reality is precisely the reading of reality that strips individuals of their humanity, subjectivity and agency and reduces them to objects rather than subjects of history. It is also a reading of reality that seems to be engendering 'collective psychopathy' among the masses. Psychopathy is a condition in which victims become oblivious to the personal responsibility of their acts and who try to place the blame on every other thing or person except themselves.

Ideology as a Result without its Sustaining Cause

Another characteristic of ideology outlined by Zizek has to do with its truth content or lack thereof. Ideology carries out a social function quite unrelated to the truth it professes to represent. And, in carrying out this function, its professed truth need not reflect the political or other reality. For example, Dev's ESD by his own admission has become baseless on both sides of the ethnic divide. He openly admits that Africans need not fear Indian numerical supremacy because Indians as an absolute numerical majority is a thing of the past. On the other hand, he inadvertently I suppose, admitted that approximately 30 years after the Indian community voted for the PPP/C to address its ESD, Indians are still faced with an African-dominated Armed Forces to the extent that when Indians protest the Police Force, by command, are prepared to shoot to kill (according to Ravi Dev). This occurs in a political environment in which it is not only PPP/C and PNC/R competing politically which would have clearly explained the political behavior of both groups; but in which the WPA, AFC, JFAP and even ROAR whose programs were intended to radically address the ESD, were available alternatives. With these competing facts, one can clearly see that it is not the fact to which the ESD purports that influences the political behavior of Guyanese because those facts simply do not exist. Guyanese, by and large, are motivated by politico-racial ideologies the truth content of which has long since been invalidated. These ideologies have become what Wilson Harris refers to as 'Apparition of the dead among the living'; they do not only direct the life of the living but also weigh heavily and overbearingly upon our present and future. This mindless attachment to these substance-less insecurities reveal something more fundamental in the human psyche, for which a purely structural argument or analysis might be totally inefficient. This is why Wilson Harris' exploration of the West Indian psyche might be of significantly more value than Dev's ESD.

To add further clarification to this disconnect between the social reality and social ideology of both Africans and Indians, a brief exploration of Sylvia Wynter's sociology of knowledge or social

epistemology might be useful. This reading of Wynter is adopted and adapted from Paget Henry.

In response to the epistemological question "what are the processes through which signs and symbols represent and shape our perception of reality?" Wynter's response is that this process involves indirect representation by which the signs and symbols and their relation to reality always take place in a particular discursive framework which is shaped by the concepts, symbols and rules of statement formation which constitute it. These elements which constitute the discursive framework are in turn shaped by prevailing social and natural imperatives. It is usual, however, for the discursive framework to take on a life of its own by outliving its social imperative. The time between which the social imperative becomes null and the new social imperative give rise to a new discursive framework, I hereby refer to as an epistemic gap. It is my position that we are currently within this epistemic gap. The discursive framework provided by the ESD becomes then a result without its sustaining cause. The Wynterian response to this self-perpetuating framework would be to expose the baseless nature of the founding categories of this transcendentalised discursive framework. Dev stopped half way of this revolutionary project of decentering the founding categories of the ESD framework by seeming to be willing only to expose the emptiness of the ASD while maintaining the validity of the ISD. Dev needs to take the next step forward.

Redemption via Abjection

Furthermore, while the behavior determined by the ESD fails to bring about its intended result, that is, the security of the race, it has resulted, nevertheless, not in the security of one race but the subordination of all races under a lumpenbourgeoisie. In spite of about 30 years of PPP rule (counting also the period in the 50's and 60's) Africans still dominate the Armed Forces and the public sector. On the other hand, in spite of, in fact as a result of, 28 years of PNC rule, the numerical dominance of Indians have been given more 'teeth' as a result of an executive presidency and the inability of parties to form coalitions after an election: two constitutional changes brought about by the PNC. In an interesting paradox, it is the PNC that gave more weight to the numerical dominance of the

Indians quite in contrast to the fear of its own constituency. This same paradox is seen on the side of the PPP/C which against the wishes its own constituency refuses for decades to reform and professionalize the Guyana Police Force.

This being the reality -Africans and Indians continue to vote for parties which worsen their respective ESD - what if the familiar way of reading the political situation in Guyana is erroneous; what if it is not Africans and Indians who are victims of the political machination of the PNC/R and the PPP/C respectively but quite the opposite. What if both the PNC/R and PPP/C correspond to primordially dark sentiments in both races which desire the oppression and marginalization of the other. What if with the political machination of the two parties, Africans and Indians become victims of exactly what they secretly wish for the other. The PNC/R and PPP/C are only able to swindle us because within our own unconscious (Jungian instincts) there is a desire to swindle the other. Ervin Goffman highlighted this paradox in his 'Frame Analysis' and Slavoj Zizek in his 'The Ticklish Subject'. In Goffman's anecdote, in certain dark streets in America, hustlers with stolen items to sell were wont to run out of dark spots anxiously confronting innocent passersby. The hustler would give the passerby the impression that he is selling her/him a watch (or some other item) at half the market price. Thinking that s/he is getting a good deal on the stolen item, the passerby falls for the bait only to realize later that the price s/he paid was the actual market price. Another example drawn from local experience with what we call 'junkies' would further add clarity. The junkie goes into a neighbourhood yard cuts out a flower plant by the stem and pushes it in a milk tin with mud. Knowing that the plant will soon wither, the junkie endeavours to sell it immediately. He, therefore, approaches someone in the neighbourhood offering the plant at a ridiculously low price. Thinking that it is a good deal, someone in the neighbourhood buys the plant only to see it wither in less than a day. In both cases the swindler only succeeded because he appealed to something abject within the victims. That abjectness is the need to benefit at the loss of another. It is through this need that we ourselves become swindled by our political parties and leaders. Is it not that what

happens, if Ravi Dev is right, when we vote according to our own ESD? Do we not desire our dilemma to be resolved at the expense of the other group's dilemma?

Strange as it may sound, it is by means of such abject desires that redemption (individual, group, national) is possible. This redemption by means of abjection was expounded upon by Ethel A. Powell who in her Master's thesis explored the theme of redemption through abjection in the works of Wilson Harris, Julia Kristeva, et al. Powell concluded that for both Harris and Kristeva, redemption involves coming to grips with one's own abjectness. Kristeva defines abjectness as '...the raw crudity about humans such as...murderous impulses, horrifying thoughts and deeds...in short the abject is what we as humans are often about but we are loathe to admit...' (qtd. In Powell 2005). It is only by recognizing in ourselves what we fear in the other that we realize that the monstrous, abject Other is not necessarily outside but inside ourselves. The Other is not, 'the intruder responsible for all the ills of the polis. Neither the apocalypse on the move nor the instant adversary to be eliminated for the sake of appeasing the group. Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself' (qtd. In Powell: 8).

It is by means of such profound self-confession that we are able first of all to redeem ourselves (group, race); secondly, to destroy the swindler (PNC/R, PPP/C) by destroying his opportunity to swindle us; thirdly, to realize that the other group or race is not a monster that needs to be marginalized or exterminated but fellow human beings the understanding of whom has been interrupted by the projection of our own fears on them, a process which has been exploited by the swindlers.

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