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The class contradictions of scholar activism

BY

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The radical politics of the professional middle classes—too often found full of rhetoric, but short on action—are explored in Leo Zeilig’s new novel, *The World Turned Upside Down*.

In writer and activist Leo Zeilig’s latest offering, *The World Turned Upside Down*, the richest one percent are wreaking havoc on both people and planet. Meanwhile, a social movement is out to stop them—one grizzly murder at a time. As the movement grows, it eventually engulfs the life of the story’s protagonist Bianca Ndour, a lesbian Senegalese professor raised in Nigeria and working in London. A thunderously irrepressible, unapologetic, and radical thinker, Bianca uses her public platform to speak out against the injustices inflicted on the many by the powerful few.

The result is a provocative and pulsating call to arms against capitalism’s grotesque excesses and inequalities, one centered around a violent revolutionary movement: the One Percent Murders.

Who is behind the murders? Can they be stopped? *Should* they be stopped? Bianca thinks not, and in her refusal to condemn the One Percent Murders, and her brazen, polemical style, her character drips with the spirit of political radical Frantz Fanon. When asked during a live television interview if she condones the murders, she fires back: “Do I approve of the violence? What violence? Whose? The violence that you have—both of you—spent wealthy years celebrating, writing nauseating books salivating over imperial tyranny and the never-ending murder spree of the rich ... in their wars. How many died in Iraq and Afghanistan?”

As Fanon wrote in his most celebrated work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, “Decolonization reeks of red hot cannonballs and bloody knives. For the last can be first only after a murderous and decisive confrontation between the two protagonists.” Bianca, too, sniffs the revolutionary potential behind the unfolding violence. “‘Rarely in history can you say this,’ she tells a small crowd, ‘but we are living through a moment of extraordinary reckoning. The rats, forced out of their lair, are panicking—watch where they run, get read for what they unleash on us’.”

Like Fanon, Bianca bursts with energy, ideology, and anger. “I had always believed in anger,” she tells us at one point. “Is this not the time for anger? It was the opposite of inertia, of academic pontificating—anger worked up action, and only through anger *and* action could justice ever come.” The emphasis on the centrality of action to revolutionary change and upheaval is a major motif of Zeilig’s work. His first novel centered around two generations of activists and the anti-war movement in the United Kingdom. His last novel, meanwhile, took its title—*An Ounce of Practice*—from a Freidrich Engels quote that “an ounce of practice is worth a ton of theory.”

Yet there is an intriguing sense that for all her anger-fueled political sermons, Bianca fails to enter the decisive arena of action herself.

There is a hint of activism in her youth, when we are told she attended a demonstration against South African apartheid as a teenager having just arrived in London from Zimbabwe. Her life as a university professor, however, is in many ways highly insular, absorbed by personal relationships, exercise, and the demands of her work. As she shuttles between international flights and university campuses, there is little to suggest that her actions extend beyond preaching at her pulpit and promoting her books at events. The only direct action we see her engage in throughout the entire novel is a cleaners’ strike on her London campus. Even here, she stumbles across the strike by chance and gives an impromptu speech calling for “the total expropriation of the capitalist class,” entirely abstracted from the specific demands and lived realities of the cleaners’ struggle.

There is a sense in all this that Bianca never really manages to escape her upbringing: she was raised in a wealthy, middle-class family on a Shell Oil compound in Nigeria. Her father was full of radical rhetoric but lived in comfort, ensconcing himself and his family from the harsher realities of Nigerian life that lay beyond the compound’s walls. While Bianca found some temporary escape from those walls during childhood—leaving them behind completely in adulthood—the stifling bureaucracy and demands of a professional career in the modern university appear to have walled her off from society once more, this time in a compound of her own making.

Here, Zeilig appears to be interrogating the class contradictions of scholar activism, and, more broadly, the hypocrisy of the professional middle classes. Even the most ideologically committed among them, like Bianca, are too often found full of rhetoric, but short on action.

It is likely that in passing this commentary, Zeilig is drawing at least in part on his own experiences, having lived in Senegal and South Africa, been active in a range of social movements and struggles, and written extensively on working-class struggle, the development of revolutionary movements, and some of Africa's most important political thinkers and activists, including Thomas Sankara, Patrice Lumumba, and Frantz Fanon.

And again, there are echoes of Fanon here, in his argument that many of Africa's early postcolonial intellectual leaders betrayed the aspirations of the working classes and popular masses, whose interests they claimed to represent and whose backs they had climbed upon in their ascent to power.

In one passage, we see Bianca run to work, shower at the office, and look out over the city of London, in perfect mimicry of the daily ritual of a wealthy city banker callously murdered in the novel's opening pages at the hands of an unknown assailant. By drawing this parallel, Zeilig pushes us to ask whether, through her seeming inaction, Bianca—and the class she represents—is in fact complicit in the system she believes she is fighting against, no better than the wealthy one percent she so despises.

And yet all might not be as it seems. Those around her, including her students, protect her ferociously when required, and wherever Bianca travels, another murder is never far behind. It is a mark of the depth and complexity of *The World Turned Upside Down* that there are no clear or easy answers, only unsettling questions combined with a relentless exposé of capitalism's ills and injustices. All of these questions are designed to jolt us out of complacency and comfort and into the one state that we all must occupy if a better world beyond capitalism is to be won: action. When, in the real world, even an establishment figure such as the current UK government's chief scientific adviser is publicly pronouncing that "nothing short of transforming society will avert catastrophe," we had better take notice.

About the Author

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