Keynote address

Liberating race from Apartheid

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When Professor Deborah Posel first approached me to give a paper at the 'Burden of Race' conference I wondered aloud if the title foreclosed the possibility of race as a positive social identity. She later informed me that they had put a question mark at the end of the title to suggest a certain open-endedness to how we imagine and talk about race. I am thankful for that change precisely because, while race has been a historical burden for black people, the struggle against racism has also been a source of cultural identity, and pride even, for black people.

In his wonderful little book, *Race Matters*, the distinguished African-American scholar Cornel West writes about how black people have over decades developed a cultural armour as a buffer against racism: 'these buffers consisted of cultural structures of meaning and feeling that created and sustained communities; this armour constituted ways of life and struggle that embodied values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence ... these traditions consisted of primarily of black religious and civic institutions'.[1] West thus defines blackness as much more than a matter of skin pigmentation. 'Blackness is a political and ethical construct,' he maintains.[2]

These arguments would not be new to South Africans, especially those of us who come from the black consciousness tradition. A similarly political definition of blackness was provided by Steve Biko and the black consciousness movement in the 1970s. This defined black people as all those who were by law or tradition discriminated against, and identified themselves as a unit towards the realisation of their freedom. The identification around certain values becomes the basis of the collective black identity. Thus someone could be as dark as one could get and still be derisively defined as a non-white because of their association with the oppressive system of rule then prevalent in the country.

While the laws have changed, people cannot be expected to throw away their evolved identities and values. One such value is that of *ubuntu*, which can be roughly translated to mean humanism, even if that universalistic translation takes away from the historic specificity of the concept. It is perfectly reasonable to assume that all human beings possess the generosity of spirit known as *ubuntu*. However, it is the historic-specific oppressive condition that made it so significant in the history of black people. The idea of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* assumed an urgency and salience that it perhaps has not assumed in a society not characterised by oppression, even though one can see it in the African-American experience identified by Cornel West or in the poor rural villages of India.

This is not to say that black people have not been horrible to each other, and continue to do horrible things to each other as we speak. It is only to say that when we reflect on those horrible deeds they are often interpreted through the racial lens. The political killings of the 1980s were denounced in terms of how much they detracted from black solidarity. Contemporary denunciations of black criminality are framed in terms of the impact of apartheid on black people or how those acts undermine the black quest for social progress. *Siyabulalana* (we are killing each other) is the phrase often used. And when children disobey their elders we say *abanambeko* (no respect) or when people are not generous we say *abanabuntu* (lack of humanism). The cultural armour that Cornel West talks about thus becomes the standard by which we measure our morality or immorality. The question then is how those values or standards will fit within the universalistic values of human rights we find in our Constitution. While it may be fairly easy to locate these values in the discourse of struggle itself, they have for the most part evolved in civil society.

And in talking about civil society I want to suggest that we go beyond the limited and rather ahistorical reduction of South African civil society to the urban social movements of the 1980s, otherwise known as the civics. Academics from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), which is also my alma mater, are guilty of producing volumes of work on civic movements as though they were the sum total of black civil society. What I am more interested in are the quotidian, everyday, civic networks where people lived outside of formal political organisations, in both the rural and urban areas of this country. In a recent paper on social capital in African townships, Belinda Bozzoli argues that before the advent of apartheid in 1948 the townships were characterised by a private world of social

networks. While they were, and continue to be, characterised by poverty, townships also developed 'a rich and fairly deeply institutionalised cultural life which found expression in *shebeens*, schools, gangs, families, sports and many other forms'.[3]

Thus, despite the harshness of the political and economic conditions, people carved out their own spaces of cultural creativity and material survival through a process of syncretic adaptation. This syncretic adaptation found its expression through, inter alia, the creolisation of European languages, the adoption of American music (especially jazz), and the development activities of organisations such as the Red Cross and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). According to Bozzoli 'nothing entered townships without being given local meaning'.[4]

This agency of giving both political and cultural meaning was, of course, constantly under state attack. The government banned political organisations, and all activity that might be remotely political. The birth of the black consciousness movement in 1968 was an attempt to reclaim these political and cultural spaces. Drawing inspiration from liberation movements in the United States, and elsewhere on the African continent, especially from Frantz Fanon, the black consciousness activists sought much more than political rights. The new movement sought to restore values of self-respect, self-reliance and dignity to the black community, and to transfer those values to the envisaged democratic society. As Sam Nolutshungu put it: 'the movement presents itself as a secession from a world that rejects or frustrates or cannot comprehend its concerns and needs, but the secession precedes the shattering of that world and the creation of another'.[5] For the student leaders of the movement this meant going back to the antecedent values and social networks that Bozzoli described. They formed alliances with traditional civil society organisations such as the YWCA, the Red Cross and welfare organisations.

Of more importance was the formation of the Black Community Programmes (BCP) in 1970. The BCP built schools, day-care centres and clinics throughout the country. They established home-based industries and cooperatives in remote rural settings and townships and published community newspapers and journals such as *Black Voice*, *Black Review*, *Black Perspective* and *Creativity in Development*; and opened community-based research institutes such as the Institute for Black Research. The period has been generally referred to as the Black Renaissance because of the revival of cultural, literary and political activity within black communities

throughout the country. A 1975 issue of *Black Review* argued that in evaluating the community projects, it was necessary to look beyond the structures created to the level of consciousness attained by the people involved. In many ways that movement prefigured the future development of the African Renaissance, even though present prophets of the African Renaissance find it hard to acknowledge that legacy. But as the development economist Albert Hirschman has argued:

> the social energies that are aroused in the course of a social movement do not disappear when that movement does, but are kept in storage and become available to fuel later – and sometimes different – social movements. In a real sense, the original movement must therefore be credited with whatever advances or successes were achieved by those subsequent movements: no longer can it be considered a failure.[6]

However, the cultural politics of meaning-creation reached its nadir with the return of non-racialism as the dominant political motif in the 1980s. Black consciousness and non-racialism stood toe-to-toe as competing visions of political and cultural identity. It would of course be unfair to suggest that non-racialism was yet another form of colour blindness. In his withering attack on the black consciousness movement written in 1976, Nelson Mandela argued that 'to say that race is a myth ... is to play with words'. He argued that people differed by the colour of their skin, the texture of their hair and their cultural origins and backgrounds. What he fought against was the racist stipulation that there was a pure race on account of one phenotypical attribute that was superior to all others.

Speaking in Johannesburg at the National Conference on Racism in 2000, a leading ANC thinker, Pallo Jordan, even suggested that non-racialism was never meant to suggest colour-blindness. As the custodian of non-racialism, the ANC and its allies would therefore probably draw a distinction between non-racialism as an empirical concept and non-racialism as a normative concept.

From a purely empirical standpoint the reality of racial identities was just too powerful to ignore. From a normative standpoint there was a need to create a society in which differences in phenotype did not determine our individual and collective fate. To paraphrase Martin Luther King, everyone in that society would be judged simply by the content of their character. This indeed seemed like a powerful vision for a society founded on racial oppression. On the surface nothing would seem objectionable about such a stance, and it would even seem pretty consistent with the black

consciousness position. The difference lay in the extent to which the black consciousness movement saw race as a cultural concept that gave people their identity, and the extent to which non-racialists saw race as a problematic physiognomic concept, a burden that had to be transcended in a broader search for certain universal values such as freedom and justice.

To understand the seductive power of this universalism, one has to go back to the antecedents of non-racialism in the long history of enlightenment universalism. The enlightenment universalist approach to race defines racism as an irrational prejudice which manifests itself through discrimination based on an arbitrary quality such as skin colour. Non-racialism, on the other hand, represents reason and progress. According to Gary Peller:

> Integrationist beliefs are organised around the familiar Enlightenment story of progress as consisting of the movement from mere belief and superstition to knowledge and reason, from the particular and therefore parochial to the universal and therefore enlightened.

Peller further notes that the meaning of race has been grafted onto a particular understanding of social progress 'so that transition from segregation to integration, from race consciousness to race neutrality, mirrors movements from myth to enlightenment, from ignorance to knowledge, from superstition to reason, from the primitive to the civilised, from religion to secularism'.[7] And since anyone is capable of being irrational, anyone is capable of being racist.

The problem with this symmetric universalist logic becomes clearer when one wants to discuss issues of political and moral responsibility for racism and that is its ahistorical, abstracted approach to racism. As Peller puts it: 'it begins to appear that the social subordination of various groups does not have a complex, particular and historical context'.[8] Blacks are, for instance, accused of being just as guilty of slavery and tribalism.

At our conference Françoise Vergès implored us to look at the history of slavery and collaboration among oppressed people. She argued that we should look at the continuous presence of slavery, and not just the transatlantic slave trade, as a more historic approach of dealing with what is perhaps a universal human fault. While I agree that black people need to take responsibility for the horrible things they have done to each other, I refuse to have that process confused with who holds moral responsibility for the historic crimes of racism. Increasingly the horrors that black people commit against each other are framed within the same universalist logic

that, for example, does not differentiate pre-colonial slavery from the Atlantic slave trade. While Vergès would argue that we need an historical gaze that looks at all slavery as a continuous presence through time, I think it is that lack of historical differentiation among systems of slavery or systems of tribalism that is, in fact, ahistorical.

For example, Basil Davidson has differentiated the kind of slavery that existed in pre-colonial societies and the slavery that took place during the transatlantic slave trade: 'Whereas chattel slavery literally meant an irreversible rejection from the society that employed it, African slaves bought for farming work were often absorbed into the family that employed them. They could found families of their own but also inherit within that unit'.[9] Similarly, the fact that ethnic or tribal identities were used as part of a policy of divide and rule has essentialised tribalism as inherently backward:

> In a large historical sense tribalism has been used to express the solidarity and common loyalties of people who share among themselves a country and a culture. In this important sense, tribalism in Africa or anywhere else has always existed and has often been a force for good, a force creating a civil society dependent on laws and the rule of law. ... But the tribalism we see today is evidently quite another thing. This tribalism flourishes on disorder, is utterly destructive of civil society, makes hay of morality, flouts the rule of law.[10]

The problem with this symmetric logic is that it becomes part of a theatre of denial and obfuscation that amounts to saying blacks were just as bad as whites, and therefore whites have no moral responsibility for what is a universal human fault. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission applied a similarly symmetric logic in drawing a universalistic moral equivalence between violence perpetrated in pursuit of freedom and violent oppression.

The choice between a progressive race consciousness and a progressive non-racialism also has implications for how we think about development. Contrary to the cultural approach to development that I described earlier, the non-racialist framework is predicated on scientific, modernist assumptions about development. Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first prime minister, adopted a secular, modernist, economistic civic ideology as the basis of the Indian Renaissance. He reasoned that any attempt to construct a new national identity on the basis of the Indian past would be disastrous. He chose instead to focus on economic modernisation as the basis of the new Indian identity. Big dams would become 'the temples of the modern age'. This is to be contrasted with the Gandhian

focus on building bridges with traditional communities as the basis for development.

One interesting example of this cultural approach in India is provided by the cultural activist Kamaladevi Chattopadhay. After independence Prime Minister Nehru offered Kamaladevi a cabinet position, which she turned down, fearing perhaps that she would be trapped into building Nehru's 'temples of the modern age'. Instead, she asked for government support to set up the All-India Handicrafts Board and travelled the length and breadth of the country identifying indigenous artists and promoting their work through development centres, exhibitions, academies and emporiums. A federal cooperative brought the products to the cities. Today Indian handicrafts and arts constitute a major part of the country's exports.[11]

Since the early days of the transition the South African government has followed a similarly economistic and modernist strategy – economic modernisation as the basis of social progress is one of those few areas where Marxists and free-marketeers think alike. Modernism, properly understood, is an Enlightenment idea about the superiority of scientific and technical methods as the basis for rationally organising society. Modernism is thus closely associated with the triumph of reason over emotion; of objectivity over subjectivity; and of universalism over particularism. Modernism is a technocratic approach to development that is pretty much consistent with non-racialist universalism in which there is no room for the role of cultural identities in development policy. Within this non-racial politics the universal language of global economic progress displaces attention to local cultures. There are many aspects of both kinds of this universalist modernism that would have been politically anathema to the cultural politics of the black consciousness movement.

Building Racial Respect and Tolerance

I have written exclusively about the black identity because that is the identity I know. I do not know much about white identity. Part of the reason for that is that white people describe themselves as identity-less, and many of them have become latter-day converts to the notion of non-racialism. Part of the reason is that the role of white people has been too much of an embarrassment for anyone to embrace it as a positive identity. Hence the urging for all to forget about their identities, a typical white thing about setting standards, you might say.

Gary Peller argues that:

> ... the failure of the progressive and liberal white community to comprehend the possibility of a liberating rather than repressive meaning of race consciousness has distorted our understanding of the politics of race in the past and obscures the ways that we might contribute to a meaningful transformation of race relations in the future.[12]

I believe, however, that contrary to the desire to run away from race, white people should try to define a new identity for themselves. To paraphrase the sociologist Charles Taylor, 'we cannot define our identities in isolation from each other'. Despite the focus on what I have described as black values, many of those black values come from the white world. Conversely, the white world has been formed by the black world. Steve Biko suggested the development of a 'joint culture' that would draw on both black and white experiences in building a new South African identity. Of course, he rejected any and all kinds of integration in which blacks were mere tokens and had no substantive impact on the direction of society. But he always favoured a form of integration in which blacks had an equal, and even preponderant, say in the cultural direction of a country in which they constituted the majority:

> For one cannot escape the fact that the culture shared by the majority group in any given society must ultimately determine the broad direction taken by the joint culture of that society. This need not cramp the style of those who feel differently but on the whole, a country in Africa, in which the majority of the people are African, must inevitably exhibit African values and be truly African in style.[13]

Pluralising African identity

What did Biko mean by saying 'this need not cramp the style of those who feel differently?' Embedded in that statement are two meanings. One, the majority should protect the cultural rights of minorities. Two, if minorities identify with the broader political culture they need not feel threatened. But the latter can only happen if the former prevails. According to Michael Walzer, when minorities are 'free to celebrate their histories, remember their dead, and shape (in part) the education of their children, they are more likely to be harmless than when they are unfree'.[14] Conversely, in *On Toleration*, Walzer wrote: 'civil religion is more likely to succeed by accommodating than opposing the multiple identities of the men and women it aims to engage. Its aim after all is not full-time conversion but political socialisation'.[15]

This means that Afrikaners could celebrate their holidays, language and culture as long as it did not infringe on the rights of others or violate the basic principles of racial inclusiveness. In fact, instead of being sources of controversy cultural disputes could provide concrete ways of taking the process of reconciliation to the community level. For example, there could be discussions of Afrikaner culture that go beyond the race-based identity politics of the Afrikaner right wing. Coloureds have as much claim to the Afrikaans language. Some of the country's heroes – Bram Fischer, Beyers Naude, Breyten Breytenbach, Uys Krige – are Afrikaners. It would seem plausible to talk about multiple ways of being Afrikaner just as there are multiple ways of being Xhosa (through different clans and customs).

Nationally this would also suggest that there should be multiple ways of being African. Zulus, Sothos, Jews, Afrikaners, English, Indians, Coloureds would define and celebrate their African identity in the context of their own respective histories, traditions and experiences as long as these did not violate our basic political values. When those practices violate common political values then the government has the responsibility to intervene. Getting people to respect each other's group identities is more realistic and achievable than the pursuit of non-racialism.

Notes

1. West, C (1993:23) *Race Matters*. New York: Vintage Books.
2. Ibid: 39.
3. Bozzoli, B (???) *The Differentiation of Social Capital and the Mobilizing and Demobilizing Powers of Nationalism: The South African Case*, p. 3.
4. Ibid: 4.
5. Nolutshungu, S (1982:152) *Changing South Africa: political considerations*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
6. Hirschman, A (1984:55-56) *Grassroots Experiences in Latin America*. New York: Pergamon Press.
7. Peller, G (1995:74) 'Race consciousness', in D Danielson and K Engle (eds) *After Identity: a reader in law and culture*. New York: Routledge.
8. Ibid: 75.
9. Davidson, B (1992:58) *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the curse of the nation-state*. Oxford: James Currey.
10. Ibid: 11.
11. Devaki, J (1998) *Renaissance as Reconstruction*. South African Non-Governmental Coalition.

12. Peller, G, op cit: 69.
13. Biko, S (1979:24) *I Write What I Like.* Aelred Stubbs edited. London: Heinemann.
14. Walzer, M (1992:101) 'The civil society argument', in Chantal Mouffe (ed) *Dimensions of Radical Democracy.* London: Verso.
15. Walzer, M (1997:80) *On Toleration.* New Haven: Yale University Press.