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The Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) Student and Youth Department was initiated in 2015 in response to an observed paucity of critical engagement in social and economic theory by contemporary South African students and youth. Developing out of the first small steps is a now thriving youth department within our institute with its own research outputs and activities including publishing, hosting of conference and events, reading groups and community courses.

The IFAA forum is the central pillar of the IFAA Student and Youth department and provides a platform for the discussion and deepening of knowledge of progressive political and social theory among South African university students. The IFAA Forum also takes dialogue beyond its merely discursive dimension and towards addressing structural inequalities, social disadvantage and poverty. The forum aims to connect local progressive postgraduate students in a community of scholars, based on ideals of peer-learning and mutual support, whilst also seeking to democratisie academic knowledge. Our forums encourage interdisciplinary engagement on current socio-economic and political issues, and attempt to instil a culture of intellectual rigour and academic collaboration amongst those destined to influence popular discourse within and outside the academy. Postgraduate students, young academics and social activists are invited to deliver presentations that are open to the public to attend.

The IFAA Critical Review is an annual volume comprised of essays presented at the IFAA forum as well as papers written by the broader IFAA network. In this edition we publish articles that interrogate themes and topics related to decolonisation and educational justice, Pan-Africanism, economic policy, the intersection between literature and politics, and the philosophy of race.

We hope that this publication will serve as a useful companion guide for those interested in contemporary social and political issues experienced by South Africa and the African continent as a whole. It is our contention that only through honest dialogue and inquiry will we have the apparatus to interrogate, and change, the current social and economic impasse in which we find ourselves.

The Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) is grateful for the generous financial support from the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. Their continued support for the Student and Youth Department has been crucial to the development of a strong cohort
of scholars and activists able to interrogate social and economic issues in South Africa. Additionally, we thank the contributing writers for their willingness to share their ideas and engage with a wide audience, both in their presentations at the monthly forums, and their accompanying papers that have been printed in this Critical Review 2017.

Cape Town, South Africa, December 2017
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Decolonisation, Science and Postmodernism

By Michael Nassen Smith

What follows is the edited text of a lecture delivered at the UCT Chemical Engineering Department in 2017.

No one involved in higher education can avoid the word “decolonisation”. Students of the #MustFall movements, such as #RhodesMustFall (RMF) have urged South Africa’s university communities, and society as a whole, to carry out a “decolonial” project. But what does decolonisation, in fact, mean?

I have been asked to speak on “decolonising science” today. Yet rather than immediately attempting to present a working definition of “decolonisation”, and then proceeding to advance a stable understanding of a “decolonised science”, I am instead going to map the historical and intellectual setting within which the debate on “decolonisation” is taking place. I will demonstrate that the dominant (yet not only) “decolonial” perspective on South African campuses today views science and the scientific method with suspicion. Yet in problematising the framework within which this verdict against science is made, I will propose that one can be attuned to the needs of institutional and societal justice without succumbing to an anti-scientific, anti-enlightenment and anti-rationalist worldview.

Decolonisation: an “Empty Signifier” with a Purpose

What is decolonisation, really? Since its popularisation by the fallist generation of 2015, the word “decolonisation” has behaved like an empty signifier; a term that makes recourse to a vague notion of “self-determination” that could mean anything, more of an emotive, visceral slogan than a concept with substantive content. Yet despite its analytic slipperiness, “decolonisation” has attracted the passions of thousands of the country’s students, academics, politicians and civil society - both black and white. While its definition remains ‘up for grabs’, the energy it has produced is ripe for exploitation by perceptive political opportunists who would be ever ready to cloak their cynical machinations under “decolonial” garb.
I have a lot of sympathy for those sounding these alarm-bells. Political history is filled with examples of seemingly progressive but ill-defined political ideas being manipulated to support regressive political ends. We have already begun to witness the potential that vacuous, but appealing, slogans like “decolonial,” “decolonisation,” and “white monopoly capital” have to promote nefarious political agendas.

Notwithstanding the urgency to provide clarity on “decolonisation” then, let us first attend to some baseline questions. Instead of asking immediately: “What does decolonisation mean?” Let us ask instead: What is decolonisation about? What is the word “decolonisation” standing in for? What problems does it identify?

“Decolonisation”, understood in terms of the above, simply calls our attention to face, and then resolve, material inequities and injustices that plague our university and broader communities. Many of these inequalities are residues of colonialism and apartheid. The visceral response that the word “decolonisation” evokes is due to the deep scars that these historical and present day injuries leave on their victims. In addition, the frustration that comes with our failure to find proper solutions even after some twenty years of democracy fans the flames. Let us attend to what these injuries are.

All is Not Well

The issues that students have raised on university campuses should now be well known. However, let us revise them briefly. First is a lack of material support: many students cannot afford university fees and face academic exclusion as a result. Universities cannot provide adequate housing and accommodation. University workers do not receive living wages and work in precarious conditions. Some students, in fact, do not have access to the basics of food and water.

Second are the more psychological and cultural issues: many black students, particularly at previously white universities such as the University of the Witswatersrand (WITS) and University of Cape Town (UCT) complain about feelings of alienation and dislocation (Nyamnjoh, 2017). The names of buildings, statues, language policy, the content of curriculums, have all been identified as contributing to a suffocating and exclusionary environment. Let us not forget, moreover, the concrete racism that students and staff have had to encounter - recall the several incidents at University of the Free State (UFS) and the racist slurs on the “have your say” noticeboard surrounding the Rhodes statue at UCT.

The struggle of various student movements aimed to address these issues and reached a climax in 2015. The students attracted wide social support to their cause and
achieved significant victories in a short space of time - the Rhodes statue was removed, fee increases were halted, insourcing negotiations began, and conversations around transforming or “decolonising” curricula, and the university as a whole, were initiated across departments and faculties.

“Rainbowism” in the Dock

Perhaps the most significant achievement of the student movement was its igniting of a broader society-wide conversation about the state of post-apartheid South Africa. It demanded that the conversation about “decolonisation” extend outward to face the entire socioeconomic and political fabric of our society.

1994 was a remarkable achievement. Yet we continue to live in a society where the legacies of apartheid and colonialism are clear to see. The students spoke directly to the material and psychological wounds that millions of South Africans continue to suffer from. “Rainbowism,” and the sanitised image of a harmonious non-racial democracy was placed in the dock and found wanting. As Trevor Shaku, a leader of FeesMustFall UFS, put it:

“Indeed. We are born in chains. This statement awakes us to the realities we are facing in South Africa and calls for us to stand up and challenge the myth of the “born frees” (‘Mokose, 2017).

Since the birth of the #MustFall movements, there has been a new urgency - as we have heard on our radios, read in the press, in books, plays, music, and art - to confront the unresolved traumas of the past and interrogate why so little progress has been made in realising the promises of the anti-apartheid liberation movements.

Having said this, I do not want to present the student movement and its politics in a wholly positive light. Nor do I want to suggest that the broader societal-wide conversations about “decolonisation” have been wholly productive. As I alluded to above, the outcome of the “decolonisation” debate and the concrete political program endorse (if any) remains to be decided. Today, there is very little left of organised student militancy, with #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall seemingly in a state of terminal decline. The fracturing of the student movement is certainly due to state and university repression, but also due to the movement’s own internal ideological incoherence, its support of random acts of violence and vandalism, and its contribution to a worrying culture of intolerance and bullying that has infected campus life. All of these have driven otherwise sympathetic students and members of
the public to apathy or even outright rejection of student politics altogether. Never-
theless, the higher education community and our society continues to speak about
“decolonisation”. We continue to speak about it because the problems that the student
movements identified still exist, even though the movements may have collapsed
themselves.

**There are Many Paths to “Decolonisation”**

So how should we approach the question of decolonisation? Let us proceed by simply
replacing the words decolonisation with the word *justice*. This allows us to ask a very
concrete question, namely, given all the problems we face in higher education and as a
society, how do we realise justice?

In order to answer this question two things are required: First, we have both a
theoretical and a scientific duty to understand our social environment. It is only by
developing an accurate depiction of the source of our problems, that we might be in a
position to address them. Second, there is a need for clarity on our moral values. There
is need for a positive vision of a future; a just university community and society; and
clarity on the values that will underpin this “decolonised” future. Are we to value egal-
tarianism or individualism? Are we to be proponents of non-racial humanism or will
we seek to build race-based ghettos? Are we to embrace technological modernity or are
we concerned with rebuilding ties to our natural environment? These descriptive and
normative questions cannot be sidestepped. They will lie at the root of any
“decolonisation” programme, even if they are not explicitly clarified by that programme’s
proponents. Let me make this point more concrete with some historical reflections.

All liberation and decolonisation movements in history have agreed that colonial-
ism was a brutal, violent system (Sitas, 2017). These movements set out to fight for
independence and self-determination. Yet thereafter, we find serious theoretical (how
is colonial power reproduced and how does it shape our society?) and normative (what
are colonial values? what type of values do we wish to replace them with and promote
in a new society?) disagreement about how to proceed. Nkrumah’s Pan-Africanism and
programme for self-determination was different to Nyerere’s (Nkrumah, 1967). Cabral’s
was not quite the same as Senghor’s, Kenyatta’s - let alone Idi Amin’s or Haile Selassie’s
(Sitas, 2017).

South Africa’s liberation struggle confronted its own set of questions:

What type of society did settler-colonialism create? What is the relation-
ship, if any, between capital and racial and colonial domination? Can and
should racial differences be overcome? What are we to do with tribal
differences, and what will be the status of customary law in a “decolonised” society? Who is, in fact, African? Are coloureds and Indians or white people African? What constitutes the South African nation? What is role of patriarchy in colonial domination in South Africa?

These questions and many more have animated thinking for decades and their answers have varied among revolutionary groupings (Sitas, 2017; Webster et al, 2017).

The ANC and the Congress Tradition, the Unity movement, the Pan-African Congress (PAC), the Black Consciousness Movement, the workerists and others promoted distinct versions of “self-determination” and disagreed on the means and ends of the struggle (Webster et al, 2017). For example, Steve Biko agreed with the Charterists and Unity movement that a post-apartheid South Africa should be a non-racial democracy; however, he could not settle on the means to achieve this. Biko argued that temporary black isolationism was necessary to advance the project of non-racial humanism. His critics, however, thought that this would be counterproductive and ended up supporting the very racialism that the anti-apartheid movement sought to overcome (Lamola, 2017). Their disagreement was more than strategic in nature, and was informed by differences in apprehending the nature of apartheid society. Whereas Biko stressed the cultural and psychological sources of oppression, and so believed that psychic upliftment for black people should be the priority of a revolutionary movement; others, like Govan Mbeki, Chris Hani, Neville Alexander - though wary of the psychic distortions of oppression - placed greater emphasis on its material basis.

The above example is a disagreement of means but not ends, but in some cases the differences are fundamental. South African socialists will hold that a decolonised society must do away with capitalism. Many liberals and nationalists believe that self-determination is compatible with capitalism. Once more, the difference is theoretical (capitalism causes social strife and entrenches colonial inequalities or capitalism promotes social harmony and overcomes inequalities) and moral (capitalism promotes positive or negative values).

The above reflections gives us a concrete lesson: The meaning of “decolonisation” differs depending on who is wielding it. This difference, in turn, has its in basis in theory, strategy, and/or moral judgements and sensibilities. Thus, if we are to evaluate the content of calls from contemporary student movements we must be concerned with exposing underlying descriptive and normative commitments that have shaped their conception of their social world. We can then ask, what has informed these commitments? What is the intellectual history that has produced them? How are they similar or dissimilar to those embraced by historical movements for self-determination in South Africa?
Africa? Finally, do we accept or do we reject them? Asking these questions, I believe, cuts to the core of the contemporary “decolonisation” debate.

Identitarianism and culturalism

The student movements across the country are not monolithic. There are certainly strategic and ideological differences between and within them. Yet despite variance, one can identify a dominant thread of student thinking about “decolonisation”. This thread has been widely embraced by students calling themselves fallists.

The fallists have centered their discourse and politics on addressing identity-based injustices. The latter refers to unfair discriminations based on race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality and/or physical ability that continue to plague university communities and society at large. If there is one idea, other than “decolonisation”, that has united fallists and their allies, it is Kimberly Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2015). Intersectionality, what black feminist scholar Barbara Smith dubbed as the “crux of the Black feminist understanding of political reality” (Smith quoted in Smith, 2017) is a useful heuristic; an “analytic sensibility” (Crenshaw, 2015). It tells us that oppressions interact in multi-faceted, interlocking ways yet become infused into a single experience. Yet intersectionality is not a theory. It does not tell us what causes the oppressions it identifies and describes. If we are to make sense of the dominant thread in student discourse then we have to assess the deeper theoretical universe within which it operates.

The three pillars of identitarianism and culturalism

The fallists have rightly called out identity-based discrimination, as they are clearly manifest in universities and society. No sensible person can dispute the reality of these grievances and the urgency of addressing them. Nevertheless, we can either agree or disagree with the identitarian and culturalist worldview within which they have been assessed by the student movement. Let us outline some of the pillars of this worldview and consider the politics it has endorsed.

1. Strategic Essentialism as a Politics and a Theoretical Device

White people, black people, males, and women, are not all the same. Members of these identity groups hold different beliefs, have different histories, different cultures,
language, conceptions of ethics, and privilege can be unevenly distributed between them. Nevertheless, according to this view, we should embrace a strategic essentialism that temporarily reifies these identities, or, makes them concrete. This essentialism allows marginalised communities to maximise power, despite concrete internal differences. This strategy, explicitly promoted by the #RhodesMustFall mission statement (RhodesMustFall, 2015), harks back to Biko’s conception of black solidarity as a means to achieve liberation (Sesanti, 2015). Yet it is also substantially influenced by the work of Gayatri Spivak.

In addition to practical benefits, essentialism has a theoretical cash out. Accepting the legitimacy of speaking in reified identities has allowed students to mobilise terms like “blackness”, “whiteness”, “masculinity” and “femininity”, to describe our social world. These reified identities are said to be causal agents of oppression. For example, one could say that “whiteness” caused apartheid and continues to exacerbate racial inequality in contemporary South Africa.

2. The Authority of Lived Experience

In the identitarian view, lived or personal experience has a truth-telling function. This is saying something more than “personal experiences matter to certain research programs”. In this view, personal experience or subjectivity always has the same value as objectivity. To put it brutally: there is no such thing as objectivity and we should be suspicious of the ability of detached reasoning (and related research methods) to comprehend our social environment.

3. “Hard” Positionality or “Extreme” Standpoint Theory

Identitarians and culturalists believe that one can draw an equivalence between identity, experience and thought - which I shall term hard positionality or extreme standpoint theory. Drawing this equivalence is not simply stating that people - researchers for example - have prejudice and biases. Any reliable researcher would be required to interrogate and evaluate his/her assumptions about the world. For the identitarian however, the latter is impossible. For hard positionality proponents, prejudice cannot be overcome through an exercise of reason or reflection. Rather, one’s biases are socially ingrained and embedded within a group consciousness, representing a distinct way of knowing the world (epistemology). This position allows for the promotion of notions like “Western thought” (whose prejudices are rationalist, empiricist and individualist), “African thought” (whose prejudices are communal and spiritual), “masculine thought” (which values hierarchy, order and competition), and “feminine thought” (which values emotion, compassion and equality).
The animating principle of the identitarian and culturalist is, therefore, radical social difference - whether that difference is expressed in racial, gender, geopolitical or cultural terms. Those who accept this framework will embrace a “decolonial” project informed by the three pillars I have outline above. An identitarian and culturalist “decolonise” science programme, as I shall allude to later on in this talk, advances a radical critique of the scientific method as being representative of an alien epistemology. Before I turn to outlining what this programme in further detail, I need to make an important distinction.

**For “Decolonisation” but against Identitarianism and Culturalism**

One can commit to fighting unfair racial, gender, class, sexuality and other forms of discrimination and embrace the spirit of intersectionality without subscribing to the identitarian and culturalist worldview. One could also agree that the institutional culture and the content of courses at our universities are insufficiently grounded in local concerns, histories, politics and experience without being committed to the harder claim that there are distinct and culturally embedded ways of knowing the world. One can, in short, be for “decolonisation” but against identitarianism and culturalism.

This is a point that I have made with colleagues before (Lester et al, 2017). Indeed, there is a substantial body of literature that opposes the identitarian and culturalist framework, while remaining concerned with the important issues that the latter tradition raises. A recent book by Vivek Chibber (2013), in the spirit of previous works by Samir Amin (1989), San Juan (1998), and Aijaz Ahmad (1992), for example, attacks the culturalism underpinning postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory, a major trend in the Humanities today, sets itself the task of combating orientalism and eurocentrism by centering the historical sociological experience of the Global South in academic discourse, the arts and broader popular imagination. This is a noble and important goal; however, postcolonial theorists have also promoted the view that a fundamental difference exists between Western and non-western peoples, whether this difference is expressed in terms of consciousness, culture and even moral disposition. Chibber’s work follows a long tradition of opposition to this view, although it is probably the most systematic, empirical and conceptual evaluation of postcolonial claims. He concludes by arguing that far from dispelling eurocentrism, the postcolonial fetish of difference in fact presents nothing more than a stale orientalism wrapped in pseudo-radical chic (Chibber, 2013: 288-289; Chibber, 2017).
On the issue of race, many anti-racist scholars reject racial essentialism (strategic or otherwise) as a political mobilisation tool and theoretical device. Paul Gilroy (2000) has argued that we need to imagine a politics of anti-racism that not only opposes racism, but the very concept of race itself. In a similar vein (and while criticising Biko’s conception of black solidarity) South African philosopher John Lamola, has warned, “The ahistorical persistence of “anti-racist racism” is both logically and ethically untenable and strategically self-defeating” (Lamola, 2017). Barbara Smith, a radical black feminist and one of the founders of the Combahee River Collective, agreed and stated that “any kind of separatism is a dead end,” for politics of black emancipation in the United States (Smith quoted in Smith, 2017).

Neville Alexander was perhaps the most vocal critic of anti-racist racialism in South Africa. Alexander, in contrast to the RMF (2015) collective, was totally opposed to using race as a proxy for disadvantage in UCT’s admission policy, maintaining that we need abandon racial categorisation in toto from our social imaginations. Recall his chilling words from an article submitted to the Cape Times in 2010 titled, “UCT will pay the price for race cowardice”:

“By making concessions to race thinking, for example, by putting it in little squares with racial labels to be checked on application forms for the alleged purpose of tracking the tempo of “transformation”, we are establishing or consolidating the template of a genocidal grid, one that is all too real in the consciousness of those who are so labelled and categorised (Alexander, 2010).”

Gilroy, Alexander, Smith and Lamola are fervently against racism. But they are equally critical of a politics that remains wedded to what Gilroy calls “raciology.” These theorists and activists contend that because the pathology of “race-thinking” is so polluting, no progressive programme can be successful from making the concept a pillar of theory and organisation. A more recent book by Kwesi Tsri (2016) titled Africans are not Black-The case for conceptual liberation promotes this view in its thesis that a racially based Pan-Africanism is a political and moral dead end.

Although these contrarian views still exist within anti-racist, feminist and anti-Eurocentric theory and politics, they remain on the fringe of academic discourse. The identitarian and culturalist framework has become increasingly dominant, particularly in the Humanities, over the course of the last two or three decades. Why did this happen? In order to answer this, we need to consider the historical development of the broader intellectual current within which the identitarian and culturalist perspective finds its home - namely, postmodernism.
The rise of postmodernism in the academy: an intellectual and political history

The 20th century was an age of big ideas. Guided by rationalist, enlightenment and humanist assumptions, political movements in that period sought to institute a global society based on conceptions of human rights and equality. This was true for liberals, communists and socialists alike. After the victory against fascism midway through the century, mass confidence in the potential for realising a universal humanist order was possible, whether it was to be in a socialist form spearheaded by the Soviet Union or other socialist movements, or in the liberal vision promoted by the United Nations (Hobsbawm, 1994). Indeed, the particular struggles of anti-racism, decolonisation, Pan-Africanism, women’s liberation, and the sexual revolution were all undergirded by an ethic and politics whose claims extended across humanity. All of Kwame Nkrumah, Franz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, Selma and CLR James, Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King championed the enlightenment project and claimed fidelity to science, rationality and universal equality and emancipation (Chibber, 2013). It would not have occurred to these theorists and activists to criticise the scientific view of the world. Even if it could be shown that scientific practice has played a part in their oppression (scientific racism/eugenics) these instances were dismissed for being representative of chauvinism, patriarchy and racism, and not of the necessary outcome of the scientific method.

Yet, the dream of a global order based on equality and the equitable distribution of the fruits of modernity did not transpire, neither in its liberal, or socialist guise. Decolonisation movements failed to implement societies in keeping with the democratic aspirations of the national liberation movements. There was to be no world socialist revolution. The Soviet Union was run less by rational scientists, than by quasi-religious ideologues serving the interests of a bureaucratic state elite (Jordan, 1990; Habib, 1991). While the west was seemingly triumphant at the close of the Cold War, liberal democracy did not consolidate itself across the globe in spite of Francis Fukuyama’s promotion of the metaphysical notion of the “End of History” (Hobsbawm, 1994). Instead, the 1990’s marked the beginning of a wave of terror based on geopolitical conflict and religious fundamentalism, of new territorial conflicts and continued political and economic crisis in the advanced world, culminating in the global financial crisis of 2008.

How did this political history and the collapse of the big ideas of the 20th century in the empirical world intrude on intellectual life? Many former socialist adherents and liberals certainly embraced TINA (“there is no alternative”) and became committed to spreading values of liberal democracy across the globe. Yet others, particularly of the
former radical left, would not give up on taking a radical posture, even while they accepted the general sentiment of TINA and refused to reformulate a humanist socialism for a new post-Cold War environment. The radical element of the new current was instead given theoretical foundation in a philosophy that not only accepted the political defeat of humanist ideals, but also actively sought to criticise the enlightenment’s philosophic foundations — foundations that are shared by both the acolytes of liberal capitalism and socialism. This philosophy is postmodernism.

**What is postmodernism?**

While the 20th century celebrated the ideal of universality, the postmodernist actively warns against pursuing goals of universal freedom and equality. In addition, he or she rails against the rational and scientific worldview in general. As Eric Hobsbawm observed:

> “Paradoxically, an era [the 20th century] whose only claim to have benefited humanity rested on the enormous triumphs of material progress based on science and technology ended in a rejection of these by substantial bodies of public opinion and people claiming to be thinkers in the West (Hobsbawm, 1994: 11).”

Jean-Francois Lyotard, the founder of postmodernism, defined the tradition as “an incredulity to grand narratives” (Lyotard quoted in Pluckrose, 2017).” It would reject any generalisation and categories of social realities based on notions of “truth” and “universality.” In place of truth was now simply power. Michel Foucault, another key figure in this tradition, maintained that systems of power control discourses, which in of themselves determine what can be known in different settings. As he wrote:

> “In any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one ‘episteme’ that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in theory or silently invested in a practice” (Foucault quoted in Pluckrose, 2017).

In Foucault, but especially Lyotard, we see the emergence of an explicit epistemic relativity (belief in personal or culturally specific truths or facts) and the privileging of “lived experience” over empirical evidence (Pluckrose, 2017). Increasingly, the idea that solidarity and common purpose can be formed across cultures (and indeed across races and genders) becomes seen to be naïve or, at worst, counterproductive to the aims of justice.
The ethics (and hence politics) of postmodernism is simple. If there is no truth and only perspectives then we should ensure that each perspective is equally respected and given the opportunity to flourish. Each perspective must be heard, allowed to speak, and each must be given opportunity to develop in accordance with its own will. This ethical relativism is very different from the Universalist goals of the 20th century.

In the 1980s and 1990s, under the influence of this new intellectual trend, we saw the emergence of a feminism, anti-racism and postcolonial and decolonial thought wedded to this new intellectual fashion. The representatives of these new variants of critical theory, would now occupy radically different intellectual and political positions to their 20th century enlightenment predecessors, even if these differences are not readily acknowledged.

**Achieving “decolonised” science: Version 1**

Postmodernism underpins the culturalist and identitarian worldview that has dominated student discourse in South Africa. This is why conversations about “decolonisation” are so often filled up with concepts such as “epistemology,” “ways of being,” and “lived experience”. Although ardent postmodernists would argue that their philosophy is radically anti-essentialist in its aim of deconstruction; in practice it leads to the mere valorisation of the neglected and marginalised. This is why the student movement in South Africa has seemed obsessed with defining, and then policing, the boundaries of “authentic” versions of black, of African, and of woman as opposed to white, European and male identities (Harvey, 2016; Nyamnjoh, 2017; Lester et al, 2017).

We are now prepared to understand how and why the student movement, or at least sections of it, have advanced a criticism against science and the scientific method. The culturalist criticism of science goes like this: Science is a culturally and socially embedded partial perspective on the world. It is not saying anything objective as there is no such thing as objectivity. Moreover, the scientific method, which values objectivity, experiment, consistency and so it is representative of a male or Western or white epistemology. Therefore, the normal activity of science, which marginalises other ways of knowing (based on experience, emotion, myth, folklore and inconsistency) and representative of a non-western, female, or black way of knowing, actively reproduces epistemic injustice. Thus, “decolonising” science would mean promoting an African or indigenous science (Udefi, 2014: 108) or a feminist science (Code, 1991), which is open to other ways of knowing, other narratives and epistemologies, based on other culturally and socially embedded lived experiences.
As a feminist scholar once put it, the sciences’ quest for objectivity is merely: “...an excuse for a power relationship every bit as obscene as the power relationship that leads women to be sexually assaulted, murdered, and otherwise treated as mere objects. The assault on our minds, their removal from existence of our experiences as valid and true is every bit as objectionable” (emphasis mine) (Stanly and Wise quoted in Hamersley, 1992).

As we heard from a fallist student: “Science is a product of western modernity, and as a whole it must be scratched off. If you want a practical solution to decolonise science, we would have to start from an African perspective (our perspective) from our lived experience” (emphasis mine) (Henderson, 2016).

When the ScienceMustFall video was released, many people were eager to excuse the views expressed by the student as merely a wayward opinion of a single individual. I think that we can now safely reject the latter view. ScienceMustFall is the logical conclusion of the influence the postmodern intellectual tradition has had on South African students in the Humanities.

**Achieving “decolonised” science: Version 2**

There is, of course, another option available to those interested in “decolonising” science. One could uphold and defend the view that scientific thinking is universal. In this view, the scientific method is one that is available and has been practiced by all people regardless of culture, race and gender. It is true that racism, eurocentrism and patriarchy have tainted scientific practice and helped produce pseudo-scientific theories. It is also true that much can be learned by indigenous knowledge if the latter was welcomed into consideration and evaluation by the scientific method (Nakhooda, 2017). Then it simply becomes our task to fight prejudice in scientific communities while remaining aware that those communities are not immune to nefarious social influences.

Part of the programme to decolonise science, in this sense, would also be to expose the various tributaries to the scientific method and scientific achievement. For example, a recent book by feminist scholar Karen O’Brein (2009) has revealed the contribution that women had to the early enlightenment project. O’Brein, contrary to postmodern feminists, maintains that the enlightenment tradition is itself supportive of feminist ends. Her views are shared by Martha Nussbaum (1994), Catherine Mackinnon (1996), Selma James (2012) and Sharon Smith (2017).
In addition to women’s contributions, one could and should expose Arab, Indian, Chinese, African, and other non-Western contributions to mathematics, technological advancement, philosophy, astronomy, biology, medicine. Works in this tradition of scholarship include Samir Amin’s *Eurocentrism* (1989) and, for a more local example, Ben Kies’s (1953) *Contribution of Non-European Peoples to World Civilization*. Both Amin and Kies argue that eurocentrism is in fact the very idea of a dividing line separating cultures in history of the enlightenment. This arrogation to Europe and the white race to sole keepers of modernity and the scientific worldview is a myth created to justify and rationalise the concrete material exploitation of the colonial and imperial era. White supremacy paints white the pillars of Western civilisation, Greece, Rome and Christianity, and isolates all of these from all external influences. Yet Athens flourished precisely because it was a trading post connecting Africa, West Asia and the Far East. Christianity as we know, flourished in Ethiopia well before reaching what we now consider to be Europe. However, for the keepers of Eurocentrism and colonial ideology there could be no talk of indebtedness to African, Chinese, Indian, universities, philosophers, scientists; no talk of Timbuktu, the Moors, Ibn Khaldun and Al-Khwarizmi. In the beginning, we are told, there was Descartes, Kant and Da Vinci, and all else was darkness (Kies, 1953).

Eurocentrism is, in these terms, not a “way of knowing” unique to European people. It is, simply, a lie - a false ideology (Amin, 1989). “Decolonisation”, then, means freeing our minds from the lies of racialism, of eurocentricism, and of patriarchy. It has little to do with replacing a “western episteme” with an African one, but rather would be concerned with revealing the social and cultural entanglement that defines the history of science and enlightenment. Such an exercise would expose the patriarchal, racist and colonial assumptions underpinning the view that reason, empiricism and mathematics has been a gift given to humankind by one class of people alone.

This project, I believe, would also resonate with Fanon’s trumpeting lines of radical humanism:

“There is no white world, no black world,” and “...I am a [human], and in this sense the Peloponnesian War is as much mine as the invention of the compass (Fanon, 1952, 2017).”

**Conclusion**

To conclude, the call to “decolonise” has had a powerful impact on our society, generating enormous enthusiasm beyond the confines of the university. This is because the issues that “decolonisation” addresses are profound. Our higher education and
broader communities are plagued with significant injustices. Identity-based discriminations, structural and individual, persisting colonial aesthetics, imagery and attitudes, are still lingering in democratic South Africa. These need to be resolved, and urgently.

To say one wants decolonisation is another way of saying one wants justice. But then, I have suggested, the hard work begins. Where do the problems that plague our society come from? How are we best to fight them? Moreover, what are we fighting for?

I have just presented a rather detailed account of the intellectual influences behind the dominant, yet certainly not only, student perspective on decolonisation. I have shown that this perspective is rooted in an identitarian and culturalist worldview, which, in turn, was given impetus by the postmodern turn in the academy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I then demonstrated how one might “decolonise” science in these terms.

Yet I have also stressed that an alternative way to “decolonise” is possible, based on a different worldview and theoretical outlook. Personally, I am in support of this alternative. But my overall goal was not to proselytise but rather to map the field of debate. I hope that this conversation is broadened to more people within the sciences and indeed across the university and society. A lot is at stake and we all need to be provided with the tools to advance an informed opinion about how best to realise equitable, democratic and just communities.

**Bibliography**


Bourdieu on the Barricades: Understanding the Symbolic Violence of Education Institutions in 21st Century Post-Apartheid South Africa

By Sara Muller

Introduction

This essay seeks to ask whether the sociological framework of the twentieth century French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, offers useful insights into understanding various fractures and ruptures in South African schooling in the twenty-first century.

Starting in 2015, student protests have disturbed schools and campuses around the country, particularly prestigious and privileged institutions, with students expressing deep dissatisfaction with their educational experiences on multiple levels including curriculum, administration, financial access and inclusivity.

At the university level, calls for change have primarily taken two forms: firstly, as pressure for free education to improve access for the poorest; and secondly, as a demand for decolonized curricula that critiques and problematises dominant ethnocentric forms of knowledge, most of which position ‘Western’ scholarship as the fundamental bedrock for advanced learning. At the secondary schools, students have demanded reform of school policies that are narrowly premised on normative Anglophone and Eurocentric learner identities.

In this essay, I argue that while Bourdieu’s canon originates from the heartland of ethnocentric Western scholarship, his tools nonetheless provide important insights into the current events on South African campuses. I will outline why his sociological analysis of French schooling at that time is in fact more relevant to South Africa now than it has been previously, and how his analysis of schooling as a socially conservative force assists us in understanding the failure of education to provide economic and social emancipation for the vast majority of South Africans 23 years after the demise of Apartheid.
Having established this basis, I then turn to ask what responses might be available to students faced with such structures of schooling. Using Bhabha’s notions of mimicry and hybridity, I open questions of what might offer genuinely liberative learning experiences for the vast majority of South African students.

**Bourdieu’s sociology framework**

A very brief outline of Bourdieu’s key concepts’ relevant for this analysis is pertinent prior to analysing their applicability to SA schools. Such an outline is presented against the backdrop of considering what is the objective of the sociology of education.

A sociological analysis of schooling attempts to excavate ‘generative structures’ (Bourdieu, 1990) for trends and patterns in schooling arrangements and practices. It also seeks to differentiate between personal problems and social issues (Wright-Mills, 1959). Education sociology is interested in the routines and mechanisms by which social groups transmit knowledge from one generation to the next, and what productive and regulative functions such transmissions serve. Knowledge transmission invariably occurs informally within the unit of the family, or more formally within the larger social group by those designated as knowledge stewards. In the twentieth century with the almost total adoption of schooling as it became institutionalized in industrial Europe, the dominant form of socially sanctioned knowledge transmission beyond the family is primarily that of the brick-and-mortar school (with learners grouped by age into cohorts, spaces arranged into classrooms, and time divided by subject specification) and beyond this, the university.²

In 1974, Bourdieu published his essay “The School as a Conservative Force”, one of the first texts to question the established dominant trope that attending school was always a liberatory experience and a means of upward social mobility. His piece followed the Coleman Report (1966), a large-scale empirical study in the US that controversially found schools in fact perpetuated, rather than reduced social inequality. But unlike the Coleman Report, Bourdieu used his sociological framework that he began developing in French-occupied Algeria to understand how and why schooling might function in this manner.

Bourdieu reasons that each agent in society, in the period of their early socialization, develops a *habitus*, a precognitive disposition towards the world based on

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¹ The reader is encouraged to engage with some of the readings listed in the bibliography for a deeper description of a large and complex body of work. Bourdieu’s framework developed over 40 years of broad and detailed empirical engagement across multiple facets and contexts of twentieth century society.

² The university lacks the tightness of age cohorts of basic schooling, but nonetheless exhibits most of its other features.
their early experiences, an embodied internalisation of habits, rituals, instincts, norms and unspoken codes about how to be in the world and how to be with others. The habitus is not a fixed entity, but is relatively resistant to change once established. Simultaneously, groups of agents establish what he refers to as fields of practice, socially delineated spaces where norms, routines, goals and expectations around activities operate within relational power structures. Education is a field. Literature, or art, constitutes a field: a discursive space with unspoken rules and routines that do not transmit easily beyond those practices. An example: to sit forty people based on age facing the same wall in instalments of an hour, punctuated by a bell, to listen in silence to one other person makes no sense beyond school. It is not a practice used in mining, in office work, in retail. When found elsewhere, it is often to engage in practices that mimic schooling: training workshops or lectures. Thus, fields contain their own internal logic that is both fashioned and sustained by the compliance of the agents that operate within them.

Habitus and field make no sense in the absence of the other: the habitus of agents shapes the fields in which they operate, and concomitantly, fields encourage some aspects of the habitus of the agents that occupy it, and discourages or negates others. Agents constantly work within the structures of the fields they inhabit, deploying whatever resources or capitals they have at their disposal to master the goals that the field decrees as valid or valorous. These capitals might be economic, social, symbolic or cultural, and forms, modes and codes differ from field to field. For example in education, speaking the dominant language used in class is a cultural capital, whereas not speaking or having mastery of that language makes an agent (a student) less ‘fit’ to play the game of schooling. Those with more appropriate habitus and capitals at their disposal use their advantage to sustain their dominance, primarily by establishing symbols and signs of distinction that signal their difference from others. In schooling, the term ‘distinction’ is even explicitly used to delineate those who have achieved ‘success’ at schooling from those who have not. But distinction in the field is premised on difference: just as in academics, where a ‘distinction’ is valueless if it is obtained by every student in the class, the dominant groups of any field continue to deploy their capitals in order to set themselves apart.

Bourdieu often used the metaphor of a game to illustrate how habitus, field and capitals interacted. He posited that the primary purpose of schooling was the socially sanctioned transmission of cultural capital as valued by dominant social groups to their children, in a manner that made mastery of such capital extremely difficult, if not impossible, for other groups who lacked the habitus or capitals to be equally fit to play the game. Schooling, and what constitutes ‘success’ at schooling, is aligned with the
habits and preferences of the dominant group, the knowledge selected and assessed, and the modes of transmission and assessment.

But for such practices to continue, they need to be seen as legitimate by those who participate in them. For Bourdieu, the primary mechanism of this sanctioning was misrecognition: convincing all engaged in the game, whether dominant or marginalised, that a cultural arbitrary is essential and ‘without alternative’, whether it be speaking English, adding and subtracting well, knowing Shakespeare or preferring scientific to occult explanations for natural phenomena.

Institutionalised (and mandatory) schooling is also a singularly unique field. All fields are broadly embedded within a field of political and economic power, and schooling as a sub-field uniquely positions students from a young age as more or less dominant within that broader field of power. Schooling acts as the reproductive field of capitals: a means of disguising economic inheritance between parents and children in the form of knowledge. It is this singular position that has often led to the shared belief that attendance and success at school is both necessary and sufficient for upward social mobility and increased personal emancipation.

But this shared belief sits on shaky ground. As Bourdieu notes, the capitals brought to schooling amongst different social strata of students, whether this be based on gender, race, class or geography, differ vastly, and are premised on their family of origin (Bourdieu 1986). He clearly states:

“In fact, to penalize the underprivileged and favour the most privileged, the school has only to neglect, in its teaching methods and its techniques and its criteria when making academic judgements, to take into account the cultural inequalities between children of different social classes. In other words, by treating all pupils, however unequal they may be in reality, as equal in rights and duties, the educational system is led to give its de facto sanction to initial cultural inequalities.” (Bourdieu, 1974, p 113.)

This de facto sanction is extremely powerful, especially in a neoliberal social meritocracy when failure is often attributed to personal flaw. Despite Wright-Mill’s caution to distinguish between personal problems and social issues, and the clear trends in education between those who ‘succeed’ and those who ‘fail’, the notion of schooling as liberatory is still held as ‘common’ sense. Schooling is still misrecognized as culturally neutral, when it never can be (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

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1 This is not to suggest that there are no distinctions between different forms of knowledge as more or less powerful. Vygotsky, and Bernstein, both recognized that one of the primary features of modern schooling was the focus on teaching and learning the ability to extrapolate from everyday, quotidien forms of knowledge to abstract and codified forms. Such forms have certainly been at the heart of the modernization engine since the industrial revolution.
Bourdieu and 21st century South African education

The idea that schools establish and legitimise arbitrary, normative distinctions that stratify society was contentious in the US or France in the 1960s and 1970s. This is not the case in South Africa. Institutionalized schooling has been a means of social domination and stratification since missionaries first began establishing schools in the Cape in the 17th century (Hlatshwayo, 2000).

More recently, the project of apartheid sought to engineer South African society explicitly by race. One of the major, and most effective, apparatus of this project is schools, leveraged to sustain inequality through the deployment of Bantu Education for black learners. This deliberate entrenchment of inequality in schools fomented some of the most dramatic events of the anti-apartheid struggle, the most notable of which are the Soweto Student Uprisings of 1976.

Perhaps it is because the symbolic violence of schooling was so explicit for the last three hundred years that the South African gaze has not been as critical of schools’ inherent ability to entrench inequality post-Apartheid. All critiques (numerous as they are) of schooling post-1994 have focused, with good reason, on the quality of teaching and learning provision as gauged against the norm of ‘schools that work’. Yet such a narrow ambition for struggling schools fails to recognise that even if all ‘dysfunctional’ schools began doing all the things that ‘functional’ schools do tomorrow, the current arrangements of the system would still fundamentally disadvantage poor, black, non-Anglophone and rural learners.

Access to the quality of schooling formerly reserved only for white learners represented one of the great liberation goals for the new democratic government: the “doors of learning” were to be opened to all (Christie, 2008). And yet, bar the exceptions that prove the rule, schooling has failed to address deep social inequalities since the demise of Apartheid. Bourdieu’s insights into how schools (in their current form) tacitly sanction and legitimate social inequalities provides cold comfort to South Africans looking to schooling to solve social ills and narrow inequality gaps.

Furthermore, in the euphoric and contradictory days of the mid 1990s, the political rush to ‘treat all as equal’, instead of laying strong foundations for positive redress and redistribution, inadvertently led the post-Apartheid government to lay down policies that would in fact do just as Bourdieu warned: the current South African schooling system by and large treats all pupils (and schools), however unequal they may be in reality, as equal in rights and duties (Motala, 2009).

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4 Of course indigenous societies had their own means of intergenerational knowledge transmission (e.g. the initiation rites of young amaXhosa males into manhood through circumcision): ‘schooling’ here refers to Westernized schooling as established in industrial Victorian times and now well established as the common meaning of the word ‘schooling’.

5 The non-adoption of the Hunter Report is a good example of how discourses of ‘equality’ trumped those of redress in the late 1990s.
While the time and place differ vastly, the fundamental structure of schooling between 1970s France and 2017 South Africa are almost identical, and the social inequalities of South Africa by far outstrip those of France. This essay does not claim Bourdieu’s analysis as a grand theory of schooling failure in South Africa. Rather, as theory should, his insights into the reproductive and conservative functions of schooling provide points for understanding the generative structures underlying current South African education crises. The next section refocuses on the disruptions and tensions of the last two years on campuses across the country and asks what Bourdieu, and others, offer us in terms of tools to begin imagining a different, more just, schooling system.

**Making sense of the rupture: moving forward**

The recognition that schools impose cultural arbitraries that privilege some groups and disadvantage others provides a theoretical rationale for current uprisings in South African schools and on university campuses.

Calls for the decolonisation of curricula, the removal of arbitrary schools rules about hair-styles or the language that learners may use on the playground, are evidence of students beginning to puncture the misrecognition of the culturally arbitrary as essential.

The symbolic violence imposed by a school requires the co-option and cooperation of the marginalised groups into sustaining the (common yet unfounded) belief that certain practices, knowledges and norms are ‘superior’. But as more and more students with a habitus at odds with that expected and valued by the education institution gain admission, the pressure for alternatives increases. Field and habitus are dialogically mutually constructive: the habitus of agents is both shaping of and shaped by the field. It then follows that as more agents with an alternative habitus gain access to privileged schooling spaces and bring different types of resources, the nature of the game of schooling, and the cultural arbitrariness it demands, can no longer be business as usual.

Homi Bhabha (1994) provides two concepts for describing the response of the colonised/marginalised towards the cultural imposition of the coloniser/dominant: **mimicry** and **hybridity**. For many years, students of disadvantaged backgrounds have ‘divorced themselves from themselves’ (Bourdieu, 1999) in order to obtain the habits and dispositions of dominant groups that are required of them to succeed at prestigious schools and at universities. Their **mimicry** of dominant groups’ language,
accents, bearing and habits set them at odds with their cultural practices of the home
and family. As Bhabha notes, the mimesis can never be complete—the mimicry de-
composes to mockery, a reflection of that which is considered ‘cultured’ or ‘educated’
so as to expose its arbitrariness (Bourdieu, 1990). Ironically, the jettisoning of all
epistemes, practices and preferences considered ‘non-African’ and hence tainted, is also
a form of mimicry: Afrocentrism adopts all the vices and limitations of Eurocentrism
by adopting narrow, essentialised definitions of identity (Bhabha, 1994; Andreotti, 2011).

But Bhabha also offers an alternative: hybridity, and cultural difference rather than
diversity. Where the latter is premised on identities being fixed entities cast as essential
and immutable, the former embraces pluralism, complexity and the agency of the
individual to manifest and orchestrate their own identity and cultural resources. That
is not to say we all descend into a “melting pot of love where everyone is brown”: cultural distinctions do exist and are backed up by power asymmetries that are
historical, political and economic. Rather, the concept of hybridity foregrounds schools’
current inability to leverage identity complexity and multiple forms of resources as
cultural capital in the learning project: students are expected to be and behave a
certain way, and deviations are rarely tolerated.  

Embracing hybridity as a strategy enables both dissenting students and educators
to leverage what they bring that is undervalued by the education system, as well as
harness the powerful forms of knowledge that formal education bestows. Students
can learn African philosophy and Greek philosophy, the Victorian literature canon as well
as post-colonial critiques thereof, and wrestle with contradicting accounts of history
from multiple perspectives. Rather than jettisoning scientific syllabi, students can learn
both organic chemistry and the philosophy of science, understanding the differences
between models and reality, as well as the limitations and strengths of positivist/
realist approaches to empirical investigation.

While time limitations always imply that a curriculum is a sub-set of all that could
be taught (and hence is always symbolically violent to someone), a pluralistic, hybrid
curriculum offers a promising approach; not only to avoiding ethnocentrically limited
thinking and learning, but to education that embraces critical approaches, appreciates
complexity and has a healthy cynicism for “single stories”. The tools and literacies
required to teach and learn such curricula are advanced and powerful, requiring

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6 A wonderful account of this splitting of the self to obtain access to the cultural capital of education, what Bourdieu calls habitus divié, or cleft
habitus, is narrated in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s novel “Nervous Conditions”.
8 (for a good example of schools serving disadvantaged learners in Australia who resist centralized curricula policies to elevate their learners’ and
communities’ indigent cultural resources, see Lingjärd et. al. 2003).
9 This is not to say there are no limitations on what constitutes tolerable behaviour. But that these norms should not just be assumed, but
negotiated democratically.
10 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story (2009)
abstractions of patterns and concepts—and attention to detail—in ways that current, universalistic curricula do not.

In addition to a pluriversalist (Mignolo, 2013) approach to curriculum content, educational spaces need to be mindful that pedagogic acts are always culturally discursive (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) and hence symbolically violent; but they need not be as symbolically violent as they currently are. Educators should rather attempt to work in the difficult boundaries of hybridity rather than expecting mimesis, and in doing so heed Bourdieu's (1974) suggestion to ‘take nothing for granted’ in order to construct a genuinely liberating pedagogy. That is: no tacit expectations about what is ‘proper’ or ‘right’ should be assumed from learners, but rather all forms of different cultural arbitrariness should be explicitly taught as objects of study in and of themselves, negotiated between educator and student in order to find common understanding about the education contract they must forge.

**Conclusion**

These approaches to schooling are far easier to write about than to implement. Questions arise over what to include and what to exclude when so much is available to be learnt. But a closer analysis of our current curricula, predominately at the schooling level, reveal inert (and sometimes arcane) content, the regurgitation of which is used more to distinguish those who ‘can’ from those who ‘can’t’ than to empower and enliven interesting thinking. There is more room to manoeuvre than might initially be apparent.

Then there is the question of who might be willing and able to teach such a curriculum, as well as the question of what changes would be necessary at the broader social scale to allow such changes; the current neoliberal moment that emphasises human capital outcomes of schooling is not fertile ground for such a bold reimagining.

But our current narrow, discursive and arbitrary schooling, both in form and content, continues to favour the privileged and penalize the under-privileged, and commands the compliance of the under-privileged to do so. The current moment of rupture on schooling campuses may provide the crack through which to shine the light\(^a\) required for reimagining an advanced and hybrid form of schooling that genuinely does open the doors of learning to all.

*The author wishes to thank Professor Pam Christie and Dr. Heather Jacklin for their stimulating conversations and presentations, many of which informed this piece.*

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\(^a\) with thanks to Leonard Cohen
BOURDIEU ON THE BARRICADES: THE SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE OF SA EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

References


Radical Democracy and Educational Experiments: From Rojava to Rio de Janeiro

By Josh Platzky Miller

Introduction

Coming into its own in 2012, the revolution in Rojava (northern Syria) has been ideologically guided by women’s liberation, ecological harmony and a form of anti-capitalist radical democracy. It has provided fertile ground for a profoundly different education system from the statist, authoritarian models previously imposed in the region. Across the globe in Brazil, following the 2013 mass protests and uprisings, waves of students occupied their schools and universities from 2015 in the "primavera estudantil". Their challenges ranged from school infrastructure investment, to the quality and content of their education, to the creation of a more caring and democratic experience within the educational environment and society at large. Although these contexts are not strictly similar to one another, they both open the space to imagine possible political and educational pathways. They can thus help us to think beyond the immediate political context of South Africa today, towards a liberatory future.

Brazil

From November 2015, high schools in São Paulo were occupied by their students as a confrontational means of saving a number of schools threatened by closure from a heavy-handed, bureaucratic policy of state school restructuring (Campos, et al., 2016). By March 2016, some schools had been occupied in Rio de Janeiro and other cities, over issues including education financing, with claims that the sector had been ‘abandoned’ by the state. Teachers and support staff had not been paid their wages, or had de facto pay cuts, and their strike action had had little impact. These issues were linked to broader

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" The ‘Student Spring’, with reference to the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ protests.
" Due to space constraints, some generalisations may be made. This should not be read as true of all students/schools.
processes of neoliberalisation: students blamed the state for trying to run down public education so that privatisation is easier to justify, and many problems faced by workers were related to terceirização (outsourcing). Thus, throughout 2015 and 2016, these forms of education-centred protests had interrelated with other socio-political issues, with occupations of up to two months alongside other tactics. At the end of August 2016, there was a controversial change in federal government (labelled a ‘parliamentary coup’), followed shortly by national austerity measures, including deep and long-lasting cuts to public education. In October 2016, students at over 1,000 schools and 200 universities responded by protesting and occupying institutions across the country.

The occupations were part of a struggle for a better, more meaningful, education – in contrast to existing education, which was described as ‘shallow and stupid’, or as training to produce cheap, alienated workers. Indeed, the occupations themselves were educational, affecting students’ perceptions, values and understanding of the world. Students, with some sympathetic teachers, ran classes around the formal curriculum and beyond, with topics including their rights under Brazilian law; Indigenous, African and Afro-Brazilian history and movements; and feminism and gender issues. Formal classes ran alongside cultural activities and life skills training. Students have reflected on how the quality of their education during the occupations was actually better than it had been because they covered what was not usually taught, and multiple diverse perspectives were encouraged and acknowledged. Simultaneously, better relationships were formed with teachers who worked with them. Teachers were often placed in the role of students, learning about the lives of young people, and even about modes of political struggle. The forms of organisation developed during the occupations changed relationships and produced new forms of social relations, which was a crucial success of the movements (Campos, et al., 2016, p. 12).

These struggles also changed students’ self-perceptions and political consciousness, occurring at a formative time in their lives. The students were fiercely autonomous (Catini & Mello, 2016, p. 1182), with a deep sense of ‘protagonismo’ (of being “our own protagonists”), arising from having taken the school “for ourselves”. Students created ‘comissões’ (commissions) for activities from administrative tasks to cooking, cleaning, teaching, organising classes and cultural activities, security and taking care of one another, and ensuring that they were safe and doing well. These approaches were particularly significant for students whose identities are regularly marginalised in Brazilian society, such as those identifying as black, women, and LGBTI+. For these students, the occupations can also be read as an assertion of their existence and their

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14 Including having classes in the street, disrupting traffic and the regular ‘order’ of city life, and even occupying a radio station to correct media misrepresentations of their struggles. See http://www.fb.com/ocuparadiouel
presence, in a socio-political context that often denies them their humanity or their identity (Aspis, 2017). Students’ spatial organising reflected this challenge, by creating gender-neutral bathrooms, and focusing specifically on women’s security in occupied spaces.

Students also took their demands to the state, engaging with broader political processes and forcing schools and education departments to engage constructively with their demands. There was thus some acknowledgement of the need to engage with political life generally, while simultaneously practicing more radically democratic decision-making on their own terms. Nevertheless, students recognised the need to understand how political processes actually work in order to engage with the world as it is, and to prepare to challenge subsequent political developments.

There were thus multiple forms of politics at play simultaneously: from political claim-making on administrators and governments, with strategic claims around the state’s ‘responsibility’; through to a self-asserted politics involving the students “seizing the means of their own education” (Branford, 2016). Through their struggles, a prefigurative politics was formed which was directed towards creating a new society – within the schools and more broadly. This generated a sense of solidarity, which challenged aspects of the status quo ranging from gendered norms to the individualism that had often previously been inculcated in students. These actions were not simply about the here-and-now, the immediate problems in schools, but extended to how the students see themselves, each other and the future of their country – and changing it through their insurgent politics.

**Rojiwa**

In Rojava (northern Syria), home to roughly 2.5 million people, radically democratic experiments are taking place that prioritise anti-statist, localised, people’s self-governance; ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious plurality and inclusivity; women’s liberation; and a social and ecological economy which provides for everyone’s basic needs, even in the midst of war.15 These approaches stem from ideologies that draw on a “consciousness of the fact that different forms of oppression are interrelated” with patriarchy, capitalism, and the state seen as foundational to interlocking systems of oppression (Dirik, 2015b), which manifests as a rejection of the oppressive histories, particularly against Kurdish minorities of the regional nation-states (Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran) and the contemporary brutality of Daesh/ISIS.

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15 For ideological background, drawing on anarchist, feminist, ecological, and Marxist-Leninist thought, see (STW, 2015), (Biehl, 2014), (Bookchin, 1982), and especially Öcalan, e.g. (2011), (2013), (2015).
Largely initiated by Kurdish liberation movements, people in the autonomous territories of Rojava have begun experiments in self-defence, and the creation of their own terms of liberation – rather than relying on others to do it for them. Even so, political activity can be seen in terms of two complementary processes: of autonomous organising alongside institutions operating for all. This exemplifies a kind of pragmatic, hybrid politics, also visible in approaches to political institutions, in the creation of collectively-run alternatives that, over time, undermine the need for the state, which then “dissolves” (Kendal & Oak, 2016).

These ‘dual-power’ processes are clear in Rojava’s education sector: the Syrian state schooling system still exists, but its pedagogies of fear, compulsory patriotism, and distorted histories are being challenged from within, and from the broader democratic society. Meanwhile, people’s alternatives are being constructed through revolutionary academies, which are “oriented to meeting the basic needs of the broad population” (Knapp, et al., 2016, p. 181), and provide “training for the construction of the social life, social change and transformation, and also to train people for leading social institutions” (Akif & Aydn, 2014). Covering a wide range of topics, with regional localisation, academies often focus particularly on learning Kurdish language, history, and literature, which had been repressed under successive state regimes. Women’s history and experiences are interwoven with ‘general’ topics, while also being the focus of dedicated courses (Knapp, et al., 2016, p. 182). Designed for the transmission of “liberatory values to people”, they teach “everything from...local languages to philosophy, history, and science. Even European philosophy...is on the curriculum” (Knapp, et al., 2016, p. 182). Thus content includes whatever enables people “to own ourselves, our society, and to understand the social reality”, to improve people’s lives in contextually-relevant ways (Akif & Aydn, 2014).

Education is not limited to particular institutions: political education has taken place in women’s military forces, and ‘all-women houses’ have been created, where women can live for as long as they like, and where they can take part in free education (STW, 2015, pp. 24-5). Moreover, educational institutions produce their own materials and people are encouraged to teach others about what they have learnt (Knapp, et al., 2016, pp. 180, 182). This manifests the principle that education is for everyone, no matter their age or position in society. Significantly, there is an emphasis on caring for the most vulnerable: even with scarce resources, the city of Kobani, the capital city of Kobani canton attacked by Daesh/ISIS in 2014.

17 Incorporating authors from Rosa Luxemburg to Judith Butler, alongside local authors & history (Biehl, 2016).
18 The capital city of Kobani canton attacked by Daesh/ISIS in 2014.
These experiments draw on a non-hierarchical pedagogy in which “dialogue is central”, and where “sharing and collective behaviour are valued”. Thus, staff and students are equals whose roles change over time as they work together to develop their knowledge collectively (Knapp, et al., 2016, pp. 180-2). For example, instead of final exams and memorisation, students critique their teachers on their teaching method, encouraging them to improve in their roles as teachers. Providing a framework for these pedagogical approaches is the fact that many of the academies’ courses are run as separated training sessions in which people live, cook, play, and learn together; mixing book and classroom learning with audio-visual and discussion-based approaches (Akif & Aydn, 2014).

The education system and the radically democratic political system are mutually-constitutive. Students cover practical matters while “searching for meaning” and thinking for themselves, to “becomes the subjects of their own lives” and to “participate in Democratic Autonomy” (Biehl, 2014). This emphasises knowledge that is “based on understanding, explaining and the shared experiences of life”, according to the principles of a “democratic, ecologic-economy and gender emancipatory paradigm” (Akif & Aydn, 2014). Rather than being designed for status or signalling, qualifications or job prospects, the system develops knowledge based on local social dynamics fundamentally oriented towards the question, “how does society want to live?” (Akif & Aydn, 2014). As a teacher in the town of Rimelan framed it, “we want to think freely now, without boundaries, and question everything...our goal is to broaden [heretofore] limited school learning and enable people to perceive themselves as conscious subjects”.

Conclusion

In both cases, there is a clear rejection of education being commodified or used to reinforce structures of domination. Moreover, they both move beyond a rejection, emphasising the ways in which students are their own main actors in ‘making their world real’ and charting their own fate going forward, drawing particularly on marginalised and liberatory histories. At times this involved a political rejection of some forms of representation, while strategically using representatives that were deeply accountable to localised, deliberative, direct democratic structures. Many of these practices relied on collectively creating spaces for people to be ‘at home’, understood and cared for by those around them – and thus able to chart collective ways forward that encompassed everybody, rather than a select group.

* Quoted in (Knapp, et al., 2016, p. 182).
Interestingly, the approaches to solidarity in each context overlapped significantly, starting with the imperative to know about what is happening, to share the story, to be inspired by their actions and, crucially, to “care about their politics” (Dirik, 2015b). Following this was an emphasis on building a “strong revolutionary movement in your own country”, from which various movements can “learn from and support one another” (Knapp, et al., 2016, p. 257). This kind of educational process is itself a form of liberatory pedagogy that contests the model of ‘knowledge production in the global north, consumption in the global south’. Finally, the success of such movements requires challenging the “pillars of the system that caused this situation to begin with” (Dirik, 2015b).

The political-educational struggles summarised above are not simply about the closure of schools, or language rights, or any single issue. They call for a reimagining of the relationship between education and society, of ways of engaging with the world, of relating to one another, of thinking and being – of collectively building a more human society. “Seizing the means of one’s own education” is a critical act in its own right, and lays the groundwork for subsequent endeavours.

But pursuing these paths means learning and teaching together; being able to critique each other and self-critique for survival and growth; rethink the modes, forms, content, and purposes of our own education, who it serves and why it serves them and, ultimately, how it could be different. As one YPJ fighter, Amara Cudî, affirmed: to succeed, it is “vital to know what you fight for”.20 Let us thus continue to work out liberatory visions for the future of this part of the world.

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20 Quoted in (Dirik, 2015b).


Thought and Reflections on Estrangement

By Zimpande Kawanu

Then Almitra spoke, saying, we would ask now of Death. And he said: You would know the secret of death. But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life? - Khalil Gibran, The Prophet

I remember walking in downtown Jo’burg with my aunt. We were stocking up supplies for her spaza shop, when two men flanked me on either side and grabbed me from the waist, hoisting me up by the belt. They dragged me in this manner at length, ensuring a considerable distance between me and my asthmatic aunt, who was encumbered by the large bags she was carrying. Straining my neck, I struggled to look back in the hope of sighting her, who, amidst the people wandering about, was lost in the throng, out of sight. Excited onlookers riled up by the frenzy were jerked to attention. Some pointed, others jeered, and a few continued without a hint of perturbation. I wondered what it was they saw, as I silently appealed to them - to someone, anybody - for an intervention. They saw me and yet there was no mention or indication that they recognized a person under duress, in need of help. My captors, who had not said anything to me for a length of time, announced themselves to be policemen - SAPS. Their civilian clothing had blended them with the mass of people going about their business, making it impossible to identify them (a strategy adopted so as to ensnare timorous undocumented immigrants). In my inarticulate jabber, with my stammer exacerbated by an unbearable sense of dread, I switched between ineloquent Zulu, English, and even some Shona, trying to inform them that I was South African. They marched on, with stolid, expressionless faces. My appeals became squeals, matched by their silence as they strode forward. I strained to walk, rising onto my tiptoes to relieve the pressure of my scrunched-up pants that pressed up against my groin.

My relationship to South Africa has been tenuous. My claim to citizenship often, if not perennially, feels so illegitimate that I am accustomed to feelings of anxiety whenever I introduce myself as one. Imposter. To lessen this this unease, I usually add qualification: “I was born here but my parents were from Zambia.”
In anthropology, the autochthon is an original or indigenous inhabitant of a place, an aborigine. This concept literally means people sprung from the earth itself - the original inhabitants of a country as opposed to settlers, émigrés, expatriates and other sojourners. My parents were a kind of émigré, until their passing. No more than a month after they had been interred, was I transferred to Zambia into the care of Grandpa, who took custody until I returned to South Africa a few years later, to begin primary school.

It is uncanny and yet oddly consoling to read words written by another person, who, is often, far removed from you across history, distance and time, and to find in their prose, an acute sense of what you have experienced and felt. This is the sensation that apprehends and transfixes me when reading W. G. Sebald, and even today, I am still reeling from the passage in *The Rings of Saturn*, in which he narrates that,

“Michael was nine and a half when, in November 1933, with his siblings, his mother, and her parents, he came to England. His father had already left Berlin several months before, and was installed in one of those unbeatable stone houses in Edinburgh, where wrapped in woollen blankets, he pored over dictionaries and textbooks until late at night; for despite having been professor of paediatrics at the Charité, he now, in his fifties, had to sit his medical examinations all over again in a language unfamiliar to him if he was to continue in practice as a doctor. Michael later wrote in his memoirs about the fears and anxieties of the family as they travelled toward the unknown, fears which came to a head in the customs hall in Dover as they looked on with horror as the Grandfather’s pair of budgerigars, which had so far survived the journey unharmed, were impounded. It was the loss of the two pet birds, Michael writes, and having to stand by powerless and see them vanish forever behind some sort of screen, that brought us up against the whole monstrosity of changing countries under such inauspicious circumstances. The disappearance of those budgerigars at Dover customs marked the beginning of the disappearance of his Berlin childhood behind the new identity that he assumed little by little over the next decade. How little there has remained in me of my native country, the chronicler observes as he scans the few memories he still possesses, barely enough for an obituary of a lost childhood.”

It often seems to me that adulthood is a drawn-out process for mourning one’s irrecoverable childhood. Sebald captures the rupture that I was confronted with when I found myself coming of age, suddenly deracinated. Also, the disappearance of one particular childhood and the assuming of another is not immediately perceptible, but insidious, transpiring subtly. You lose the language, you lose the accent, and then the
memories become dimmer. After moving to South Africa, on many occasions I would wake up in the new house in Germiston and wish that when I opened my eyes (which I had kept shut since the point of rousing) it would be the blue curtains of Grandpa’s house stirring before me. I cannot say for how long this continued, but at some point I stopped wishing to be spirited back, and further still, I reached a time when I forgot the details of that house in Bauleni altogether. What has remained is the longing, an interminable sense of nostalgia and melancholia, and these, opaque and spectral scraps of memory are barely sufficient for an obituary of my lost childhood.

The next time I moved, it was from South Africa for Zimbabwe, where I was to begin secondary school at Kutama College. It was a boarding school in Zvimba, a rural region in Mashonaland West. Migratory patterns are, taken from a broad perspective, largely predictable. The sequence follows, or rather flows, from the poorer countries and regions to the more affluent ones. Usually, the travellers leave their places of birth or occupation under adverse/inauspicious circumstances: civil war, political discrimination, economic deprivation, as well as other reasons. This had been the case with my Zulu grandmother, “granny” who emigrated, following my grandfather’s marriage proposal, to begin a new life in Zambia.

Years later, in August 1993, 64 Muzovu Street looked just as ordinary as the other houses that stood in uniform rows to its left and right side. All unindividuated, they were painted in the same government standard-issue brown. Whenever I have returned there, it always strikes me that there is an ascetic harmony to these fields of low-cost housing that extends as far as the eye can see. Mangala lay in the interior room ebbing in and out of consciousness, and so frail that she looked spectral, ethereal. The lump had been detected late following the death of her husband, who that same year in March, had been involved in a fatal car accident. Soon after that, Mangala, with two small children still at the breast and a third, an embryo in its second trimester, moved in with Granny, who was to console her in her time of bereavement. A few weeks later, during her antenatal consultation at UTH (university training hospital), a crestfallen doctor, straining to contain his own sorrow, for he had heard of her recent loss, told her that the report from the lab bore grave news.

This was in April. In May the malignant cells had spread to her cervix and Mr Tyson, an orderly, moved in to help with the palliative care, whilst Granny watched and consoled the little children. In June she was admitted to the hospital, where I am told, that on the day of her little girls’ third birthday, on the twenty-first, the nurses organised a party. Mangala, who had been in a constant state of fatigue, was enervated, and watched on as the little girl, unaccustomed to the doting attention she was receiving, was beaming a beatific smile.
“Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience” writes Edward Said, who, despite writing on the plight of Palestinians displaced by the establishment of the Jewish state, speaks to an experience that I can claim to having an intimate awareness of, having led an itinerant/nomadic life. In 2009, on my return from Zimbabwe at O.R Tambo Airport, a sneering janitor shot me with an acrimonious question: “when are you going back home?” It has been eight years since that interdiction, and despite having achieved some semblance of stability in Cape Town, the gnawing feeling of estrangement has never dissipated: “Exile is life led outside... and no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew.” (149) However, it must be acknowledged and even confessed, that I am a citizen of South Africa, and this has enabled me precipitous gain (manifest) in the form of access to scholarships and some work. I should be mindful to exercise some sensitivity in how I wield this identity of the exile for it is true, “exile originated in the age-old practice of banishment” (144). My life has been nomadic, and whereas there have been qualities of the exilic, this does not wholly typify it. Going back to Said, he tells us that,

“...poets and writers lend dignity to a condition legislated to deny dignity. From them, it is apparent that, to concentrate on exile as a contemporary political punishment, you must therefore map the territories of experience beyond those mapped by the literature of the exile itself – you must think of the refugee-peasants with no prospect of ever returning home, armed only with a ration card and an agency number. Paris may be a capital famous for cosmopolitan exiles, but it is also a city where unknown men and women have spent years of miserable loneliness: Vietnamese, Algerians, Cambodians, Lebanese, Senegalese, Peruvians. As you move further from the Atlantic world, the awful forlorn waste increases: the helplessly large numbers, the compounded misery of undocumented people suddenly lost, without a tellable history.” (139)

One can add Cape Town and Johannesburg to this list. Its masses of undocumented women and men, who bundled, have bussed or walked to these enclaves, with little hope of returning home.

“And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in the exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind for ever... Looked at from the bleak political perspective
The opposite of exile is nationalism - the other ‘N word’. As a consequence of the estrangement that I have been confessing, I often find myself dwelling on the features that distinguish me as an outsider, primarily: class, complexion and accent. This heightened state of self-consciousness, and self-surveillance, manifests in Cape Town, Jo’burg, even Lusaka, Harare, and more severely in Basel, Munich, and Boston. If adulthood is about leveraging one’s misfortunes, then I perhaps stand to be at an advantage here. As a nomad I belong nowhere and everywhere simultaneously. Again, Said observes,

“When it perhaps seems peculiar to speak of the pleasures of exile, there are some positives things to be said for a few of its conditions. Seeing the entire world as a foreign land makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one sitting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that is contrapuntal.” (148)  

To feel perpetually out of place is to be a sceptic. It is to look at people, situations and places over, twice, thrice, with equanimity; and it is to elide insularity, dogmatic orthodoxy and provincialism. The stranger knows that homes are always provisional in this secular and contingent world and that, “borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons.”(147) The only home truly available now, though fragile and vulnerable, says Said, is in writing. This home, he continues, transcends national and provincial limits.

**Works Cited**


Decolonisation as an Internal Revolution of Thought among Individuals in British West Africa, from the mid-18th - 20th Century

By Kweku Yakubu

A simple definition of ‘freedom’ on an individual level reveals that it implies the power to think, act, and speak as one deems fit without any hindrance. It also denotes the power of ‘being’ or ‘doing’ as well as the right of refusing purportedly rational socio-economic changes (such as hut taxes and entry into wage labour society), especially if it is perceived to be disruptive to the conventional order of things and indigenous values on a communal level. Freedom, understood in this simple manner, has characterized Africa’s relationship with the rest of the world from at least the 14th century.

The establishment of trust and subsequently commerce between and among European, Arab and African peoples in the 15th century was an exercise of freedom which crystallized socioeconomic relations among universally human, but culturally unique populations which continue to this day. The abolition of slavery by the end of the 18th century was an exercise of freedom, and at the same time, an exercise in the right to challenge the status quo and overturn the normalized rules of the game. The anti-colonial struggle waged by detribalized (predominantly westernized and bourgeois) native populations in many colonial territories and their subsequent success in the attainment of political independence, Africa wide, by the end of 1960s, also utilized freedom as an aspirational value.

A study of the debates among Africans in the mid-20th century reveals how the term has been coupled with legal terminologies such as human rights on an individual level, and national sovereignty on a collective level. On the collective level, freedom has been traditionally understood as the right and power of a cultural people, or an autonomous African governing body to govern itself economically, socially, politically and set its own strategic goals for the future without any interference from outside sources or bodies.

Without a doubt, an understanding of freedom in the mid-20th century should be seen as a part of a broader historical movement in ideas and thought. Most importantly,
in my opinion, it should be viewed as being rooted in the following existential question “Am I not a man and a brother?” which can ultimately be found in discourses on slavery in Europe and in North America (15th century), to the Haitian revolution (16th century), abolition of slavery (18th century), the independence struggle (20th century) and post independence deprivation struggle (neo-colonial/present era).

The discussion subsumes anti-slavery and anti-colonial sentiment under the broad heading of decolonization. Furthermore the approach taken is from the history of ideas. The rationale for doing this is based on the observation that the historical evolution of decolonization ideology and its articulation among Africans and their allies as anti-slavery humanism, Pan-African nationalism, Black Power, or Black consciousness was first of all a conscious expression of the mind. From such a perspective, it is recognised that the call for decolonization in Africa as well as the call for a more ethical and just global socio-economic order between the 18th and 20th centuries was less of an external, visible, political force but rather, it was in the first place an individual psychological shift. It was a personal revolution of thought and transvaluation of values which shifted the worldview of individual personalities.

In this regard, Decolonial thought is fundamentally a shift of an individual’s world view to the extent that he/she no longer identified as a servant of the colonial order but as an independent human being capable of making decisions in his own interest without guidance from the colonial master. As a result of this shift, the individual in many instances became critical of the colonial order which was now viewed as unethical and antihuman. The call for Decolonization can thus be contrasted with Enlightenment as explained by 18th century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant to mean:

*Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. Sapere Aude! [dare to know] “Have courage to use your own understanding!”—that is the motto of enlightenment.*

Understood in this way, I will propose and attempt to show that the movement from antislavery to anti-colonialism is in a nutshell evidence of the courageous attempt by certain articulate African intellectuals to solve an existential puzzle and use their own understanding to impact their psychological, social, economic and political affairs.

The approach of this work is intellectual history. It is a presentation of individuals, their ideas and life’s work. Most importantly, the highlighted individuals are relatively unknown. Accordingly, the purpose of this project is threefold: to draw attention to the
existential crises and alienation attendant with slavery and the colonial situation, the ideas which arose from it, as well as, illustrate the necessity of social and intellectual history in studies of the African past. It is important to note that the highlighted individuals were concerned primarily with their personal liberation, and secondarily, with broader notions of freedom and justice. The chronological arc of the study begins from the 18th and ends in the 20th century.

All the individuals highlighted, in my opinion, underwent a clear revolution of thought (as opposed to evolution), and so experienced a fundamental change in ideas of ‘what is’, ‘what can be’ and ‘what ought to be’ of their rapidly changing socio-economic environment. It is this process which I identify and place under the banner, ‘internal revolution’. Furthermore, I will suggest that this revolutionary process was in the first place, metaphysical in nature. It was from this metaphysical foundation that the individuals viewed social relations as well as ethics. It was from this departure point that they became critics of the institution of slavery, the colonial situation and the status quo socio-economic realities which they faced.

A more detailed exposition of the individuals presented can be found in the following publication by Gambian Pan Africanist and Intellectual Historian, Ayodele Jabez Langley (1943-2007): ‘Ideologies of Liberation in Black Africa, 1856 – 1970: documents on modern African Political thought from colonial times to the present’. Supplementary sources are also provided at the end of the brief biographies.

William Ansah Sessarakoo (1730-1770)

The exact birth and death dates of Ansah Sessarakoo are unknown. What is known about him, however, is that he was the son of a wealthy Gold Coast merchant who was wrongfully enslaved on a diplomatic mission to England in the mid-18th century.

His father had intended to send him to England to learn more about the British and their customs in order to increase their family business prospects. However, the captain of the ship Lady Carolina, David Bruce Crichton, entrusted with Sessarakoo’s transport, dishonourably sold him into slavery in Barbados around 1749. Sessarakoo was to remain a slave at a trading port in Barbados until he was discovered years later by an English slave trader. Consequently, he was liberated by English and Gold Coast slave traders on the Royal African Company, an English joint-stock company operating in slaves and other commodities along the West African coast in the 18th century. In an interesting turn of events, Sessarakoo was transported to England where he was received as an African Prince.
Sessarakoo’s father, known by the British as John Correntee (his local name remains unknown but probably the Akan name, Koranteng), was a prominent merchant in Anomabo, a large trading port in the Fanti confederacy in the Gold Coast at the time, and so was of special interest to the many European trading companies competing for access to trade and land in the region. This may explain why Sessarakoo was received as a Prince.

Although there are no records of Sessarakoo engaging in Abolitionist activity during his stay in England, he nonetheless succeeded in garnering respect not only for himself, but for all Africans as civilized individuals. When he left England, he also left behind the fairy tale life of an African slave turned prince.

His journey from the Gold Coast to Barbados, England and then back to the Gold Coast was an important marker of the abolitionist movement in Britain. Without speaking or doing much, Sessarakoo showed the British that Africans were not inferior savages, but were equally deserving of humane treatment. Furthermore, his visit forced London society to acknowledge the ethics of the complex social relations in place between Africans and Europeans at the time.

In his memoirs, published in 1750, Sessarakoo wrote that: “Good sense is the companion of all complexions”, which may be taken to be illustrative of his thoughts on the unethical nature of the slave trade. For more on William Ansah Sessarakoo see his memoir – ‘The Royal African: or, Memoirs of the Young Prince of Annamaboe.’

The memoirs are freely available, courtesy of a special collections at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the USA. It can be accessed at the following web link: http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/royal/royal.html

**Olaudah Equiano (1745 - 1797)**

Olaudah Equiano, known also by the name given to him by his European masters, Gustavas Vassa, is believed to have been born around 1745 in a village east of the Niger River in what is now Nigeria. His own account of his remarkable life: ‘The interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavas Vasa the African, was published in London in 1789.

Around the age of ten, Olaudah and his sister were captured by slavers from a neighbouring ethnic group. As chattel, he was sold from one slave owner to another until he ended up on the West African coast. He was subsequently sold to a plantation owner in the West Indies and worked aboard slave ships sailing between the Caribbean and England. In his early twenties, he managed to befriend a British aristocrat who encouraged and helped him to buy his freedom.
After buying himself out of bondage, he offered his services to ship Captains and nearly got enslaved again several times simply because of his demographic features. He visited the Mediterranean and took part in an expedition to the arctic in 1773. He crossed the Atlantic several times, first as a slave, and later as a wage labourer.

He was an ardent member of the abolition of slavery movement in England and was appointed Commissary for stores when the freed slaves were settled in Sierra Leone in the late 18th century.

In his time, many European trading companies who found slavery profitable attempted to justify the practice of slaving by suggesting that it was a ‘savage’ practice adhered to by Africans themselves, as evidenced in what they regarded as indigenous institutions such as pawning and panyaaing. Equiano was at pains to point out that the form of slavery practiced in the Americas and in the West Indies was unethical and inhumane and had nothing in common with any of the practices in the Guinea Coast (what is now West Africa).

The following passage from his autobiography illustrates his lament:

“In times of war, those prisoners that were not sold or redeemed were kept as slaves: but how different was their condition from that of slaves in the West Indies! With us they do no more work than other members of the community, even their master; their food, clothing and lodging were nearly the same as theirs, (except that they were not permitted to eat with those that were freeborn), and there was scarce any other difference between them than a superior degree of importance which the head of the family possesses in our state, and that authority which, as such he exercises over every part of his household. Some of these slaves have even slaves under them as their own property and for their own use.”

During the 17th and 18th centuries, there was a commonplace assumption in Europe that the African was not quite a human being, an assumption that has persisted and, in spite of the evidence to the contrary, continues to indirectly influence social relations between Europeans and Africans. When Olaudah Equiano’s autobiography appeared in 1789, it was immediately recognised as an important contribution to the fate of the African slave in the West Indies and in the Americas. The British Monthly Review for June 1789 set the tone when it concluded that the book was ‘calculated to increase the odium that has been excited against the West Indian Planters’.

Olaudah Equiano’s contribution was one of the first forceful statements of African humanity in Europe, the West Indies and the Southern States of America. ‘Am I not a man and brother too?’ was the question constantly on the lips of Equiano and which, sadly enough was never satisfactorily answered until he died.
Like Ottabah Cugano 1757-1793 (who was also captured on the coast of Guinea and sold into slavery), Equiano made the symbolic gesture of redeeming his humanity by proclaiming that he had a name: Olaudah Equiano; not Gustavus Vassa, Plato, Cesar, David or John. This act towards establishing a unique African identity, distinct from the one given to him by his masters was a critical revolution of thought and his first step towards individual freedom.


**Kwabena Ottobah Cugoano (1757 - 1793)**

A notable antislavery campaigner, who worked alongside Equiano, was Ottobah Cugoano. It is estimated that he was born in 1757, in the part of West Africa now called Ghana. In 1770, he was kidnapped and taken to the West Indies, where he spent nearly a year enslaved on Grenada. Cugoano was sold and transported to England in 1772 and soon became one of the leaders of London’s radical African community (Sons of Africa) and their abolitionist campaign to end the slave trade.

In 1786, Cugoano played a key part in the rescue of Henry Demane, a freed slave who had been kidnapped and was being shipped out to the West Indies. Cugoano and another community leader, William Green, reported the kidnapping to Granville Sharp and Demane was rescued at the very last minute, just as the ship was about to leave.

In 1787, Cugoano published a book called ‘Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Human Species’. Cugoano was in fact the first published African critic of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the first African to demand publicly the total abolition of the trade and the freeing of enslaved Africans. The book seems to have been written with the help of Olaudah Equiano and other abolitionists. It set out the case for the abolition of the Slave Trade and contained accounts of slavery in Grenada:

> “Every day I saw the most dreadful scenes of misery and cruelty. My miserable companions were often cruelly lashed, and as it were cut to pieces. I saw a slave receive twenty four lashes of the whip for being seen in church on a Sunday instead of going to work.”

His book attracted many readers and was even translated into French. In it, Cugoano argued that slavery was morally wrong. How could British people call themselves the
most ‘civilised’ people in the world when they were involved in a trade of ‘barbarous cruelty and injustice?’ and thought that ‘slavery, robbery and murder were no crime’? Cugoano argued that everyone in Britain was responsible in some degree for slavery and that the country should ‘set an example’ and be the first to abolish the trade.

“Is it not strange to think, that they who ought to be considered as the most learned and civilized people in the world, that they should carry on a traffic of the most barbarous cruelty and injustice, and that many think slavery, robbery and murder no crime?”

Cugoano was also the first writer in English to argue that enslaved Africans had not only the moral right but also the moral duty to resist slavery.

“If any man should buy another man and compel him to his service and slavery without any agreement of that man to serve him, the enslaver is a robber. It is as much the duty of a man who is robbed in that manner to get out of the hands of his enslaver, as it is for any honest community of men to get out of the hands of rogues and villains.” Cugoano and Equiano’s books influenced public opinion in Britain and in Europe and ultimately contributed to the abolition of slavery.

**Mojola Agbebi (1860-1917)**

David Brown Vincent changed his name to Mojola Agbebi in 1887. That he changed his name is not at all surprising. In fact, it was a common practice among the African intellectual classes in the period.

From the mid-19th century to the Berlin conference of 1884-85, increased contact between Europeans and Africans and the civilising mission which underpinned imperialism – and its attendant missionary education contributed to the rise of critical African consciousness, and the proliferation of Ethiopian movements across the continent. It was common practice among Ethiopianists to change their Christian names to local ones.

Mojola Agbebi was born on April 10, 1860 and was converted to Christianity in 1883 by British missionaries. In his time to be educated also implied forced conversion to Christianity. He later was the president of the native Baptist Union of West Africa which included Yorubaland, Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast, Iboland and the Ekiti area of the Cameroons, with a membership of around 3000.
Agbebi did evangelical work in several parts of Southern Nigeria between 1890 and 1910 and in the Cameroons, converting many to Christianity and opening schools. He visited Britain in 1895 and was particularly interested in the industrial training for young Africans. He took a keen interest in the religious, social, political, industrial and educational problems of West Africa; he paid a second visit to Britain in 1903 and participated in the 1911 conference on inter-racial Problems held in London, where he contributed an article on “The West African Problem”. One of the leading African exponents of Ethiopianism he believed in religious independence and self-reliant churches for the African, controlled and directed by the African. According to Ayodele Langley, his outspoken Inaugural sermon (1902) should be regarded as a masterpiece and a major contribution to the defence of the African personality.

Agbebi was elected as the first president of the inter-denominational African communion in 1913, he died in Lagos in September 1917.

Below is a passage from Mojola Agbebi’s inaugural sermon delivered at the celebration of the first anniversary of the ‘African Church’, Lagos, 21 December 1902, which indicates somewhat his Ethiopian position on Christianity and the African personality:

“According to the Apostles estimate, the preaching of Christ, the triumph of the gospel, the success of practical righteousness is the essential thing, all others are non-essentials. Let us consider one or two of the non-essentials. Formularies are non-essentials. The prayers or prayer-books of certain Christians may not necessarily be the prayers or prayer-books of other Christians. With one people it might be considered suitable to use the sign of the cross, with others, it may not.....Hymn books are non-essentials to the preaching of Jesus Christ. The hymns of one nation may not necessarily be those of another nation. The Christians of England may sing hymns different from the Christians of Armenia, of France or of Africa, and one tribe may sing differently from another tribe...In one of the churches planted up-country, I have found it necessary to advise that for seven years, at least, no hymn-books but African hymns must be used at worship. African Christians dance to foreign music in their social festivities, they sing to foreign music in their churches, they march to foreign music in their funerals, and use foreign instruments to which many are alienated to cultivate their musical aspirations. Throughout the entire scriptures there was not a case in which Christians sing foreign hymns, or an instance where prayers were unanswered or worship unaccepted because certain hymns were not sung. We are come to the times when religious developments demand original songs and original tunes from the African Christian.”

**Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912)**

Among some Pan-African historians, Edward W. Blyden is considered as one of the foremost authorities of Pan-Africanism and is believed to have set the blueprint for latter intellectuals who advanced positions linking the African Diaspora to the continent such as W.E.B Dubois (1868-1963), Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), and George Padmore (1903-1959).

Blyden was born in the West Indies in 1832. He went to the United States in 1850 to study at Rutgers’ Theological College in New Jersey but was refused admission because of his race. He was so appalled by the racial discrimination in America that he immediately turned his attention to Africa.

Liberia had recently become an independent African nation in 1847. After his experience of racial prejudice, Blyden accepted an offer in the same year, 1850, to relocate to Liberia. Soon after his arrival in January 1851, Blyden was employed as a teacher to teach literacy and Theology at Alexander High School in Monrovia. There he began self-directed studies of theology, the classics, geography and mathematics.

In Liberia, Edward Blyden became an active politician, public intellectual and educator, holding office as Secretary of State from 1864 to 1866. Drawing on both scriptures and science, to advance his ethical position on race relations, he challenged the arguments about African inferiority that were increasingly popular in Europe and North America during this period.

Between 1856 and 1887 Blyden authored four books, ‘A Voice From Bleeding Africa’ (1856); ‘A Vindication of the African Race’, ‘Being a Brief Examination of the Arguments in Favor of African Inferiority’ (1862); ‘Africa for the Africans’ (1872); and ‘Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race’ (1887) as well as numerous articles to advance his case. Blyden also challenged black, Americo-Liberian and mulatto elites in Liberia who in his view, hoped to monopolize political power over indigenous Africans.

He was forced to leave Liberia in 1871 for Sierra Leone because of his radical politics. He returned to Liberia in 1874 and was appointed Ambassador to Great Britain (1877-78) and president of Liberia College (1880-1884).

Blyden has been identified as a leading thinker on Pan-Africanism in the 19th century. He not only advocated a Back-to-Africa policy but lived it. Although he was a
Christian Minister, he believed Christianity to be unsuitable for Africa. He was discredited in Liberia for his apparent involvement in an unsuccessful coup (1909) and died penniless in Sierra Leone in 1912.

Below is a passage from African Life and Customs published by Blyden in 1908 which should provide a glimpse of his views on socio-economic change and the African personality in the historical context concerned:

“There was a time when the native African, brought up on European lines, looked upon everything European as absolutely superior, and as alone indispensable to the attainment of man’s highest happiness and usefulness in the world, and even to salvation beyond the grave. He looked upon the European method of accumulating wealth, the wear and tear and excitement of trade, upon the banking system, the individualistic possession, as the ultima Thule of human development. But a vast, a sad, an increasing experience has proved to him, so far as happiness for himself or success for his posterity is concerned that these things are but ‘broken cisterns that can hold no water’……The African is, therefore, rapidly arriving at a revision of his former immature ideas on the subject. There are today hundreds of so-called civilized Africans who are coming back to themselves. They have grasped the principles underlying the European social and economic order and reject them as not equal to their own means of making adequate provision for the normal needs of all members of society both present and future...They have discovered all of the waste places, all the nakedness of the European system both by reading and travel. The great European wealth can no longer dazzle them, and conceal from their view the vast masses of the population living under what they supposed to be the ideal system.”

For a fuller portrait of Edward Wilmot Blyden, and a discussion of his ideas in the context of Pan-Africanism see:
And
On African Socialism

By ’Manapo ’Mokose

The concept of African socialism developed at a time when many African states were preparing for independence. This was during the 1950s, when the pressing issue confronting the first crop of African leaders was how to approach development and nation building after colonialism. The general format was a break away from the Western model of economic development, which had been imposed upon African countries during colonialism. The outcome of this model, capitalism, had left African countries without transport, manufacturing and infrastructure, with a heavy product dependency on Western economies, and unequal trade relations between Africa and their colonial proprietors. During colonialism, European imperialists validated their unwelcomed conquest of other lands with a claim that they were bringing civilization and development to their respective colonies. The reality was that in these colonies, little was left in the way of developmental mechanisms. The roads and railroads that they built were not intended to develop national infrastructures but to facilitate the export of African raw materials to the empires. Further, the colonial powers did not develop industries through which African countries could then develop their wealth of raw materials. The result was that African states then depended on Europe for processed goods. Having been on the receiving end of an unjust system, African leaders rejected capitalism for what they felt to be a more impartial development model, socialism. Theirs was a socialism of a unique kind. It strayed from the Western socialism that was touted by Marxian philosophy, and instead drew from African realities to develop what came to be known as African socialism.

Understanding African Socialism

African socialism developed as a doctrine that catered for the social, political and economic realities of Africa. It gained the support of many leaders and thinkers who contributed differently to it. Through Julius Nyerere, the doctrine found expression in what he coined ujamaa (African familyhood). Leopold Senghor made reference to negritude, while Kenneth Kaunda talked of humanism, Kwame Nkrumah of conscientism and Sekou Touré of communocracy. From their individual
contributions, the doctrine came to be composed of varying and distinct perspectives. There was, however, a common thread that ran through their individual views that made way for a working definition of the doctrine. From it, we may define African socialism as an attempt to regain and modernize the traditional Africans’ communal way of life before their encounter with the world and values of the white man. The theory sought to recapture the collectivism that was specific to African cultural and social norms and to move away from the individualism that was injected into Africa by Western capitalism. Thus, African socialism aimed to be an anti-imperialist social system that is rooted in African soil and breaks away from Western markets.

In terms of effecting development, therefore, African socialism aligned itself more with the idea that the best way to address social and economic inequalities was through state control of markets and distribution. This will be explained by considering the thinking of two of the leading African socialists, Nkrumah and Nyerere. Their theoretical contributions to the doctrine are considered to be a fair representation of the group.

Nyerere’s Ujamaa

Nyerere’s African socialism was constructed around the concept of ujamaa, or “familyhood” as he described it. It was motivated by his interest to extend to the socialist project a native African identity that was grounded in the historical memories and realities of Africa. Nyerere contended that socialism was inherent in the African societal structure and therefore that adopting African socialism would simply be a reversion to pre-colonial society. He argued that “we, in Africa, have no more need of being ‘converted’ to socialism than we have of being ‘taught democracy’.” For Nyerere, the pre-colonial African society was devoid of “class” or “caste” and everyone was a worker. In the same vein, Nyerere declared that there hadn’t been any rich people in Africa, and that wealth had not been used to dominate others. He presented traditional African society as one of equals, where land, house and food were shared. Furthermore, Nyerere maintained that traditional African societies were participatory and democratic, a view that he captured in his statement “they talk till they agree”. His entire project was founded on his stance that like democracy, socialism was an attitude.

To implement African socialism, Nyerere developed a policy on socialism and self-reliance referred to as the Arusha Declaration. The Declaration encompassed ujamaa’s rejection of capitalism, which organized society on the basis of the
exploitation of man by man, and of Marxism, which was based on the philosophy of inevitable conflict between men. With African socialism, Tanzania would seek a path of self-reliance that de-emphasized industrial development and material wealth for its own sake and promoted cooperation for the common good of society rather than competition for individual private gain.

Nyerere enforced a policy of villagization in which people were relocated to villages to practice collective agriculture. He believed many benefits would come out of this. It would unite the rural population which would then benefit from state services such as health care and education and develop a sense of community that would eradicate the tribalism that had plagued many postcolonial states.

The implementation of ujamaa was flawed, though. Few supported being forced to move by the state, especially those who were forced to move when their fields were already sown with that year’s harvest. Food production fell, and the country’s economy suffered. There were advances in terms of public education, but Tanzania was fast becoming one of Africa’s poorer countries, kept afloat by foreign aid. In 1985, when Nyerere stepped down from power, Tanzania abandoned its experiment with African Socialism.

**Nkrumah’s Consciencism**

Like Nyerere, Nkrumah’s philosophy was grounded in African history which he believed it could guide and direct Africa’s reconstruction after colonialism. He differed from Nyerere in that he saw this reconstruction as possible only if the contemporary realities of African societies were acknowledged. Nyerere advocated for a reversion to the communal African society. Nkrumah viewed this as impossible. He argued that current African societies had been significantly influenced by contemporary experiences that could not be ignored.

Nkrumah outlined three experiences that had shaped African dynamics:, the traditional African society, the Islamic presence as well as the Euro-Christian presence. He argued that these were ushered in by colonialism but that its defeat would not result in their automatic disappearance. For Nkrumah, the latter two altered the character of traditional African society to such a degree that philosophical thought was necessary to restore the African conscience. This African conscience would be restored not by a reversion to African societies – which was impossible – but by drawing from the values of those past societies to improve upon the contemporary African society.
Critical Analysis

Various objections have been levelled against Nkrumah and Nyerere’s philosophies. Chief among them are that both politicians drew from utopian ideals of pre-colonial African societies and that both their works were inspired by imported ideologies. While these criticisms expose some similarities between their standpoints, they predominantly expose the supremacy that Nkrumah’s African socialism had over Nyerere’s ujamaa.

Pertinent to the utopian critique, the views of Okadigbo, Rodney, and Babu come to mind. These authors identified in Nkrumah’s philosophy a basis that was influenced more by what he perceived Africa should be than the reality of what it was; a denial of the existence of a class structure in Ghana; and a revisionist policy that could not be applied across time and space. While these inferences may be right in their objections to African socialism, they expose a mistake by these writers to categorize Nkrumah’s philosophy within that ideology. Nkrumah categorically distanced himself from the ideology, and equally condemned the very African socialist characteristics that Okadigbo, et al accused his philosophy of having. In his essay, “African Socialism Revisited” (1967), Nkrumah criticized African socialism for making “a fetish of the communal African society” and simplifying the African society which he maintained was neither classless nor free from hierarchy, and which in fact practiced slavery. This is in stark contrast to Nyerere, whose ujamaa falls within the ambit of the ideology that Okadigbo, et al and even Nkrumah condemned. Nyerere readily embraced African socialism, declaring that “we are committed to something we called ‘African Socialism’.” Nyerere rejected foreign influences, believing that simply through reform, Africa could go back to pre-colonial societal organisation. Nkrumah instead advocated for Africa to focus on the values rather than the structures of traditional African life. Nkrumah embraced the material realities of contemporary African society while Nyerere not only fetishized the past, but failed to understand a present that had strayed too far from that past to accommodate its reinstatement.

Ultimately Nkrumah can only be criticised for not qualifying the African values that he proposed the reconstruction of contemporary African societies should draw from. While African societies shared some common values, the suggestion of uniformity across all African societies without the provision of some caveat was an error. Nyerere is equally guilty here because in his advocacy for the reversion to traditional African structures, he neglected the pluralism of African culture and forced a false unity upon what was unequivocally diverse.

Another criticism was that Nyerere and Nkrumah appropriated foreign ideologies. The argument was that these two politicians were subjecting Africa to imported constructs that would betray its original civilisation. In and of itself, this criticism is
compromised by its apparent failure to understand the nuances of Nkrumah’s philosophy, which understood scientific socialism as a methodology instead of an ideology.

Scientific socialism initiates its process with the relationship that man has to the material world. Marxism refers to this as ‘the basis’ and it pertains to the specific mode of production, social relations, and material circumstances that society finds itself in – similar to what Nkrumah referred to as the ‘social milieu’ (Zak, 2016, p. 156). Thus, the basis is specific to particular contexts and fluctuates across space and time. Regarding Marxism as an ideology would therefore be erroneous because more than anything else, it was applied to Western Europe as a methodology. To the extent that methodology is independent of time and space, it could be applied to different contexts. Marx himself was careful to articulate this view, maintaining that he did not determine a single mechanical progression of history. He advised that *Das Capital* was nothing more than a depiction of the path from which the capitalist order emerged in Western Europe and that it was not his intention to extend the model of Western Europe as a philosophical theory of the path that all people were fated to take.

Marxism is, therefore, not a finished product and Nkrumah recognized that. The notion that he imported foreign ideologies to Africa is a misguided one that sees Marxism as an end and not as a means. Nyerere, in adhering to African socialism committed this very mistake, as demonstrated by his rejection of the “one pure socialism” (Nyerere, in Zak, p. 151) that he perceived Marxism to be. His understanding of Marxism categorized it as an ideology and a conclusion, and failed to embrace it as a methodology. In this way, he committed the crime of imposing an ideology on African societies without a necessary reflection on the contemporary realities that colonialism had left behind. Nkrumah did not fall into this trap and thus his philosophy presented a more pragmatic avenue towards the emancipation of the African conscience. Instead of forcing upon society an idyllic concept of where it should be headed, it presented the opportunity for man to first understand his social conditions as a way of easing the transformation of thought to practice. This section has demonstrated how very different Nkrumah was from Nyerere. It alluded to the extent of Nkrumah’s accomplishments in constructing a new philosophy that he applied to scientific socialism as a methodology. With his philosophy he established an organic ideology that moulded itself to contemporary African experiences. This was in stark contrast to Nyerere, whose ujamaa did not present a knowledge basis for a society that needed to comprehend why ujamaa was directed at a particular structure of society. He rejected Marxism based on a misguided understanding of its nuances and ended up with autopian vision of Africa’s future. Nkrumah did not, and while Consciencism is not without fault, it succeeded in important respects where his peers failed.
Bibliography


Sobukwe and the Questions of Violence, Race and the Economy

By Rekang Jankie

Introduction

While Mandela and Biko have dominated different sectors of mainstream political discourse in South Africa, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe was largely relegated to the side-lines of the postapartheid imagination until recently when the #MustFall raised him to prominence once more. It is important therefore to revisit his works and assess his relevance to the political climate today. Of particular interest are his views on the political efficacy of non-violence, the concept of nonracialism in relation to African nationalism and the call for universal franchise and a planned economy as necessary pillars of a post-apartheid society. At the outset, it is important to note the limitations in analysing Sobukwe’s ideas given that his life was cut short by an early death following a long period of incarceration and isolation. As a result, many of the views he had publicly expressed could not be fully fleshed out.

The Virtues of Nonviolence

A debate that has gripped anti-oppression movements globally is the question of pursuing violent or nonviolent resistance. In the formative years of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) Sobukwe was firm believer in non-violence. In his speech preceding the Sharpeville Uprising/Massacre he was adamant that the march would observe the principle of absolute non-violence, arguing that the state and the police would be the only people to benefit from any violence. He pointedly stated, “My instructions, therefore, are that our people must be taught now and continuously, that in this campaign we are going to observe absolute non-violence” further lamenting “the only people who will benefit from violence are the government and police” (Lesch and Douglas, 2013).

Beyond considering political violence as beneficial for the state, he also objected to it on the basis that violence would alienate many who were sympathetic to the grievances of the anti-apartheid movement. Sobukwe believed this alienation would
stem from people being resentful of becoming cannon fodder without any tangible results (Ibid). Despite this, following Sobukwe’s imprisonment, the PAC, like the ANC, adopted armed resistance as a response to increasing state violence by forming the Azanian People’s Liberation Army (APLA) also known as Poqo. The nature of Sobukwe’s incarceration meant he was removed from the formation of this armed wing and had harsh criticism for Poqo describing it as a “tsotsi element” and “undisciplined”. He described himself as being opposed to acts of sabotage but accepting of the fact that there would have come a point where they were necessary (Sobukwe, 1970).

**Race and Being an African**

While the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) espoused the principle of multi-racialism, Sobukwe was fundamentally opposed to this, instead preferring a philosophy of non-racialism. He argued that multi-racialism accepts the false notion of race to be true. Non-racialism on the other hand was rooted in the idea that, because the biological concept of race is false, it would be foolish to then base an ideal society on it (Alexander 2014). While Sobukwe rejected the concept of biological race he can be described as being accepting of the constructivist concept of race. This understanding formed the foundation for how he practiced African nationalism. He viewed non-racialism as the end goal for society but preached for an exclusively black resistance movement to avoid corruption by what he viewed as self-interested whites. He conceded the argument that one could not organise people based on exclusion and then hope that those people would come to view non-Africans as being African at the conclusion of the struggle. He believed that he and his peers would be recognised by future historians as having chosen the correct path (Sobukwe 1970). However, the PAC was unable to gather momentum perhaps as result of the fact that the ANC’s emphasis on multi-racialism ensured broad participation while the PAC continued to embrace an even more strident racialism thus alienating potential supporters.

Further criticism of multi-racialism was rooted in the fact that because South Africa had long fostered group prejudices and antagonism, keeping racial classification would “be transporting to the new Africa these very antagonisms and conflicts”, and that multi-racialism was pandering to “European bigotry and arrogance” (Ibid). His non-racialism was emphasised by an ideal of Africanism that did not consider race to be relevant in who was considered African, something clearly evident when he stated that,
“government of the Africans by the Africans, for the Africans, with everybody who owes his only loyalty to Afrika and who is prepared to accept the democratic rule of an African majority being regarded as an African. We guarantee no minority rights, because we think in terms of individuals, not groups” (Sobukwe 1959).

While clearly stated, this prescription of who can be considered African is paradoxically quite vague. In short it states that to be African you have believe in the rule of Africans, with the caveat of individualism trumping collectivism. The vagueness stems from the circularity of the proposition, with an African unable to be defined without relying on the use of the term “African”. What further complicates “African-ess” is that Africanism as argued by Sobukwe essentially boils down to self-identification. However, one can self-identify as being an African but view someone else who also identifies as an African as not being African or sufficiently African. The conflict is then between the collective (Africans) and the individual (the self-identifying African). The collective is offered the ability to impose/abate the identity of the individual. One can attempt to square this circle by pointing out that being an African is less of an identity and more of a commitment to a political program. However, this does little to help us because, firstly one needs to articulate what the political and economic project is and, secondly, one has to articulate what it is that makes the political and economic program distinctly African.

Economy

The political project Sobukwe advanced was one of universal franchise where anyone, regardless of race or gender, was free to vote and run for election. The corresponding economic project he advocated for was one of a planned economy (Sobukwe 1959). A critique of this set of ideals rests on two questions that need be answered. Firstly, what makes their content distinctly African? Secondly, what is the relationship between individual liberty and a planned economy?

It seems obvious to point out that neither universal franchise nor a planned economy are distinctly African ideals. Examples of the aspiration for democracy have been observed across the globe over the past two centuries while planned economies were ubiquitous across Eastern Europe and many other non-African “socialist states” in the

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Racial constructivism refers to the argument that, even if biological race is false, races have come into existence and continue to exist through “human culture and human decisions”.

20th century (Brown and Hinrichs, 1931). A possible defence of this is that both models are to the betterment of Africans and as such they are African, at which point one might argue that merely asserting that something is for the betterment of Africans does not necessarily make it true. One can claim that economic liberalism, ethno-nationalism and a whole host of other political philosophies are to the benefit of Africans without it necessarily being true.

The above leads us to a second question, “Can one have individual liberty under a planned economy?” It is important to note upfront that what follows will not be a critique of a planned economy per se, but rather an attempt to explore the contradictions that arise in emphasising individual liberties within the context of central planning. It is in fact a contradiction Sobukwe himself was able to identify when he stated,

“Our problem, as we see it, is to make a planned economy work within the framework of a political democracy. It has not done so in any of the countries that practice it today, but we do not believe that totalitarianism is inherent in a system of planned state economy.” (Sobukwe, 1959)

However, mere acknowledgment that an economic system one is proposing almost always leads to totalitarianism is insufficient to resolve the contradiction, as is the assertion that one will be able to avoid totalitarianism. One has to show how this totalitarianism will be avoided. This should include concrete measures necessary to enforce plans including, for example, measures to deal with individuals who resist processes, such as redistribution of wealth. It goes without saying that these measures are bound to be resisted; this is the fact that any political movement dedicated to redistribution is bound to encounter.

The way in which said movement responds to this resistance determines its commitment to individual liberties and political freedoms (Fine 1992). This contradiction becomes less pressing if the political movement loses any notions of individual liberties being at the core of their political project or if the movement adopts “means justify the ends” thinking. However, it is clear from Sobukwe that the latter was a framework he intended to avoid, whether it be in matters of the economy, political violence or even integration (Sobukwe 1970). There does seem to be room for a more nuanced position on the matter of “Individual Liberties vs State Authority”. The position is one that Sobukwe was able to acknowledge but unable to work through, largely as a result of his early death and extended incarceration.
Conclusion

Sobukwe held a whole host of views on a number of complex social issues. He opposed violence as a political tool since he viewed it as counterproductive in nature. This position on the efficacy of political violence is one that has long been abandoned by members of the organisation he helped found. He rejected the concept of race in support of the idea of a singular human race while simultaneously supporting a racially exclusive anti-oppression movement a position that the PAC has yet to be able to reconcile. If we are to recognise the importance of leaders like Sobukwe it is important that we not only acknowledge their positive contributions to society but also explore some of the shortcomings they had.

References:


Economic Policy since the Transition: Socially-Oriented to Market-Oriented

By Zunaid Moolla

As we look back to 1994, it is useful firstly to understand the context in which the transition occurred. The global status quo then, as now, was that of a unipolar world. The Soviet Union had collapsed in 1989 which made the US the sole super-power. This altered the relations with smaller countries who no longer had the choice of aligning themselves with an alternative political system. A capitalist world order was established which meant that the US and its major allies used their hegemonic power to impose conditions on small and medium countries with regard to how they frame their national development objectives. This was the era in which neoliberalism became the dominant ideology, an all-encompassing system that prescribed how the economies of countries should be structured. The underlying purpose of this ideology is to ensure that the greatest possible number of countries entrench an order in which the gains from economic activity flow to corporations and their representatives. We will elaborate on the details of neoliberal policies below.

The Vision and Plan of MERG

The conditions of life under Apartheid are well known, having been documented in much detail during and after the years of the struggle. It is this that formed the starting point of the Macro Economic Research Group (MERG) when it was set up in 1991 – 1992. MERG was tasked with developing a new macroeconomic policy framework for South Africa. It was composed of economists from several countries who were grouped into teams with South African economists. Each team dealt with a particular area of economic policy.

The work of MERG was guided by the enormous challenge a new, democratically elected government would face as it set out to dismantle the structural barriers that were erected by Apartheid over more than 40 years. The point of departure for
MERG was that social development should be the priority and the economy should be organized to generate the resources that would be required. It supported this approach by arguing that social development in itself could be a strong stimulus to growth. Building schools, houses, hospitals and clinics, and infrastructure for public transport, energy, water and sewerage are all labour-intensive activities. They would create jobs and generate taxes. It is useful to see how MERG conceptualised this.

MERG sought to combine the components of macro-economic policy into a coherent framework wherein a high level of coordination could be achieved. Thus, at the implementation level, five components would be brought into sync with one another, namely:
1. Monetary Policy
2. Fiscal Policy
3. Trade and Industrial Policy
4. Labour Market Policy
5. Rural Development Policy.

Fiscal policy would firstly deal with the expenditure side. On the assumption that finance was not available, monetary policy would be required to secure funds either by printing or borrowing. Through trade and industrial policy, government would promote the formation of small- and medium-sized enterprises. In partnership with larger established businesses these would have a mandate to supply the inputs and finished goods for the massive social development programmes as well as consumer goods. The objectives of labour market policy would be to undertake the full range of skills development and training programmes to meet the needs of the social, business and government sectors while entrenching workers’ rights. Finally, rural development policy would focus on improving living conditions for the vast number of South Africa’s poorest and most marginalised people and for achieving food security.

With regard to the financing of this socio-economic renewal, the models created by MERG showed a deficit for the first 10 years as expenditure exceeded revenue. In response to the criticism they received for this, they argued that deficits are firstly, not necessarily bad if the money is directed into productive investments and, secondly, the deficit would decline over time as tax revenues increased from all sources i.e. workers’ wages, enterprise profits and households.

The complete programme of MERG was published in a book titled Making Democracy Work. It was presented to Trevor Manuel who, as head of the Economic Development Unit, received it on behalf of the ANC at an official ceremony. After the elections in 1994,
with the completion of its work, MERG was dissolved. But there was strong agreement that there was a need for the organisation to continue as another entity. Subsequently, the National Institute for Economic Policy (NIEP) was created. One of the first initiatives of NIEP was to set up a training programme in Parliament which it called the Service Programme. MPs were offered a series of workshops to raise their levels of knowledge of economics and to provide them with an understanding of the policies that needed to be adopted for economic growth. NIEP also opened an office in Johannesburg where it continued to do groundbreaking research until it closed in 2004.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP)

MERG started its work in 1992. In 1994, shortly after the transition to political democracy, the ANC began holding a series of consultations with its allies and several civic organisations to spell out a vision for an economic development plan. Going back to the tradition that was rooted in the Freedom Charter of 1955, the RDP laid out a policy framework on how to tackle the abject conditions wrought by decades of Apartheid. Like MERG, the RDP made social development a major plank of its programme. It noted that it is not merely the lack of income which determines poverty. For millions of citizens, very basic needs were unmet. In its preface, the RDP asserted that attacking poverty and deprivation is the first priority of the democratic government. It addressed issues of social, institutional, environmental and macro-economic sustainability in an integrated manner, with specific attention to affordability.

In attacking poverty and deprivation, the RDP aimed to set South Africa firmly on the road to:

- eliminating hunger
- providing land and housing to all
- providing access to safe water and sanitation for all
- ensuring the availability of affordable and sustainable energy sources
- eliminating illiteracy
- raising the quality of education and training for children and adults
- protecting the environment
- improving health services and making them accessible to all.

On the state of the economy at the time, the RDP noted it was characterised by low growth and investment, falling real incomes and high unemployment. The country was
also not able to compete effectively in world markets, relied too much on exporting gold and other minerals and was dominated by a few large conglomerates. Manufacturing industries were under-developed and there were weak links between small and large business. The RDP pointed to the situation for women as particularly appalling. They were excluded from important areas of economic control and were employed in the lowest-paying industries or as domestic workers and in subsistence farming.

The Programme targeted several main sectors for ending poverty, creating jobs and meeting basic needs. Among its goals were the following:

- address the structural problems of the economy
- build the economy as well as that of Southern Africa, and integrate South Africa into the world economy
- protect worker rights
- develop human resources
- end all discrimination based on race, sex, ethnicity, disability, religion and language
- democratise the economy by involving all stakeholders, including trade unions and small business, in an open and transparent process of economic decision-making.

These goals were to be achieved by giving a strong mandate to specific sectors. The following is a brief description of the policies proposed for the key sectors:

**Industry, Trade and Commerce**

The RDP aimed to achieve 5% growth of the economy and to create between 300,000 and 500,000 jobs in industry, trade and commerce within five years through the following:

- **Trade Policy**
  To reduce protection in a way that does not severely disrupt employment while making it a successful trading country.

- **Changes in Institutions and Government Departments**
  To introduce a National Economic Forum and other similar structures to establish a tradition of negotiation.

- **The Corporate Sector**
  Create mechanisms for empowering black people, especially black women, and promote more competition in the big business sector.
• Development of Small, Medium and Micro Businesses.
  To increase citizen participation in the economy, create jobs, spread income and improve the efficiency of the economy.

• Better Use of Technology
  Mining and mineral rights to be returned to the state to allow open access to mineral resources that will involve consultation with all stake holders. In addition, policy must also address:
  • more effective marketing of our minerals and more use of our minerals in local manufacturing (beneficiation)
  • workplace democracy for miners
  • participation of miners in the financial affairs of mining companies
  • strengthening of tri-partite structures such as the Mining Summit
  • better accommodation for miners, closer to mining sites
  • improvements in the health and safety system
  • protection of the environment
  • promotion of co-operation in the Southern African region.

**Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry**

The RDP aimed to increase production and employment in this sector through the development of commercial agriculture. At the same time it called for the need to change ownership through land reform and to support small-scale agriculture, especially for women in agriculture. It also aimed to:

• Provide affordable food so that the basic needs of all South Africans can be met.
• Extend full worker rights to farm workers and improve their working and living conditions.
• Restructure the fishing industry so that poor coastal communities have access to ocean resources that are sustainably managed.
• Tighten government control and better management of our forestry resources.

**Tourism**

The potential of tourism for employment and foreign exchange makes it a priority sector, but the industry would have to be restructured to take full advantage of the country’s extraordinary human and natural resources.
Community partnerships were vital to generate income through the development of tourism in South Africa and link it with the rest of Southern Africa. This must be done, however, with full protection of our natural environment.

**Upgrading**
Infrastructure

An infrastructural development programme to contribute broadly to economic development and social upliftment at the same time. Telecommunications and information technology, for example, should also help upgrade education and health care. Improving transport systems would not only upgrade urban centres but also link rural areas.

**Reform of the Financial Sector**

While the financial sector is relatively well developed and modern, it is highly concentrated in ownership. This is true for banks, insurance companies and the stock exchange. Changes are needed in order to improve the level of savings in the country and prevent discrimination with regard to access to finance. In addition, a special bank for home ownership and community banks should be created. Pension and provident funds should be made more accountable and the illegal flow of money out of the country must be brought under control through tougher regulations.

**Labour and Worker Rights**

- The basic rights of workers to organise and to strike will be guaranteed.
- Structures will be set up to ensure collective bargaining and full worker participation at national and industry level and at the workplace so that workers can play a full role in the reconstruction and development of our country.
- Workers’ skills will be upgraded and affirmative action programmes adopted.
- The new government will also ratify (recognise and support) the International Conventions of the International Labour Organisation.
- Consultations will be held on the restructuring of the then Department of Manpower, the Unemployment Insurance Board, the Workers’ Compensation Commission, and other bodies that affect workers and their conditions. Southern African Regional Policy.
- As part of the Southern African region, the RDP advocated strongly for the development of trade, investment, labour standards, technical cooperation, electricity and telecommunications systems.
- The RDP proposed government support for bodies that promote regional co-operation and co-ordination and for programmes and projects that benefit the people of this region.
Financing the RDP

The RDP was not merely a list of demands but a carefully considered programme that could be financed over a 5 to 10 year period.

Funding was envisaged through the following:

- Carefully considered savings in government expenditure;
- Removing the unnecessary duplication of government functions from the Apartheid period;
- Improving the efficiency of government expenditure and targeting RDP priorities;
- Increased tax revenue that will result from rising incomes through higher employment and growth in business enterprises;
- A careful review of the tax system to make it simpler, fairer and more effective. It is not the intention of the RDP to raise taxes;
- A Reconstruction Bond to encourage people to invest in RDP programmes for a market-related return on their investment;
- Carefully and wisely considered assistance from the international community;
- A disciplined approach to finance and money to avoid inflation which destroys the living standards of the majority of the population.

Selected RDP Goals

- Housing: Provide well-located and affordable shelter for all by the year 2003. Build one million houses in five years
- Water: Supply 20 to 30 litres of clean water each day to every person in two years and 50 to 60 litres per day within five years from a point no more than 200 meters from their dwelling.
- Electricity: Supply 2.5 million more households and all schools and clinics with electricity by the year 2000.
- Healthcare: Provide free medical care to children under 6 years and to homeless children; improve maternity care for women; organise programmes to prevent and treat major diseases like TB and AIDS.
- Land reform: Implement land reform based on redistribution of residential and productive land to those who need it but cannot afford it and restitution to those who lost land because of apartheid laws.
- Job Creation through public works: Establish a national public works programme to provide basic needs such as water supply, sewerage and roads and at the same time create jobs, particularly in poor and rural areas.
- Social security and social welfare: Set up a new system to provide for all people
regardless of their race, gender or physical disability. Create a pension system to meet the needs of workers in the formal and informal sectors.

• Education and training: Provide literacy for all, equal opportunity, 10 years of free and compulsory education, class sizes of no more than 40 pupils, training for workers to meet the challenges of the new political and economic conditions.

The Growth, Employment and Redistribution Policy (GEAR)

In 1996, the government published its new economic policy document which came to be known as GEAR – Growth, Employment and Redistribution. It marked a dramatic shift in thinking from the RDP and, predictably, was severely criticised by trade unions and civic organisations. The economic rationale for GEAR was that a new course had to be charted to increase growth, reduce government expenditure, halt the depreciation of the Rand and build up foreign reserves.

The main elements of the GEAR policy were:

• A faster fiscal deficit reduction programme to contain debt service obligations, counter inflation and free resources for investment
• An exchange rate policy to keep the real effective rate stable at a competitive level;
• Consistent monetary policy to prevent a resurgence of inflation;
• Further gradual relaxation of exchange controls;
• A reduction in tariffs to contain input prices and facilitate industrial restructuring, compensating partially for the exchange rate depreciation;
• Tax incentives to stimulate new investment in competitive and labour-absorbing projects;
• Speeding up the restructuring of state assets to optimise investment resources;
• An expansionary infrastructure programme to address service deficiencies and backlogs;
• An appropriately structured flexibility within the collective bargaining system;
• A strengthened levy system to fund training on a scale commensurate with need;
• An expansion of trade and investment flows in Southern Africa and a commitment to the implementation of stable and coordinated policies.

Despite heavy criticism from progressive sections of society, government remained committed to its implementation. Ministers from the frontline departments said repeatedly that GEAR was nonnegotiable. When it was adopted, the South African government became notorious for being one of the only countries in the world to impose a structural adjustment programme (SAP) on its citizens. SAPs are typically imposed by the World Bank and IMF on highly indebted countries seeking financial
rescue packages or on emerging economies that apply for development loans. They are comprised of several austerity requirements of governments as a condition for getting loans. Generally, these include:

• Reduce government expenditure (invariably entails cutting social spending);
• Trade liberalisation (remove tariff barriers for imported goods);
• Free floating exchange rates (letting the Rand find its value through the market);
• Flexible labour markets (wages are not regulated);
• Privatisation of state enterprises and other assets;
• Lifting of exchange controls (no or little restrictions on money taken out of the country).

Some analysts strongly feel that the adoption of GEAR caused the alliance to split irreparably as some partners felt this was a betrayal of all the ideals which the liberation movement struggled for in the decades leading up to the transition to democracy.

What did GEAR achieve and what is the current landscape of economic policy in South Africa?

GEAR set a target of 6% average growth per annum with 400,000 new jobs added each year which was to be achieved through expansion of new investment, especially foreign direct investment. The thinking of those who formulated the policy was that this expansion of investment would induce rapid growth, leading to job creation and a reduction in inequality which, in turn, would bring about higher levels of the provision of services.

The target growth rates in investment and job creation were never achieved between 1996 and 2002. The budget deficit (as a proportion of GDP) was reduced but interest rates increased, employment fell, inflation rose at first but dropped marginally and the Rand depreciated.

ASGISA and NDP

Fifteen years later, the economy has shown no appreciable change. GEAR was subsequently replaced by ASGISA (Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for SA) and then by the NDP (National Development Plan). With ASGISA, government consulted with a range of stakeholders. The ASGISA Task Force led by the Deputy President included the Ministers of Finance; Trade and Industry; and Public Enterprises; the Premiers of Gauteng and Eastern Cape provinces; and the Mayor of Johannesburg who represented the South African Local Government Association. Many other ministers
and their departments were included in the discussions, as were organised business and labour, religious leaders, youth, and women in various groupings and forums. Government also consulted with domestic and international experts.

ASGISA identified six ‘binding constraints’ which prevent South Africa from achieving the desired growth rate:

• The relative volatility of the currency
• The cost, efficiency and capacity of the national logistics system
• Shortages of suitably skilled labour, and the spatial distortions of apartheid affecting low-skilled labour costs
• Barriers to entry, limits to competition and limited new investment opportunities
• The regulatory environment and the burden on small and medium enterprises (SMEs)
• Deficiencies in state organisation, capacity and leadership.

It would be difficult to find evidence that these constraints have been removed or substantially eased.

In May 2010, President Jacob Zuma appointed the National Planning Commission, an advisory body made up of 26 experts drawn largely from outside the government, to draft a vision and national development plan.

The commission’s Diagnostic Report, released in June 2011, set out South Africa’s achievements and shortcomings since 1994. It identified a failure to implement policies and an absence of broad partnerships as the main reasons for slow progress, and set out nine primary challenges:

1. Too few people work.
2. The quality of school education for black people is poor.
3. Infrastructure is poorly located, inadequate and under-maintained.
4. Spatial divides hobble inclusive development.
5. The economy is unsustainably resource-intensive.
6. The public health system cannot meet demand or sustain quality.
7. Public services are uneven and often of poor quality.
8. Corruption levels are high.
9. South Africa remains a divided society.

The vision sketched in the NDP encompasses the following:

• The creation of eleven million new jobs bringing unemployment down, even for an expanded population, to no more than 6%
• The elimination of poverty across the majority of the population
• The reduction of the Gini coefficient for income from an outrageous 0.7 to an, admittedly far from acceptable, level of 0.6
• A notable reduction in corruption and corresponding increase in government capacity and efficacy
• A national health service provided through the public sector free at the point of delivery with a focus on primary and preventative care.
• A major expansion in provision of basic needs such as housing, water, electrification, education and other elements of social and economic infrastructure
• And considerable progress in a shift towards a green economy with the adoption of new renewable technologies.

Government and supporters of the NDP are likely to argue that it is in the process of being implemented and therefore too early to assess the results. The NDP received nods of approval from most mainstream economists as well as from a few internationally acclaimed economists such as Joseph Stiglitz. Several progressive organizations, however, dismiss it as nothing but a continuation of neo-liberal economic policy, albeit with a few elements of the transformative vision articulated in both the MERG and RDP policy proposals.

Conclusion

At the most elementary level, economic policy is concerned with two broad goals: growth and development. Increasingly, however, the premises of growth are being questioned – growth to what end and for whom? The state of the world’s natural environment places the mantra of growth on trial. There is also evidence from many countries that in more recent times growth has not led to the creation of a significant number of jobs. This is especially true since the era of financialisation. Moreover, in countries where economic conditions are characterised by high levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality the burning issues call for something that is more responsive to the basic needs that go unsatisfied in the midst of plenty. In such situations, and here we are talking about most of the people on this planet, it would make much more sense if growth were to be hinged to redistribution, equity and social justice than to merely record an increase in GDP.

The question of growth for what end thus takes centre stage: whether we should make social justice, equity, environmental protection and general well-being the paramount objectives in our systems of production and exchange rather than treat them as mere by-products?
In South Africa after more than 20 years of political democracy, social justice remains a mirage that moves ever further away with each step we take in our journey towards expiation of the past. It is necessary to consider what it is that has brought us to this state. Many possible explanations are, and have been, proffered. Can any one of them be identified as the main culprit? Corruption is an eminent candidate. When hundreds of millions are siphoned from government vaults whole neighbourhoods are left poorer. When massive profits are expatriated, levels of investment are bound to fall over time. When cheaper imported goods are allowed to flood the market, the manufacturing industry collapses. But when the wrong economic policy is adopted year after year, large sections of a country’s population suffer prolonged periods of deprivation of their most basic needs which affects generations to come.
Interrogating the Concept of White Privilege

By Shaun Stanley

There are many things to say about the notion of ‘white privilege’. Few of the things I can say are, however, supportive. As a racial eliminativist I consider racialised language to be meaningless on account of its irredeemable vagueness and ambiguity. For this reason and others, racialised notions ought to be eliminated. I’m committed to the view that the phrase ‘white privilege’, as a feature of racialised language, is meaningless and so should also be eliminated. In short, there is no such thing as ‘white’ privilege, because there is no such thing as a ‘white person’. There are no distinct ‘races’ which may or may not enjoy certain privileges. Hence, to speak as if there are is to speak nonsense, as far as I’m concerned.

My racial eliminativism is not predicated on a denial that there are social issues. It is predicated (in part) on the following two things. One: the view that there are indeed many severely important and demanding social problems. Two: the conviction that this requires of us clarity and precision of thought. Racialised language takes us further away from precision of thought hence, we ought to find other ways of speaking about these pressing problems which would be, I’m sure, a more beneficial and accurate means of solving them. Whatever problems there are can, and must, be stated in non-racialised terms.

This is an extreme view. As such, it might not be altogether helpful in certain circumstances. I think that the view can be defended, but let me not endeavour to do that here. Let me put my racial eliminativism momentarily aside in order to discuss the notion of ‘white privilege’.

Firstly, let us admit that the phrase is motivated by certain more or less obvious social problems, particularly those to do with societal injustice and inequality. There is something to the phrase, and the social problems which motivate it are important. Despite all of this I remain sceptical about the value of the phrase ‘white privilege’. It is a highly problematic phrase, and, irrespective of my eliminativist view, we would do better to employ a different one.

Although there is much more which can be said about this phrase I intend to focus only on a few things. I’ll try to show that we can be reasonably sceptical about reported
instances of ‘white privilege’ by exploring some actual examples. I’ll argue that such examples show that the phrase, as it is often used, is used inaccurately. After that I want to discuss two, among many, conceptual problems with the notion. One relates to the tone with which the notion is invoked; another is with regard to the quite glaring inefficiencies and inaccuracies of the notion. This alone does not entail outright elimination of the phrase. But I do hope to highlight some significant problems which must, one way or another, be dealt with by those who employ it. I suggest that the problems are best dealt with simply by abandoning the phrase as there are better ways to describe and discuss what is real and important in the world. But for those who do not share my eliminativist sympathies, the revisions which are required to render the phrase somewhat respectable are quite significant. They would, I think, remove much of the imagined force which made the phrase originally so appealing. This is anyway what I hope to show in this article.

1. Assessing Alleged Cases of ‘White Privilege’

One can spend a long time discussing the individual instances of so-called ‘white privileges’ which people actually cite. I’ll go over a few examples. In a widely cited article by Peggy McIntosh, for example, it is stated that (1) one common instance of ‘white privilege’ is being able to, if one wishes, “be in the company of people of my race most of the time.” Another example is, (2) “I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my colour.”

This is clearly an unhelpful characterisation. It is unclear either whether (1) is true universally, and whether this scenario does reflect genuine privilege. Probably, in areas where the majority of people are white, and one is white, it is at least easier to arrange to be in the company of white people than non-white people. But this would not so obviously be correct in areas where the majority of people were not white. Moreover, there appears to be a subtle problem in thinking that this does present a situation of privilege. The statement implies that it is good, or desirable, to be around people that look the same way as one does. It also implies that black people lack this opportunity and would be better off if they did. Read in this way, McIntosh’s assertion is consistent with the claim that there are separate races which ideally should remain separate, and therefore as being consistent with (if anything actually deserves the name) a racist perspective.

Example (2) seems to take the general form, ‘I can do some action A, or involve myself in some event E, without my doing A or E being accounted for with reference to my skin colour’. To the same general effect, for Macintosh, ‘white privilege’ is being able
to do things without other people rooting explanations of such behaviour in a reference to one’s skin colour, or drawing generalisations about the behaviour of all people who share one’s skin colour.

It’s no doubt that hasty generalisations or poor (i.e. racialised) explanations are irritating. To be exempt from them would be a kind of privilege. But it is doubtful that white people have this privilege in most cases. For a start, the very notion of ‘white privilege’ is predicated on a very gross generalisation about the sorts of privileges that white people generally enjoy. ‘White privilege’ features as an explanatory hypothesis that seeks to account for some of the sorts of things it is alleged that white people do (or fail to do). Alternatively, the behaviours of some white people have elicited the generalisation that all white people behave in that privileged way.

Further, it is not uncommon for one’s social behaviour, cultural affiliations or values to be explained with reference to one’s skin colour. Such, after all, is the basis for the numerous debates about language policy in South Africa, for example. Afrikaans and English are viewed as ‘white’ languages - not ‘black’ languages. Someone speaks these ‘white languages’ either because one is white or otherwise was raised, culturally, as white (so runs the explanation). Much of our discourse is peppered with these sorts of racialised explanations or generalisations.

Now, MacIntosh’s article is fairly old. It is also written in a different context to that of South Africa, which is perhaps what accounts for these inaccuracies. However, analysing recent or local examples won’t yield happier results. A recent article suggests that “Because of white privilege you will never have to worry about being the victim of Law Enforcement Officers”2. This is, of course, simply untrue. White people, generally, and in South Africa, are sometimes the victims of the police.

This should indicate, at least, that the very notion of ‘white privilege’, if it is to be used at all accurately, must be contextualised. The privileges that white people enjoy will vary according to the context in which such people reside. This is to forgo the implied universalism inherent in the notion of ‘white privilege’. Once this universalist pretention is abandoned, not much stands in the way of contextualising the notion more completely. Let me return to this point later on.

Now, the United States of America (USA) has a very different racial history to South Africa and it has engendered, for that reason, different persistent social problems. Nevertheless, it seems as if the discourse surrounding the notion of ‘white privilege’ has been imported from the USA without undergoing the requisite alterations. Perhaps that is what accounts for the rather obvious inaccuracies I pointed out above, and if the notion is contextualised to suit the contingencies of South Africa it will fare better under scrutiny.
Gillian Schutte has tried to deliver the requisite amendments. She says, for example, “white privilege is accusing a black person who critiques whiteness of being racist”\(^3\). At least it can be said that it is part of the South African experience to witness a stream of accusations of racism when black people publicly critique whiteness. It remains questionable whether or not this is truly an instance of ‘white privilege’. If a black person is genuinely uttering racist remarks, as many, I believe, who ‘critique whiteness’ do, it is not a privilege but a moral (and legal) duty to point that out. This is so regardless of the wavelength of light one’s skin reflects. If, of course, the utterances are not racist, then that too can be pointed out and discussed. But surely it is not the sole ‘privilege’ of white people that they alone can, or do, accuse (rightly or wrongly) black people of saying racist things. Keeping Schutte’s writing ‘style’ in mind, she can be paraphrased as suggesting, equally problematically, that ‘white people should not (or are racist to) accuse black critiques of ‘whiteness’ as racist’. But the reasons why they should not, or why it is racist to do this, remain elusive.

One can spend a long time discussing this, as I said, and it’s not my intention to do more of that here. But it suffices to problematize these particular allegations of ‘white privilege’ in order to get at a more general issue. The issue is that many of the cited instances of ‘white privilege’ are things about which we can reasonably raise doubts. Just because someone cites some event as an instance of white privilege does not entail that it is such an instance. It is possible to be mistaken about these cases. At least, it is possible to show that many such citations are neither wholly, nor even mostly accurate. But let me now move on to discuss some more general concerns.

2. Assessing some conceptual problems with ‘white privilege’

Let’s start with Gillian Schutte’s comprehensive guide to white privilege in South Africa [see 3]. Its first point is rather distressing. It reads as follows: “White privilege, like whiteness itself, is almost indefinable to white people. There are few words to describe the invisible. However, white privilege is only invisible to white people and to those people of colour/black people who benefit from or buy into white privilege.”

This encapsulates what I find generally objectionable about the tone discussions involving the notion appear often to carry. Put in other words, the claim is the following: There is ‘white privilege’. If one disagrees with this, then one is either white, or a non-white person who cynically benefits from it, or a non-white person who thinks ‘white privilege’ is justified or good. This is unfortunate, but represents a seemingly popular view. It is the view that it is impossible to be incorrect about the reality of ‘white
privilege’ or one’s attribution of it to particular cases. Anyone who disbelieves in it does not see the issue clearly enough, or cynically benefits from it, or endorses ‘white privilege’.

This cannot be correct. The existence of ‘white privilege’ is neither a conceptual or logically necessary truth nor is one’s attribution of ‘white privilege’ to particular cases guaranteed to be correct. It is possible that ‘white privilege’ doesn’t exist, or, at least, that it isn’t entirely real. This is generally ignored in ordinary discourse surrounding the matter, and that it is ignored is a problem.

Further, conceiving of ‘white privilege’ in this way renders the position of the believer in ‘white privilege’ unfalsifiable. Such is the sign of an impoverished notion. Any seemingly falsifying evidence against ‘white privilege’ can be dismissed out of hand. Whoever raises the objection either doesn’t see clearly, cynically benefits from, or endorses, it. That is, all apparent counter-evidence is, on this view, necessarily transformed into confirmation of the reality of ‘white privilege’.

That is putting the problem in a somewhat technical way. In other words, the problem is that those who believe in ‘white privilege’ are unwilling to (or so blinded by dogma that they are incapable of) considering the possibility of their own error. The believers in ‘white privilege’ have the Truth, to which no alterations, reformulations or rejections are possible. Anyone who does suggest a change is dismissed and thereafter viewed as part of the problem, and so becomes further confirmation of the immediacy of the problem presented by ‘white privilege’.

Arguing, or having a discussion, with someone so spellbound by this idea is frustrating. Firstly, it is frustrating for some technical reasons. The existence of ‘white privilege’ is not a logically necessary truth. There are – to use a technical philosophical term – possible worlds in which it doesn’t exist. Indeed, part of the point of invoking the notion is to point to a problem with the way society currently is – a problem which can be fixed, such that if the right conditions are met, undue ‘white privilege’ would disappear.

For this reason, believers in ‘white privilege’ should be able to spell out its truth-conditions. That is, they should be able to tell us under which conditions one would be justified in believing and disbelieving in ‘white privilege’. They should be able to provide us with accessible evidence which, in accordance with accurate truth-conditions, suggest that there is white privilege. And this evidence should be capable of scrutiny. That is anyway what would happen if the notion was one that could be taken seriously on its intellectual merits alone. But this is ruled out by Schutte’s ‘comprehensive’ guide to ‘white privilege’, and by the way many people, along with her, think about the issue. I have a problem with this.
It is frustrating for the additional reason that the tone with which people often invoke the notion (perhaps because of the notion’s unfalsifiability) is unjustifiably sanctimonious. Only they who believe in white privilege see the Truth and if you don’t agree with them then you are blind, part of the problem, and even further confirmation of their correctness and righteousness. With this, too, I have a problem.

The phrase itself is vague and this represents another problem with the notion of ‘white privilege’. Let me assess both words in this problematic phrase: ‘white’ and then ‘privilege’. Not all white people have privilege in every situation all the time. Some black people have some privileges in some situations some of the time. These are two very obvious facts. Yet the notion of ‘white privilege’ fails to reflect these facts.

Perhaps it may be admitted that a Universalist sense of the phrase should be avoided. Nevertheless, it may be argued, white people are generally more privileged than non-white people, and ‘white privilege’, properly employed, should reflect that. But this won’t work. Reimagining the term so that it ranges over only and all and those privileges enjoyed by ‘white’ people will not help. This is because again, not all white people enjoy all the privileges to an equal measure in every situation all the time. Further, some black people enjoy some privileges, some of the time, in some situations. What prevents us from simply (and more accurately) suggesting that some people enjoy some privileges unfairly sometimes and this shouldn’t happen, and those privileged people should be mindful of their unjust advantages? Nothing prevents us, except for the dogmatic racialism of believers in ‘white privilege’. It is a phrase which endures wide and various applications, but is at best an inaccurate and misleading phrase.

Let us next talk about the notion of ‘privilege’. The word ranges over various distinct issues. It matters that we emphasize these distinctions, for they make a difference regarding how we think about, and perhaps resolve, certain different instances of illegitimate ‘privilege’. There are at least three different categories.

One – call it the type category – is related to the different kinds of advantages one may have: educational, social, cultural, linguistic, religious, political, economic, and so on. Another – the directional category (in which direction is the injustice pointing?) – relates to the legitimacy of having such advantages. Some things, education for instance, are things which everyone ought to have in a just society. The problem is that some people don’t have these advantages. Some people remain excluded from educational institutions, for instance. Other things, for example a large sum of economic inheritance, are things that no one deserves. Analysing situations in which people enjoy benefits which no one deserves requires a different sort of analysis to situations in which some (but not all) people enjoy benefits which everyone deserves.
The third issue – the objective/subjective category – relates to whether instances of so-called privilege are objectively, or subjectively, problematic. That is to say, there are situations, like the case of education, which are objectively problematic. Seemingly independent of how one subjectively feels, everyone has a right to education. Other situations, for example those relating to culture – the prevalence in society of food-stuffs with which one was raised, for example – are subjectively problematic. What makes these situations problematic are the particular subjective values which some people do, or don’t, hold, rather than any objective issue about rights to which everyone is objectively entitled.

The notion of privilege ranges over these distinct categories, but as I said, the distinctions between these categories matter crucially for how we think about the alleged privilege. For example: (A1) ‘white privilege is to have one’s language and culture widely represented in the media’; (A2) ‘white privilege is getting a job, and not having to fear that one’s colleagues question whether you got the job because of merit or skin colour’. (B1) ‘White privilege is being able to travel to one’s appointments in the comfort of one’s own car, and never worrying about public transport’; (B2) ‘white privilege is knowing that when one’s parents die, one could subsist on inheritance money alone.’ (C1) ‘White privilege is never wondering whether one’s job rejection was racially motivated’; (C2) ‘white privilege is seeing one’s race largely positively represented in the media’.

A, B, and C related respectively to categories 1, 2, and 3 I detailed just above. These, perhaps, might be instances of privilege; but if so, they then require quite different sorts of analyses. The notion of ‘white privilege’ does not seem capable of capturing these genuine differences, because the notion of ‘privilege’ is employed to do too much different work. This should represent a further problem for the notion of ‘white privilege’.

One could expand on all of these assertions; however, the points I have outlined already render the notion of ‘white privilege’ unusable. Again, there is nothing wrong with admitting that problems of privilege I’ve pointed out are real, and oblige one to quite significantly reformulate the notion – or at least ‘check’ how one invokes the notion.

3. Conclusions

One could merely assert that people enjoy certain kinds of benefits in certain situations, but not in others. When a person (irrespective of which wavelength of light the surface of their skin reflects) is in a situation where they have benefits that alters their perspective of some issue under discussion, it can serve well for that person to critically
reflect on those benefits. Such critical reflection may involve realising that one’s current view, or current attitude in that situation, is not the only one possible and that there are other valid perspectives the consideration of which might shed valuable light on some issue.

But, this is no more than to say that some of us have various biases, prejudices, habits, or expectations that are not necessarily legitimate, which can be questioned, and perhaps should be changed. Anyone interested in having a rational view of the world would be interested, then, in ‘checking their benefits’. Spelling it simplistically like this does not inspire one with revolutionary zeal in the way the notion of ‘white privilege’ can; but so much the worse for revolutionary zeal. Without the revolutionary zeal, the sanctimonious and self-righteous tone; the unfalsifiable statements, and logically problematic accusations much more progress could probably be made in the right direction.

To recapitulate, individual instances of so-called ‘white privilege’ can and should be questioned. Many cited instances of ‘white privilege’ are inaccurate and serve more to obscure the real issues than help to understand them. This is an unfortunate aspect about how the notion of ‘white privilege’ is employed – inaccurately, hastily and therefore objectionably. The way in which this notion is invoked often involves an unhelpful and sanctimonious tone, where its believers cannot, as far as they are concerned, be incorrect. This represents technical and practical problems. Technically, of course attributions of ‘white privilege’ can be mistaken. If one’s view is that they cannot be mistaken, then one’s view is inaccurate. From a practical perspective, the inability for one to admit that they could be wrong is probably the result of an unfortunate, highly frustrating and damaging dogmatism on the side of believers.

Most significantly, the concept of ‘white privilege’ is conceptually vague, and its vagueness masks certain very obvious problems. The term cannot be used in its Universalist sense (as so many people do use it) because doing so invites troubling, and obvious errors. To avoid such issues, we are better off radically contextualising the issue. We are better off, that is, admitting all the exceptions, problems, errors, and just saying that some people, some of the time, in some cases, have some kinds of benefits, and that in such situations they should be mindful that this may hamper their understanding of certain issues. But this radical contextualisation is functional (even if not metaphysical) elimination. One can be sceptical about my brand of racial eliminativism, but the result, once we scrutinise the notion of ‘white privilege’, is the same. As I have demonstrated vagueness and ambiguity render the concept unusable, if not meaningless. I have also demonstrated that we are able to capture what is meaningful
about it in terms which are less complex, less revolutionarily charged, and racially neutral.

It is no doubt that our society has problems. It is no doubt that many aspects of our society unfairly alienate some people, while unfairly pandering to others. It is no doubt that many people who benefit from the status quo of society (who, perhaps for this reason, are less immediately conscious of its problems) are people with pale skin. But if that is all that we meant, we could have, and should have, just spelled it out simply and plainly as I’ve just done. If this is the problem, we do not need to refer to it with an outmoded metaphysics, or with vague and problematic concepts. And if this is a problem, then there are parallel problems with regards to some people with dark skin who, for one reason or another, perhaps also illegitimately benefit from the way society is. To suggest that those people who benefit from society in these ways think deeply about their situations is only to require of them that they think and believe rationally. That is something behind which I can stand - not dogmatic faith in ‘white privilege’.

Epilogue:

Reflecting on this article 3 years after it was initially written I believe it has, so far, stood the test of time. The thrust of the article is really an opposition to two major trends people who employ the notion of ‘white privilege’ exhibit. One is a form of essentialism. The other is a form of dogmatism.

Generalising over a class of human beings, attributing them all certain qualities, without nuance and declaring that these qualities are the basic result of their race is racially essentialist. Insisting that anyone who disagrees with these generalisations is part of the problem – or, otherwise denying that there could be any reasonable disagreement with these generalisations – is a form of dogmatism. Both trends are objectionable for reasons that ought to be obvious.

I think the basic thrust, against dogma and racial essentialism, is correct. Articulating the nature and causes of our social problems, and formulating solutions to those problems, requires neither dogma nor recourse to racial essences. Some will admit this much at least, but will suggest that describing our problems in racial terms is, even if inaccurate, useful. Exploring the notion of ‘white privilege’, however, reveals something different. It reveals that unless one heavily qualifies – or ‘contextualises’ – one’s use of the notion, one is likely to say something quite inaccurate. This heavy demand for qualification leads to, I still maintain, functional elimination. The notion, to be used accurately, requires such extreme revisions that it effectively is a rejection of
the way the notion was originally employed, at least by Macintosh and Schutte. Rather than indulging in attempts to patch up an obviously defective and inaccurate notion with additional qualifications, it would be easier to drop the notion and settle on a better one. I think it would.

There are two issues I might have elaborated on. One, how, and in which contexts, should we think about ‘privilege’? My three-way distinction is an innovation of sorts, but much more could be said about it. Two, what is the function of the notion of privilege anyway? Some use the notion, more or less, to stifle debate, or as a quick way of rejecting some dissenting opinion without further argument. Others use it as a key toward reflecting on the moral duties privileged people have in our society. Others use it as a way of referring to pervasive social, economic and cultural injustices. But the variety of uses to which the notion is put only increases the ambiguity of the notion and causes the notion to become vacuous. Given the variety of uses to which it is put, I am not sure, in the end, that the notion serves any very good function anymore.

I continue to think that once we scrutinise these notions – and others like it – we will find their usefulness to be very limited. There is no reason to continue to lavish in such useless notions. Not when there are so many pressing issues which require careful and clear analysis. Not, of course, because ‘analysis’ is some wondrous enterprise, but because unless we understand the nature and causes of the way our society is, we won’t be able to determine ways to make our society better.

NOTES

1 – http://amptoons.com/blog/files/mcintosh.html
ABOUT IFAA AND THE FORUM

The Institute for African Alternative (IFAA) launched in 1986 as a Pan-African policy research institute. It is based in South Africa but strongly networked across Africa. The Institute aims to produce and promote constructive analysis of South African and African socioeconomic and political issues by conducting broad policy research and raising critical issues for debate in public forums.

IFAA supports a wide range of initiatives that can contribute to national and regional development. It provides several platforms for disseminating progressive views and encourages critical engagement with socioeconomic and political matters. The IFAA Forum, which focuses on building critical engagement between students, young academics and the general public, is one of those platforms.

The IFAA Forum is an open discussion group facilitating the democratization of socially relevant ideas and discourses. Our forum aims to connect local postgraduate students pursuing degrees in the social sciences with each other and with a public audience. Presentations and discussions are primarily based on topics in political philosophy, political economy and development economics and are given in a conversational and non-technical style as far as the subject permits. The Critical Review is the final outcome of a series of engagements in 2016/2017.

Supported by: