

## **PANEL DISCUSSION**

### **ROUNDTABLE: ROLE OF INTELLECTUALS IN THE STATE-SOCIETY NEXUS**

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## **THEORISING THE SOUTH AFRICAN RENAISSANCE IDEAL**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Without entering the debate about definitions of intellectual work, and what Professor Thandika Mkandawire refers to as “quintessentially the labour of the mind and soul”<sup>1</sup>, I wish to posit an extension of the historical context, by arguing that intellectual work preceded colonial conquest.

Needless to say, pre-colonial society in its various strands had an intellectual organising framework that defined sets of beliefs, artistic expressions, rationalisation of systems of social organisation and abstract intellectual pursuits. It can be argued that, from the artisans, traders, poets, generals, spirit mediums and administrators of Mapungubwe to Autshumao, Makhanda, Moshoeshe’s counsellors and Ntshingwayo (one of Cetshwayo’s commanders), these intellectuals were critical in preserving, sustaining and advancing culture in the broad sense.

### **HISTORICAL BREAKS AND ‘MODERNITY’**

This issue is canvassed not for purposes of glorifying the past, but to acknowledge it; and primarily in order to draw attention to the transition that African societies endured as a consequence of colonial subjugation. Along with this was the imposition of Western education and a form of ‘modernity’ – in the less pejorative sense, pertaining to the introduction of advanced productive forces and the emergence of a modern, albeit, colonial state. This is important because, in theorising the South African renaissance ideal, we cannot ignore the persistence of some form of indigenous knowledge and, critically, the break that was imposed on the evolution of African societies.

However, such breaks are not unique to colonial experiences. The Meiji restoration<sup>2</sup> of 19<sup>th</sup> century Japan was a self-imposed economic, social and political transformation of Japanese society. The same can be said about the emergence of the State of Chin<sup>3</sup> some 2 500 years ago and later the ‘four modernisations’ of Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping<sup>4</sup>; and the European Renaissance which started about 700 hundred years ago. The East Asian transformations in particular reflected, among others, a profound and brutal self-critical paradigm, based on an appreciation of the deficits (or what some of them called ‘backwardness’) in national development, and a determination to rise from the pain and shame of national humiliations. This paradigm is largely absent in South African (and to a significant extent, African) intellectual and socio-political discourse.

The break in the social evolution of indigenous South African communities, as a consequence of colonialism, means that an imposed alien modernity required of the subjects to remake themselves in the image of the colonial masters. From language to world outlooks, a psychology could easily set in always to seek affirmation and reassurance from the very colonial masters. On the other hand, the

tools of an imposed modernity could be remoulded into weapons of struggle in the hands of the oppressed. In that sense, the colonialists became “an unconscious tool of history”<sup>5</sup>. It is in the tortuous effort to find a resolution between these contradictory states that sovereign South African (and African) intellectual pursuits should determine their fulcrum.

And so, theorising the South African renaissance ideal should transcend the mind-set to inherit, maintain and somewhat tinker with the socio-economic pillars of the status quo ante. To quote David Scott, the subalterns should not perceive of themselves as “...passive objects of a dominant civilizational power, merely assimilating or mimicking Europe, but rather [as] self-conscious actors, resisting, translating, displacing, and so on, that dominant power in the course of making their own history”<sup>6</sup>.

Two strands of thought therefore inform one’s approach to the notions of renaissance, civilisation and modernity in the South African context. The first is about the agency of resistance and reconstruction as propagated by luminaries such as WEB du Bois, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, Kwame Nkurumah, Sheikh Anta Diop and Thabo Mbeki. The second derives from an understanding of civilisation as progressive improvement in the mastery of nature and pursuit of humane socio-political relations. When Biko and Seme argue that Africa can give “the world a more human face” by introducing a civilisation that is “humanistic ... moral and eternal”<sup>7</sup>, they thus introduce a fundamentally important quality to the conceptualisation of civilisation and renaissance.

### **RENAISSANCE IDEAL IN EVOLUTION**

In this year of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Freedom Charter<sup>8</sup>, it is perhaps apposite to locate the discussion on the South African renaissance ideal in the provisions of, and debate around, the Charter. But before this, some brief observations about the preceding historical period deserve reflection.

The first issue relates to the stature of political leadership. There is no doubt that the liberation ideal owes much of its conceptualisation to the African intellectual traditions that started to emerge in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. What is of utmost importance to our discussion is that it was the best from within this community that took up the cudgels in articulating the collective dreams of the oppressed. Besides their intellectual prowess, they were community leaders in their own right and, as much as humanly possible, the paragons of virtue. This ensured that they commanded respect beyond the narrow constituency of political activism.

The second observation is about the question posed earlier regarding the image of the colonial masters constituting the canvass upon which even the notions of liberation are defined. It is a matter of historical record that, in the first two decades of the existence of the African National Congress (ANC), its leadership campaigned for a qualified franchise. This did not necessarily reflect an ideal inferior to what obtained for the white community – which itself had qualifications pertaining to literacy and assets. Yet this approach persisted even after “qualifications for the white franchise” were removed in 1931<sup>9</sup>: more a reflection of appeasement so whites would not feel overwhelmed by the black masses. For the record, it was the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), which as early as the 1920’s pioneered the demand for universal franchise in a Black Republic.

By the 1940s, this had changed, with the 1943 African Claims, adopted by the ANC, calling for “the extension to all adults, regardless of race, of the right to vote and be elected to parliament, provincial councils and other representative institutions”<sup>10</sup>.

What is striking in the African Claims is the attention paid to social issues, including such matters as free and compulsory education, free medical and health services, as well as collective bargaining and insurance for workers. But, aside from demands for “an equal share in all the material resources of the country” including “fair distribution of the land”, “equal opportunity to engage in any occupation, trade or industry” and “recognition of the right of the Africans to freedom of trading”, the African Claims document was quite sparse on matters to do with equitable distribution of wealth.

The Freedom Charter thus represented a major advance in these and other respects.

### **REFLECTIONS ON THE CHARTER IDEALS**

The aim here is not to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the Freedom Charter, but to identify a few issues in its provisions for debate.

In reiterating the self-evident truth that government and state legality and legitimacy should derive from the people as a whole, and that “South Africa belongs to all who live in it”, the Freedom Charter asserts a profound and abiding non-racialism and democratic bent. Further, the Charter’s progressive nature lies in its recognition of the intertwining of racial oppression and economic exclusion. Thus, its ringing injunctions on the reordering of wealth distribution, including land, stand out as a towering monument to the ideals of social justice.

Among others, three critiques have been proffered on the Charter’s starting point on these issues.

The first is about what some interpret as the equation of oppressor and oppressed. But could South Africa have developed a different approach, given the ‘colonialism of a special type’ in which the large settler community had made the country their permanent home? What has not found resonance in discourse on this issue, though, is the responsibility on the part of beneficiaries of apartheid colonialism, in practical material terms, to contribute to the righting of the historical injustice. Proposals such as the TRC recommendation on a wealth tax and once-off levy on corporate and private income were not sufficiently debated. The ‘fight back’ of the first decade of freedom resulted in a conceptual stalemate; and efforts such as the Business Trust initiative petered out. The notion that current privilege has little to do with the apartheid order of things is bandied about as fact. An opportunity was missed; and resentment will persist.

The second critique relates to the Freedom Charter’s reference to “all national groups”, and thus an implied subtraction from the principle of individual rights. This is also criticised as undermining solidarity among Black people who were all victims of oppression. However, besides the issue of oppressor and oppressed canvassed above, is the recognition of apartheid’s hierarchy of oppression among Black people themselves a conceptual aberration; or does it enjoy resonance in lived experiences – thus requiring careful management in policy and practical programmes?

The third critique derives from a rejection of the notion of ‘colonialism of a special type’ which would require the creation of a national democratic society as the maximum programme of the ANC.

According to one of these critiques, the South African social system could be characterised as ‘racial capitalism’ – with race and class so intertwined that the antagonisms could only be resolved through the creation of a socialist order, as an immediate objective. It can be argued that this approach underplays not only the principle of broad fronts and the variety of interests that coalesced in the liberation alliance; but also the array of class forces on a global scale.

Yet a retort about society’s experiences since 1994 – with current levels of poverty and inequality defined mainly along racial, gender and spatial lines – would be thoroughly justified. In this regard, the issue may not be so much about building a socialist system; but about the radical nature of socio-economic policies that have been implemented since the advent of democracy. Is it in fact possible to build ‘non-racial capitalism’ when the odds have historically been so heavily stacked against Black people?

This brings us to the debate about the interpretation of the property question as articulated in the Freedom Charter, in particular, the central injunctions that the “mineral wealth beneath the soil, the Banks and monopoly industry shall be transferred to the ownership of the people as a whole” and “restrictions of land ownership on a racial basis shall be ended, and all the land re-divided amongst those who work it to banish famine and land hunger<sup>11</sup>”. The word ‘interpretation’ is used deliberately because it has a subjective premise, and assumes tints in the eye of the beholder. In this regard, context becomes crucial so as to avoid games of make-believe, and taunts and ripostes that are more about public political postures than the science of social development.

What are some of these postures? To paraphrase, these are, firstly, that the Charter did not intend nationalisation and those who assert the opposite are distorting the thinking of the drafters. The second approach is the inverse of the above, with accusation that the post-apartheid government has betrayed the ideals of the struggle. The third one evades the issue and resorts to listing finicky detail about Black Economic Empowerment, the Minerals and Petroleum Resources Development Act and a state mining company, as well as poorly implemented land restitution and redistribution as proof that the Charter is being meticulously implemented.

None of these approaches helps the discussion much, for each one of them tends to ignore context. When Nelson Mandela argued in the 1950s that “in demanding the nationalisation of the banks, the gold mines and the land the Charter strikes a fatal blow at the financial and gold-mining monopolies and farming interests that have for centuries plundered the country and condemned its people to servitude,”<sup>12</sup> he was accurately reflecting the generally understood meaning of the Charter’s property clauses, then. This is reiterated in the ANC Strategy and Tactics document adopted at the Morogoro Consultative Conference in 1969<sup>13</sup>.

Such was the interpretation of the Charter when state ownership was seen as the primary instrument through which redistribution of wealth and economic leadership could be exercised. And this was “within an international context of transition to the Socialist system, of the breakdown of the colonial system as a result of national liberation and socialist revolutions, and the fight for social and economic progress by the people of the whole world”<sup>14</sup>.

The approach in this regard has changed. And this is not merely on account of a changed global environment, but because of a different approach to the role of the state in economic development,

with the need or otherwise of state ownership weighed on a case by case basis. To quote from the ANC's 1992 Ready to Govern document:

*"The primary question ... is not the legal form that state involvement in economic activity might take at any point, but whether such actions will strengthen the ability of the economy to respond to the massive inequalities in the country, relieve the material hardship of the majority of the people, and stimulate economic growth and competitiveness.*

*"In this context, the balance of the evidence will guide the decision for or against various economic-policy measures. Such flexibility means assessing the balance of the evidence in restructuring the public sector to carry out national goals. The democratic state will therefore consider:*

- *Increasing the public sector in strategic areas through, for example, nationalisation, purchasing a shareholding in companies, establishing new public corporations or joint ventures with the private sector;*
- *Reducing the public sector in certain areas in ways that will enhance efficiency, advance affirmative action and empower the historically disadvantaged, while ensuring the protection of both consumers and the rights and employment of workers.*

*"Such a mixed economy will foster a new and constructive relationship between the people, the state, the trade union movement, the private sector and the market."<sup>15</sup>*

In other words, government is implementing a specific interpretation of the Freedom Charter, from the point of view of the current logic on the role of the state in economic development. It may not articulate this clearly or it may be implementing this badly; but this does not necessarily mean that the approach itself is misplaced. It may well be that a different logic is required, and other approaches may produce better results. But an argument to this effect would have to demonstrate whether principles in the current logic are in fact being implemented, effectively and to the letter; or whether the problem lies elsewhere!

The changes envisaged in the Freedom Charter, the framework of which is captured in the country's Constitution – encompassing all generations of human rights – imply a fundamental transformation of apartheid political and social relations; in other words, a Revolution. To argue that the "South African Constitution...provides for transformation and not a radical revolution"<sup>16</sup> is therefore incorrect, and reflects an aversion to what for instance the Americans and the French have embraced as a proud part of their being.

## **PRECARIOUS ELEMENTS IN THE CURRENT CONJUNCTURE**

Recent events have thrown up contradictory trends about the state of South Africa's polity and its prospects going forward. On the one hand, the overwhelming majority of South Africans have, broadly, shown support for the National Development Plan and a yearning for social compacting to realise a better life for all. On the other hand, negative events – ranging from the Marikana tragedy, to increasingly violent local protests, disruptions in the legislatures, shoddy responses to injunctions of institutions such as the Public Protector, and strange developments in state institutions – do pose a question about the sturdiness of the country's constitutional order.

Against the backdrop of these developments are the recent electoral outcomes which reflected, among others, the following trends<sup>17</sup>:

- the persistence of race as a marker of political self-interest, with close to 100% of whites voting for the Democratic Alliance (DA) and one or two smaller parties that have historically been associated with privileges of the colonial order, and increasing numbers from within the Coloured and Indian communities associating themselves with these schools of thought – and ditto with the African community in relation to the ANC and ‘liberation parties’, though there is greater diversity within this community in terms of electoral choices;
- the recession of ethnic identity and regionalism within the African community, with the three largest parties having a national footprint, and KwaZulu-Natal attaining averages similar to other provinces in terms of African support for the ANC (with indications that the latter is largely premised on actual ‘service delivery’ in deep rural parts of the province);
- the continuing loss of support by the ANC (since 2009) especially in most of the Metros, with indications of a rising prominence of concerns around issues of ethics especially among sections of the African middle strata, who are starting to evince a fickleness typical of any strata that are less dependent on state largesse;
- the shift in support for parties that profess “radical” approaches on socio-economic issues such as nationalisation and land redistribution without compensation – which since 1994 had collectively gained barely above 1% of the vote, now attaining some 6%.

Are these issues at all related, and what is their relevance to the theorisation of the South African renaissance ideal?

At the root of many of these developments is the persistence of exclusion and marginalisation, reflected in high levels of poverty and the growing inequality in society especially within the African majority (as distinct from across the various racial groups). The class composition of society is changing, with larger numbers from among the Black people ascending to the status of ‘middle class’; and educational attainment among them is also on the rise. At the same time, social status is still defined mainly by race, with a sediment of society – particularly young people, women and rural communities – intensely marginalised from meaningful economic activity.

While its character (e.g. levels of education) and absolute numbers may have changed, this ‘under-class’ has always been there in the past 21 years. And so, why is this social tinder now more prone to catching fire? The answer lies in the balance between hope and despair.

When the structural nature of South Africa’s unemployment problem combines with rising inequality, consequences of a global recession, persistence of ‘racial capitalism’ and signs of advancement among a few from within the previously disenfranchised, the social tinder becomes even more flammable. But it is in more than the objective circumstances that we should seek answers – for, again, many of these circumstances have been with us during the past 21 years.

When weak state capacity merges with gross manifestations of corruption at local level (of the Mothutlung/Brits-type where water infrastructure was deliberately sabotaged so local politicians and bureaucrats could make money with water tank vendors), the sense of hope loses its flicker. In

the place of political persuasion and infusion of hope, state security agencies become the first and last line of defence; and some communities start deliberately to target these agencies when they engage in protest. When media reports and commentary on government are replete with cases of abuse of state resources, a sense of impunity, manifestations of patronage on a grand scale in state-owned enterprises, and strange shenanigans in critical state agencies, the very legitimacy of the state and the democratic order at large are severely undermined.

In other words, rulers themselves can, by commission or omission, create conditions for a chain of de-legitimisation that may start off with the individual leader, extending to the party, the government and ultimately the state and the polity as a whole. In some post-colonial societies on the African continent, it was precisely at such moments that the Right and the self-declared Left found common cause to revolt against the status quo, with the military forces taking advantage of the situation to stage coups d'état. This, however, is not possible in South Africa. Yet in other instances on the continent, the state started to rely more and more on overt and/or covert acts of repression.

And so, the chain of de-legitimisation takes various forms, with those who are exploiting both the social tinder and the subjective weaknesses aiming to displace the ruling party in the polls. On the extreme, the state is goaded to take precipitate action, such as in the Marikana tragedy and recently in the disruptions in Parliament; which action in turn aggravates the process of de-legitimisation. Elements of the Right also seize on the opportunity, and strange alliances take shape. The more extreme among these elements – particularly rabid racists who had gone into hibernation – come out of the woodwork and latch onto this to question the very capacity of Black people to govern, and to rationalise latent disloyalty to the new dispensation.

Parallels, in this regard, can be drawn in relation to the unseemly squabbles in the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). A comprehensive analysis of this problem requires interrogation of the changing character of the working class, the balance between private and public sector workers in the federation, the social demographics referred to above, as well as 'sins of incumbency' that include business unionism, privileges and commercial opportunities that accrue to shop-stewards (let alone senior leaders), and blatant thievery. But this is not sufficient to explain the impasse that has resulted in the expulsion of the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA), rending the federation virtually down the middle. Even the ideological differences have always been there, and were in fact more acute during the first 15 years of democracy. In other words, beyond the objective circumstances are issues of leadership quality across the Tri-Partite Alliance, including declining legitimacy among the political leaders, occasioned among others by corruption and patronage. All this fuels an irrational and suicidal factionalism.

In other words, the environmental conditions (e.g. slow economic growth, limited fiscal space, changing social demographics and the electricity supply crunch) and the subjective factors (e.g. leadership conduct) do conspire to fuel a sense of crisis in society.

## **IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION**

Theorisation of the South African renaissance ideal should encompass all the elements – both objective and subjective. It should interrogate the detail of technical 'delivery'; but do so in a manner that identifies inter-linkages and macro-trends and can thus help in conceptualising the

long-term trajectory of the changes society is striving to implement. Historically, the profundity of South Africa's (and indeed Africa's) contribution to the social sciences, globally, lay in this sharpness of analysis. Currently, weaknesses in research and teaching in the Humanities and Social Sciences seem to hamper possibilities for creative intellectual interventions that contribute to the realisation of the South African renaissance ideal.

In this regard, to quote a few examples, creative conceptual interventions such as references to a decent standard of living, measures to reduce the cost of living for the poor and how to address spatial manifestations of social exclusion – as articulated in the National Development Plan – do start to raise issues that should engage the mind of South Africa's intellectuals and policy-makers. The same applies to discourse on the efficacy of employee share-ownership schemes, profit-sharing and worker representation in enterprises' decision-making structures, as part of the panoply of measures to address inequality. One can add to these, the challenges relating to the tension between traditional governance systems in rural areas and the rights embodied in the Constitution. There is also the question whether social compacting can succeed under conditions of weak political legitimacy. At a more generic level, there is the fundamental question whether South Africa is seeking to build a 'non-racial capitalism' and whether this is possible at all! Further, with sub-Saharan Africa showing signs of sustainable growth and development, how does South Africa reorient its outlook to benefit from, and support, these possibilities? Many other instances of this kind can be cited, straddling various macro- and sub-themes, all of which require systematic interrogation in our Humanities and Social Sciences.

If the analysis above regarding processes of de-legitimisation and a sense of crisis in society is close to the mark, what are the corrective impulses that will drive a turn-around? Is it the senior leadership of the 'ruling party' as it better appreciates the dangers of these phenomena; and/or the middle-level cadres driven by idealism, but also by self-interest as electoral prospects diminish? Or will it be other political forces, as negative tendencies within the 'ruling party' congeal and become too stubborn to erase? There is no end to questions that deserve comprehensive interrogation.

Intellectuals have an important role to play in ensuring a turn-around from the current sense of crisis. If the country proves unable, in the medium-term, to choose and pursue the positive development trajectory that beckons, South Africa's intellectual community should accept a large part of the blame. The inverse should also stand as necessarily true!

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<sup>1</sup> Prof Thandika Mkandawire, Introduction to *African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development*

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/373305/Meiji-Restoration>.

<sup>3</sup> Dr Francis Fukuyama, MISTRA Lecture (2013)

<sup>4</sup> Ezra Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, *The British Rule in India*, The New-York Herald Tribune, 1853

<sup>6</sup> David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, Duke University Press 2004, (p113, Kindle edition),

<sup>7</sup> Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* & Pixley ka Isaka Seme 1906 Columbia University Lecture, *The Regeneration of Africa*

<sup>8</sup> *The Freedom Charter*, adopted at the Congress of the People, Kliptown, 1955

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<sup>9</sup> Report of Study Commission on US policy toward southern Africa, *South Africa: Time is running out, 1981*

<sup>10</sup> *African Claims in South Africa* (adopted by the ANC in December 1943)

<sup>11</sup> Op cit

<sup>12</sup> Nelson Mandela, *In our Lifetime* (Article in Liberation Journal)

<sup>13</sup> In the document, The Freedom Charter: Revolutionary Programme of the ANC, adopted at the 1969 National Consultative Conference, the ANC asserts: "It is necessary for monopolies which vitally affect the social wellbeing of our people such as the mines, the sugar and wine industry to be transferred to public ownership so that they can be used to uplift the life of all the people."

<sup>14</sup> Report on the Strategy and Tactics of the African National Congress, 26 April 1969

<sup>15</sup> *Ready to Govern*, ANC policy guidelines for a democratic South Africa adopted at the National (Policy) Conference, 28-31 May 1992 as mandated by the 48<sup>th</sup> National Conference in 1991

<sup>16</sup> George Devenish, *SA's Constitution provides for transformation and not a radical revolution*, BDLive, 27 January 2015

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed analysis of the 2014 electoral trends refer, [www.mistra.org.za](http://www.mistra.org.za), *Voting trends twenty years into democracy*