NOTES
BLACK EXCELLENCE AWARDS
FOOD FOR THOUGHT
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REFLECTIONS ON BLACK EXCELLENCE AND THE MACROSOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

As Tower (Prof Itumeleng Mosala) would know, there is a saying by Che Guevara that *the velocity of the guerrilla band on the march* is equal to [that] *of its slowest [member]*. So, in solidarity with those who couldn't manage aces and birdies today, I'll proceed from an imaginary hole in six – in terms of the number of theses in these brief reflections.

The first thesis is a challenge about how we define excellence. For the black middle and upper strata this could mean a 'good life' manifested in co-option into the historical courtyard of privilege and acceptance of the status quo where we are employed or where we operate. It can mean echoing the worldview of our benefactors; and at a macropolitical level, celebrating the mere fact of occupying the colonial mansion and maintaining it and the gardens as previously kept. But excellence should entail more fundamental ideals. To paraphrase Steve Biko: *The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more human face.*

The second thesis pertains to a discourse that underplays the profound changes that have taken place in the conditions of life of South Africans as a consequence of democracy – a form of fatalistic pessimism. Yet, beyond access to social services, some interesting statistics include, for instance, the fact that the black middle strata are now the majority of this social segment; African students at tertiary level constitute some 75% of this cohort compared to less than half in 1994; and Blacks are now the majority in skilled and professional categories. The fact that many of the rights are now taken for granted, especially by the youth, does not mean that they have not been attained.

The third thesis relates to a shallow appreciation of dynamics that have spawned the current confluence of crises (or poly-crisis): increasing poverty and inequality; low investment rates; misgovernance in most municipalities; poor state capacity in the other spheres; growing levels of lawlessness, and so on. Many of these problems are self-generated and need to be corrected with a sense of urgency. But is it correct to ignore the fact that, for over two years, Covid-19 scuppered much of what was being done to renew our society? The danger of this acontextual presentism is that we start questioning the very utility of the democratic project: losing faith in the journey to the 'promised land'.

The fourth thesis is that, in giving practical meaning to Biko's injunction about giving the world a more human face, South Africa needs to pursue a minimum standard of living below which no one can drop. In this regard, we need to take into account dualism in paths of development that has persisted even under democracy – many of us have joined the privileged social strata; but unemployment, poverty and asset distribution remain skewed according to race and gender. When we talk of reconstruction and recovery, we tend to focus on the economy of the internal metropolis at the expense of the internal colony. We underplay low-end manufacturing, land programmes,

support for micro and informal enterprises, and other such programmes that would absorb the majority of the unemployed who are unskilled and semi-skilled.

The fifth thesis relates to whether we have developed an organising framework to define the end-goal of our social endeavours. In my view, such strategic reflection would point towards a combination of a developmental state with high rates of economic growth, and social democracy with sustainable redistributive measures, including a reasonable minimum wage, narrower income differentials, and employee share-ownership schemes…not just elite economic empowerment.

The last of the hole in six is a thesis on conscious promotion of strategic thinking, discourse and praxis within the black community. Are we supporting cutting-edge research through progressive think tanks? No nation has succeeded without nurturing strategic research and a science-based approach to social change. Philanthropy on bricks and mortar is absolutely necessary, but we dare to forget the 'think industry' at our own peril.

In conclusion, let me refer to the current work on Indlulamithi scenarios, whose researchers argue that South Africa burst its bubble of African exceptionalism when we allowed state capture and systemic corruption to take root. But as they revise the scenarios, they are saying that we may yet regain that dubious accolade of exceptionalism, by being the first in Africa, voluntarily through elections, to hand back the political reins to the erstwhile colonisers – as has already happened in some municipalities.

That is my food for thought for the evening!

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