

Black identity

Moral instrument or weapon of power?

Racial identity expresses itself in complex ways. **Xolela Mangcu** argues that the current South African leadership has betrayed the non-racial society envisaged by South Africa's liberation movements.

Be careful what you say, you might just get it. This tongue-in-cheek saying captures for me the central contradiction of racial discourse in the ruling African National Congress (ANC).

Historically, and almost without exception, all of South Africa's liberation movements pledged themselves to the creation of a non-racial society. Take for example the following paradigmatic explications of non-racialism from the leaders of the three revolutionary movements, Nelson Mandela of the ANC, Robert Sobukwe of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and Steve Biko of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM).

Speaking at the Rivonia Trial where he was sentenced to death

Nelson Mandela declared: "During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

The radical PAC claims to have invented the concept of non-racialism in response to the ANC's multiracialism. The PAC argued that multiracialism was predicated on the existence of different race groups while non-racialism rejected the concept of race in favour of one human race. Robert Sobukwe described his position on race thus: "I know I have been accused of being anti-white, not only by the government but also by others. But there is not one who can quote any statement of mine that bears that out. When I say Africa for the Africans I mean those, of any colour, who accept Africa as their home. Colour does not mean anything to me."

The leader of the BCM Steve Biko repeatedly called for the creation of a non-racial, egalitarian society. In his book *I Write What I Like* he wrote: "We see a completely non-racial society. We don't believe, for instance, in the so-called guarantees for minority rights, because guaranteeing minority rights implies the

recognition of portions of the community on a race basis. We believe that in our country there shall be no minority, there shall be no majority, just the people. And those people will have the same status before the law, and they will have the same political rights before the law. So in a sense it will be a completely non-racial, egalitarian society."

To be sure there were always differences of strategy between those who advocated a multiracial and non-racial approach in the Congress movement, and those who advocated an exclusivist position in the PAC and BCM. But an exclusivist position is not necessarily an essentialist argument. The former is a political strategy of struggle, and the latter is an account of identity. In their political practices the PAC and Black Consciousness leaders were exclusivist but always maintained that in the end they sought to build an inclusive non-racial society.

The leaders of these movements were, in their personal and social relations, as non-racial as you can get. Hence Robert Sobukwe's close relationship with Benjamin Pogrand, Steve Biko's relationship with Donald Woods, Francis Wilson and his spiritual father, Aelred Stubbs. Despite leading a breakaway from the multi-racial National Union of South African Students (Nusas) on account of it being a white dominated organisation that purported to speak on behalf of black students, Biko maintained close

personal relationships with white student leaders such as Neville Curtis, Duncan Innes, Paul Pretorius, Paula Ensor, Geoff Budlender, Horst Kleinschmidt and many others. Without exception leaders of Nusas attest to Biko's non-racial personality. This is the magnanimity missing in our present political culture.

To be sure Nelson Mandela's government started out with, and was celebrated for, its non-racialism, and even criticised for being overly magnanimous. Mandela's biographer Anthony Sampson captured some of the dangers inherent in Mandela's approach: "In his first months as President, he enjoyed a brilliant honeymoon, particularly with white South Africans, to whom this tolerant old man came as a wondrous relief... at the end of the first hundred days in office the *Financial Times* could find no whites who had a bad word for him. It was a normality which carried its own dangers, as black militants saw the revolution betrayed, and younger ANC leaders including Thabo Mbeki knew they must make reforms which would offend the whites."

Indeed, the cordiality that underpinned the non-racial ethos in the ANC, PAC, and BCM has been replaced in quick succession by what the journalist Jonny Steinberg in the *Business Day* called a shrill and belligerent culture under the leadership of President Thabo Mbeki: "...what Mbeki coaxed to the surface of SA's political culture was an anxious man's nationalism and a paranoid's nativism."

Mbeki's position on HIV/AIDS seems to be informed by defensiveness that uses race as a scapegoat for government's policy failures. Speaking at the University of Fort Hare in 2000 Mbeki rejected the

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implications of what the HIV/AIDS activists were saying in what were starkly racial terms that had nothing to do with the reality of death afflicting people on a daily basis. Delivering the first ZK Matthews Lecture he argued that there was a racist ploy to present black people as "germ carriers." "And thus does it happen that others who consider themselves to be our leaders take to the streets carrying their placards, to demand that because we are germ carriers, and human beings of a lower order that cannot subject its passions to reason, we must perforce adopt strange opinions, to save a depraved and diseased people from perishing from self-inflicted disease."

This deployment of race as a weapon of attack and defence against critics and a trope of denial has extended to other policy domains as well. The Mbeki administration has often resorted to race to explain away its defence of Zimbabwe's tyrant, Robert Mugabe. One of the most tragic displays of the pitfalls of racial reasoning was the response to a journalist by Minister of Foreign Affairs Nkosazana Zuma, "... the economic crisis affecting Zimbabwe did not come from a reckless political leadership but out of a genuine concern to help the black poor. We will never condemn Zimbabwe."

A grotesque display of this racial

nationalism was when a group of South African election observers returned from Zimbabwe's fraught elections in 2002 with an endorsement of the elections. Trying to please all sides, they did not say whether the elections were free and fair but that they were 'legitimate'. Talk about ducking the issue! Again, the issue was racialised within the ANC. Leading ANC officials started arguing that black people in their right minds could not really be against this "nationalist hero". After all, as the ANC youth leader Malusi Gigaba suggested, only whites and the West were against Mugabe.

The ANC leadership came down like a ton of bricks when a white member of their national executive, Jeremy Cronin, suggested there was a Zanu-fication of their own party with the increasing centralisation of decision-making in the party leadership. Cronin immediately withdrew his comments.

Even Nelson Mandela was described as un-African for condemning Mugabe. Somehow black nationalism had been stripped of its moral content. Blackness had ceased to be what Cornel West calls an "ethical and moral construct", and had become a instrument for bludgeoning critics and kow-towing to power-hungry dictators.

The same racial defensiveness was used to deflect criticism of corruption in the arms deal. The president went on the attack against what he described as racist fishers of corrupt men who sought to portray Africans as corrupt. This racial defence would soon be shown for what it was, a diversion. No sooner had the president issued this defence than there were allegations of corruption involving the highest officials in the ANC, some of whom

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are serving jail terms for exactly the corrupt practices the president was denying.

As we speak the ANC is split right down the middle because of allegations of corruption against the deputy president, Jacob Zuma. In turn Zuma has suggested that Mbeki negotiated the arms deal, and that questions regarding promises to bidders should be directed to the president. Reports have also emerged that the president met with representatives of the arms supplier Thale, indicating a potential conflict of interest.

One of the more comical deployments of racial reasoning was Dali Mpofu's attempt to explain away the existence of a blacklist at the South African Broadcasting Corporation. Following allegations that the SABC had a blacklist of commentators who would not be used on its news programmes, Mpofu asked highly respected lawyers, Gilbert Marcus and Zwelakhe Sisulu, to set up a commission to investigate the allegations. Mpofu promised that heads would roll if the allegations were found to be true. And voila, the commission confirmed the existence of such a blacklist, and what did Mpofu do? He argued that there was no such finding and tried to prevent the release of the report to the public. However, the *Mail and Guardian* beat him to it, and published the report.

What emerged was that Mpofu had misled the public about the report's contents. And what did this non-racialist of note do? He penned a racially charged article in the *City Press* in which he accused racist right-wing newspapers and editors and their fellow travellers [read

black] of trying to capture the soul of the SABC and undermine the agenda of change. He showed the proverbial finger to these whites by arguing rather whimsically that the barbarians were now in charge and that the whites had better learn to live with it. But what did any of this have to do with the findings of the commission that Mpofu himself commissioned? Nothing, except that once again race had become the scapegoat for failure of leadership.

Black commentators were not exempted from this racial venom. The spokesperson of the Department of Arts and Culture, Sandile Memela, published an article in the *Mail and Guardian* in which he accused me and a number of commentators of being “coconuts” who made it in the white system because of our criticism of the black government.

Perhaps what this illustrates is what Jean Francois Bayart says in his latest book, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*: “... there is no natural identity capable of imposing itself on man by the very nature of things... there are only [political] strategies based on identity.” If black identity was constructed as an instrument for the construction of a moral and ethical political struggle, that very same identity is now being deployed for a different political purpose – to buttress power. That is the central irony of our times.

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QUOTES FROM SOUTH AFRICAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION COMMISSION OF ENQUIRY INTO BLACKLISTING.

“Several witnesses testified on conditions of anonymity. It suggests an atmosphere of fear and distrust which is scarcely conducive to open and rational debate expected with a public broadcaster...”

“Mr Perlman who had direct experience of being instructed not to use Karima Brown and Aubrey Matshiqi was confronted with an ethical dilemma. He was presented with an official statement by the SABC which he knew... to be untrue. He had to decide whether to perpetuate that untruth or to confront it. He chose the latter.”

“Dr Zikalala requested a copy of the Special Assignment programme due to be broadcast on the evening of 19 July 2005. The programme dealt with security at Johannesburg International Airport. It transpired that the programme... had been shown to three people from the office of the Presidency.”

“The Board needs... to emphasise that the Corporation is the property of all South Africans: the leadership should encourage SABC personnel to recognise their accountability to the public in terms of programming, ethos and presentation of a full spectrum of views within the country.”