

South African democratic state

What to learn from Africa

By adopting a neo-liberal democratic system that aligns itself to global capital the South African state has not learnt from what has happened to African countries post-colonialism. Therefore, there is a need to build a system that challenge dominant ideas and one which is also participatory. In this sense ideas by Frantz Fanon and Antonio Gramsci among others are important reference points, writes **Pamela Johnson**.

Whilst participating in the struggle for the liberation of Algeria in the late 1950s, one of Africa's greatest intellectuals, Frantz Fanon, observed what had happened to African nations which had recently gained their political independence. Expressing his disappointment, he described the consequences of the rise of power of a new political elite as follows:

'After a few hesitant steps in the international arena the national middle classes, no longer feeling the threat of the traditional colonial power, suddenly develop great appetites. And as they do not yet have any political experience they think they can conduct political affairs like their business...The people who had given everything in the difficult moments of the struggle for national liberation wonder, with empty hands and bellies, as to the reality of their victory.'

Fanon was referring to the transformation of the liberation party into an African national bourgeoisie who had become an ally of foreign capital, colluding in the ongoing domination of the newly independent African states. Once former leaders of national liberation struggles assumed control of the

state, the new political elite distanced itself from civil society.

This is a scenario that is familiar to South Africans; 20 years ago South Africa assumed the nominal status of 'democracy', characterised by conducting elections based on a universal franchise. The fact that since then social inequality has increased, whilst a small, extremely wealthy black elite has emerged from the ranks of the African National Congress (ANC) cadres of former trade unionists and party leaders, is unremarkable. Like other post-independent African states, the historical process of colonialism forged the links between the former colonisers and their colonies, defining the structural relationship between dominant and dominated. This relationship has been debated and theorised extensively, dating back to Walter Rodney's classic *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* and the many investigations into relations of dependence by Immanuel Wallerstein. However, one of the foremost causes of the ongoing subordination of the masses in civil society, that of collusion on the part of the political elite, needs to be addressed more thoroughly through a theoretically grounded investigation.

The damage of the 'apartheid legacy' in the form of a systematic, structured political and social oppression, considered as 'correctable' through a 'national democratic revolution', persists. The question to be asked is not what needs to be done by government. Instead, the theoretical grounds for escalating social inequality must be laid bare. Firstly, the nature of the capitalist state is such that it acts to ensure the continued existence of dominant classes; and secondly, continued domination is facilitated by a collaborative political elite. The state presents itself as the guardian and protector of the people's rights; whilst the ruling party within the political elite portrays itself as the hero of the struggle for political freedom for black South Africans. The combined message is one of exercising power in the name of the people – and few would disagree that this is the role of any leader.

It is here that the role of the messages, ideas and symbols that the state distributes to society needs to be examined, not for what they say, but for the effect they have. Through the media, through party mechanisms, through the

bureaucracy and any number of public and private sources, the intention of the state is to retain power. It does so, not simply through its actions, but through persuading society in various ways of the seriousness of its intentions to govern in the interests of society.

The Italian political analyst Antonio Gramsci imprisoned by the state and released a few days before his death, was the first to emphasise the ideological role of the state. All its activities have the intended effect of convincing members of society that 'things are the way they should be' - that the society we live in is the best possible among a range of possibilities. If successful, and society accepts that indeed, we live in the best of possible worlds, the state can 'exercise hegemony' without relying on force to retain power. Society becomes complicit in its own domination. It does not question the array of activities that take place behind the veil of liberal democracy; the discussions and alliances between the new political elite and powerful corporates that will enable social domination to continue - and, as has been the case in South Africa, to permit the intensification of social inequality.

In short, it does not really matter which element of the political elite is at the helm of the state. The intention of the liberal state is to secure the interests of dominant capital, and seldom has this been more clearly illustrated than in the recently terminated prolonged strikes on the platinum mines. The ANC and the Democratic Alliance (DA) alike rallied to the call to persuade striking miners to return to work for the sake of the economy - not to persuade senior managers to accept salary cuts or to forfeit their bonuses. This is because the political elite aspires to become part of the national bourgeoisie, seeking linkages to the globally dominant bourgeoisie. Masked behind the discourse of the 'national democratic revolution',

which requires the development of a powerful black bourgeoisie that will at some stage 'commit class suicide', the political elite grows in numbers and in stature.

Yet, once in power, far from abandoning its class, the new national bourgeoisie entrenches itself to benefit from the privileges it has acquired through collaboration. Fanon's second book, *The Wretched of the Earth* was not just a condemnation of the colonial order, but also an analysis of the failure of post-independent African governments to deliver social justice. Fanon accuses the new African political elite of collusion with foreign capital and of abandoning the masses who brought it to power:

'It [the new African national bourgeoisie] discovers its historical mission as intermediary... a conveyor belt for capitalism... The dynamic, pioneering aspect, the inventive, discoverer-of-new-worlds aspect common to every national bourgeoisie is here lamentably absent.'

In other words, the post-independence African national bourgeoisie lacks the only virtue the bourgeoisie possesses as a class, that of driving economic growth. Fanon dismisses the African national bourgeoisie because 'it serves no purpose. Mediocre in its winnings, in its achievements and in its thinking, this bourgeoisie masks its mediocrity by ostentatious projects for individual prestige, chromium-plated American cars, vacations on the French Riviera and weekends in neon-lit nightclubs'.

It is not difficult to transpose Fanon's writings to the South African landscape. Is it any wonder, then, that violence and service delivery protests continue to rage among the miners and the millions of unemployed, the inhabitants of sub-standard housing projects? The elusive promise of a 'better life for all' has done its time, and Fanon's writing goes to the core of the

anger and impatience felt by those who refuse to be fobbed off any longer by promises, or to accept social grants as a sop in lieu of meaningful change.

Meanwhile, growing numbers of people become increasingly poorer as they fail to find the scarce jobs provided by a global bourgeoisie that is more interested in investing money in financial speculation than in genuinely productive mechanisms. Nonetheless, many seem unable to believe that they have been betrayed.

The ANC has recently returned to power, with a declining percentage of support, but nonetheless, with its leadership entrenched. This phenomenon is explained by Raymond Williams in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* who says that domination is effective when the dominated believe in the system to the extent that they participate in their own domination. So, for example, by accepting an electoral process as a symbol of democracy, civil society agrees to a particular rule. Next, by accepting a system of proportional representation that allows party leaders to choose representatives of the people from the party's list, self-enrichment by those selected by the ruling party is permitted. It is not that civil society accepts inequality, but that we become convinced that the 'rules' of the game in the society in which we live are the best possible.

The significance of the 'collective consciousness', the thinking of civil society as large, was theorised by Fanon in his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks* first published in French in 1952. Here he illustrated the effect of colonisation in that the dominated continue to aspire to the culture of the dominant, as a result of which black people end up imitating their oppressors. He also pointed to the lasting effect of the inculcation of inferiority on Africans and African nations, who continue to seek affirmation from their former oppressors.

It is this hidden element of the collective consciousness that allows the perpetuation of a relationship of domination and subordination. We still believe that a western education that prioritises mathematics, science and technology is the only way to achieve social development. We also do not question the value of a school education that has the main function of convincing learners that they have no future without accepting knowledge that originated in the dominant society.

Education lays the ground for continued domination by preparing the minds of learners to think in a way that does not challenge what is being taught. This is why the state becomes alarmed when school children abandon their classes to play truant, or turn to petty crime to make a living, or when communities refuse to allow children to attend school, as we have recently seen. The failure of any education system signals a weakness in the *exercise of hegemony* that is, the ability of the state to influence society to believe that the way that they are governed and the way they live is how it should be. Cracks in this function, the exercise of hegemony, point to a rejection of the system, as well as its values and ideals.

Gramsci explained domination from the same perspective as Fanon, in relation to the human conscious and sub-conscious, but with a different argument. He would agree that the post-apartheid state is able to govern because the new political elite disguises its collaboration with the global capitalist elite. However, he would see the success of the ruling party in retaining the loyalty of the masses as a result of it, the ruling party, having convinced them that it is the symbol of liberation. This idea becomes so deeply rooted in their minds that it is difficult to dislodge it.

Gramsci named these deep-rooted beliefs 'common sense'. Selections from the *Prison Notebooks of*

Antonio Gramsci explain that 'common sense' exists in the minds of all people as a combination of the beliefs, values and ideas that come from tradition and history, handed down from one generation to the next.

However, Gramsci admitted that 'common sense' can change over time, as a result of practical experience that causes people to change their beliefs. To try and prevent a shift in loyalty, the ruling elite tries to mix party loyalty with traditional values, so that the two are so closely linked that to reject one would be to reject the other. This attempt to retain party loyalty is clearly less effective among youth under the age of 25, who have less historical exposure to the ruling party, and whose practical experience is one of not being able to find a job – any job. For this reason, among others, the youth tend towards political apathy compared to older members of society.

In the long run, however, the state is able to maintain its position of dominance because it constantly invents new ideas and ways of confusing or deceiving civil society about the way that they live, the way that life should be. The aim is to convince members of civil society that the state indeed represents their interests in the best possible way, and, if election results are to be taken at face value, the South African state has been relatively successful in doing so, despite constant accusations of corruption within the political elite.

Fanon made a pessimistic observation on the prospects for post-colonial Africa, in which he foresaw continued relations of domination and oppression, as follows:

'Colonialism and its derivatives do not constitute the present enemies of Africa. In a short time this continent will be liberated. For my part, the deeper I enter into the cultures and the political circles the

surer I am that the great danger that threatens Africa is the absence of ideology.'

This lies at the core of the current dilemma. Civil society at large fails to see that the existence of collaboration between the political elite and transnational capital has no other possible outcome than increasing self-enrichment on the part of the political elite, and its continued distancing from civil society. There is still a belief that the system can be corrected and that a liberal democracy can be made to work for the benefit of the masses. For as long as society continues to believe that elections are the key to a better society, this myth will be perpetuated.

If there is a genuinely transformative possibility, it does not lie within the realms of existing models of government, which serve the instrumental purpose of maintaining the status quo. A social order that conforms to the expectations of rituals associated with liberal democracy has one primary effect, that of proving compliance with the norms of liberal democracy. To move beyond this point and achieve a more substantive form of democracy, it is necessary to resuscitate the widespread mass participation that gives rise to the genuine expression of the popular will. How this is to be achieved will only emerge once civil society is able to proceed beyond the manifestation of its discontent, to that form of collective expression that will shape a new society. As Fanon argues, the only way out of the vicious circle of striving to emulate the oppressor is for Africans to craft an independent counter-hegemonic strategy. ^{LB}

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