THE LECTURE BY PROFESSOR ASHWIN DESAI

South Africa: The Second Transition?

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He has nothing to lose so he reaches for the stars. For where do we go when it falls apart in our hands and we are left with less than we started with? Begin again? And with what? Where are the dreams to fill the souls of wandering exiles? What revolution can they subscribe to? The days of Muhammed Ali and Napoleon, the Post-Colonialists and Pan-Africanists, the Communists and Socialists and all the other "-ists," all of them are gone. And yet the past has come back with a vengeance, and we must think our way out. Where are the damn poets when we need them?

Jamal Mahjoub

Letter from Sudan, 30.xi 95

How can we memorialise this man? This wanderer, this exile, this non–ist, this jack out of the box: And still I am driftwood/Still the restlessness, the journeying, the quest/the querying and the hungers and the lusts(in Sustar and Karim, 2006: 249). These words are from a poem written in Algiers in 1970 by Dennis. It was a time when he was cris-crossing North Africa, scribbling down reflections about the continent of his birth; What is the soul of Africa? / What is it? Is there a soul of Africa? he asks in 1978(in Sustar and Karim, 2006: 247).

I hope to take up the Brutus challenge of querying and the hunger and, hopefully, depending how the evening pans out, the lusts. Although from what I have heard of the s nightlife and the social conservatism of the city's Left that might be a forlorn hope.

I am not seeking to ask questions about the soul of Africa. Rather I want to query the form and content of the national liberation struggles that were the foundations of the anti-colonial struggles on the continent. Against what can only be seen as a cursory understanding, I want to ask questions about the democratic transition in South Africa.

In scanning the literature on anti-colonial struggles in Africa, we can discern similar strands encased in familiar language: the national liberation struggle that seeks to unite "the people" against colonial domination, take control of the state and wield it as a defensive weapon against imperialism and an offensive weapon to develop the country and uplift the lot of the poor and the downtrodden. In this monumental struggle the trade unions, the churches, the myriad other organs of civil society must come

together, suspend internal conflict and contestation to rally behind the ruling party. Out of this political kingdom will flow resources downwards and outwards.

Once in power the script is dominated by a familiar language and the outcomes seemingly predestined. As soon as the national liberation movements came to power on the back of tremendous sacrifices and stirring hopes, the possibilities for change were immediately placed in fetters. 'Economic realities' dictated that national plans for development were rolled out from the top, while all the time the creative and impatient insurgency that drove national liberation from below was reeled in and asked to exercise patience.

Name a country in Africa and we can trace this unfolding pattern; the siphoning of energy upwards, the "betrayal" of ideals that drove the liberation movement and the emergence of a crust of privileged party apparatchiks who obliterate the distinction between party and state. Into this mix is the singular god like figure Kenyatta, Nyerere, Nasser, Machel, Mugabe , Gadaffi, the fathers of the new nation whose children will never grow up and so they must remain in power till kingdom calls or be removed by the barrel of the gun.

The word used to describe many of these newly liberated countries throughout the 50s to the 70s was neo-colonialism. Whatever the party political manifestos, the role of the new leaders would be to suture the local economy into the rhythms and dictates of the metropolitan masters.

There was one complexity, the Soviet Union and Stalinist socialism. But aligning with the Soviet bloc hardly led to a new path of accumulation and nationalist development. For the most part, it gave legitimacy to outrageous forms of authoritarianism and dominance of the single party, whose leaders lived in capitalist opulence.

So the social subjectivities were broadly the same: national liberation, the Party, the merging of party and state, the embodiment of the people's aspirations in a Leader whose legitimacy is assured by the wounds he suffered in the fight against colonialism.

The outcomes were generally the same. A privileged strata gathered around the state, the drawing of trade unions as an appendage of the Party and its leaders into formal political positions, the loosening of capitalist social relations characterized by uneven and dependent development (for a more nuanced outline of these developments see Saul and Leys, 1999).

Within these societies, there was still some opposition. The main Left alternative of this awakening from betrayed dreams was to urge a de-linking from the global economy and a form of autonomous

development driven by the state (see Amin: 1990). These ideas had their own contradictions. This form of development would be driven by an omnipotent state from the top. However, this cunning plan ignored the political question and did not account for the character and nature of the ruling elites who took power. If one could not rely on state functionaries to make simple policy choices that benefited the people when newly liberated territories were still linked into the world economy, what force would cause these same functionaries to be any less selfish and self-serving with their countries' economic borders thrown up. In any case the idea of autarchy was not seriously considered by any of the African countries. They needed foreign exchange, not only for the cash crops and un-beneficiated resources they sent out by the container-ship full but also to purchase property in London, couture in France, automobiles in Bavaria and numbered accounts in Zurich.

By the time the ANC was to come to power, the African economy was in free-fall, ravaged by internal forms of pillage and IMF structural adjustments. The countries blessed with the greatest resources - Zaire, Angola and Nigeria were host to the deepest wounds of inequality.

Like Ghana, then Tanzania and Mozambique, South Africa became the source of possibility for the Left to envisage a new beginning. New paths to escape the squeeze of global capitalism and, in the process, also avoid the stereotype of Third World kleptocracy.

The line-up of the team to achieve this was the same as previous confrontations on the continent: national liberation, the Party, the trade union movement as partner, the people rallying behind the Party and the much heralded reconstruction and developmental goals to be led by the state.

Still, there was great expectation that the path that other liberation movements travelled would not be repeated in South Africa. The reasons for this optimism lay from the power of Mandela "magic" to more well-worn explanations that centred on the position that non-racial capitalism was unsustainable in South Africa and the strength and weight of the organised working class.

For many, the optimism still held even though the first couple of years were marked by a series of retreats on the socio-economic front. Mandela who, in his first speech after release from prison, had defended nationalisation, returned from Davos in Switzerland in 1992 to announce to his closest aides: 'Chaps, we have to choose. We either keep nationalisation and get no investment, or we modify our own attitude and get investment' (Sampson 1999:435). It was symptomatic of a time where 'even some of the most fervid foes of the apartheid regime formally conceded to the "natural" (if not supernatural) power of global markets and to the claim that, because of globalization, "there is no alternative" (TINA) to orthodox neoliberalism' (Hart 2002:7). Once revolutionaries who swam against the current, they now

felt that the only possible response to globalisation was ‘to try to catch the wave, to ride the juggernaut’ (Lazarus 2004:616).

Policy papers were spun out as consultancies, with many leading neo-Marxists stalking the corridors of power and billing by the hour, were put on lucrative ‘retainers’ by the new incumbents of power. There was no issue, be it education, welfare or poverty alleviation that could not be turned into a policy document, and swiftly and rationally dealt with as an administrative matter. These challenges were summarily de-politicised in the process of process.

Zola’s masses were scripted to leave the stage of history making, to be ‘managed’ by Faust’s technocrats.

The remarkable became routine. Ideals were to be cost recoverable. Activists and former revolutionaries became state functionaries overnight. Everything revolved around order, the New World Order. As the Reconstruction and Development Programme(RDP) gave way to the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) plan in 1996, so big business was wooed and that old lightning rod of the rebellion of the 1980s, capitalism, was embraced with great enthusiasm. The ANC government saw foreign investment as crucial to firing up the economy. And so the economy was adjusted to make it attractive to global capital, but instead of investment flowing in, some of the largest local companies decamped and relisted on the London or New York stock exchanges.

As Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki came and went, the government barely made a dent on levels of unemployment and poverty while inequality deepened (Marais 2011:388).

As the transition stretches, folds and twists, instead of the ANC dominating the state and bending it into fulfilling the ostensible objectives of redress and redistribution, it has slowly been absorbed into a state beholden to transnational economic forces. ‘Rather than the seizure of the state apparatus by the party, what took place was the seizure of the party by the state’ (De Oliveira 2006:17).A country that was witness to robust and probing liberal and Marxist debates throughout the apartheid years has seemingly run out of ideas; ‘progress without conflict; distribution without redistribution’ (Anderson 2011:12).

The ANC, it is asserted, has the ‘know-how’ to ‘master the science and art of forces of crafting long-and short-term common platforms to ensure that all the motive forces pull in the same direction’ (African National Congress 2007:12).Alongside a modernist narrative, as Hein Marais shows, the ANC seeks to increase the power of traditional authorities (Marais 2011:425).

This is the paradox and the power of the ANC. The ability to look two ways at once: modernisation and traditionalism; nurturing the black bourgeoisie and uplifting the poor; African nationalism and non-racialism; anti-imperialism and the most craven genuflection to the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Right now, this ANC is personified in the figure of Jacob Zuma, who straddles the urban and rural, the traditional and the modern, the Robben Islander who can draw on revolutionary credentials to demand 'discipline', 'patience', and 'sacrifice' in the present.

The strains inside the ANC alliance, despite the most plaintive calls to discipline and obedience to the party line, grow. 'Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown', Shakespeare tells us of the usurper Henry IV. As the ANC gears up for its leadership battle once more, Zuma scans the ranks for potential challengers, finding it increasingly difficult to hold the middle ground, cutting an increasingly Macbethian figure:

Having become King officially by killing Duncan, he (Macbeth) finds that he has achieved nothing: there is always another step to be taken before he is really king, secure in his role, and each step taken undoes what he has won because each step breeds more destructive consequences. He is not allowed to become what he is, to be authentically, king; he spends all his time and energy in consolidating his position (Eagleton 1967:132).

The organised working class, that old shibboleth of the left, has to contend with a vocal black middle class, a huge young unemployed mass, and the creation of jobs that are casualised and outside formalised bargaining forums. Franco Barchiesi has argued provocatively and persuasively that participation in the labour market is not the route out of poverty. This, he argues, has led to 'the politics of workers' melancholia' for the kind of 'decent jobs' that capitalism simply no longer provides (Barchiesi2011:255).

The Left, outside the ANC alliance, while adept at critiquing the neoliberal turn, has found it difficult to present alternative ideas to the shaping of economic policy, innovative organisational forms, and a language that fires up the imagination beyond anti-privatisation andanti-eviction. The social movements' demands and victories around free basic services and free access to anti-retroviral AIDS medicines were impressive but ultimately, instead of threatening the economic system as radical reforms would, they were readily incorporated. While there is an almost reflexive antipathy to 'vanguardism' – the Leninist view of communist or socialist political parties and their leaders 'representing' the 'masses' – there is very little sense of how groupings struggling for a semblance of bare life will overcome sectional and organisational chauvinisms.

Pallo Jordan argues that national liberation movements have embarked on retreats 'in order to prepare for a more coherent and better planned advance' (quoted in Magubane 2004:658)

There has been nothing to indicate that an economic policy is emerging which will make advances against poverty and deepening inequality resulting in the ANC government having to retreat on promises of housing and jobs.

What we have witnessed instead is how the Gospels that inspired our quest are everyday spat upon. Now we read that the Samaritan must first check if the injured Jew has medical aid. Jesus divides the fishes and bread and sells them to the highest bidder. The lepers must be denied because they are an invention of Western imperialists. Jesus dare not turn the tables on the moneylenders at the risk of offending the markets and credit rating agencies. And the erstwhile Prophets of the democratic transition snatch back access to gospels through bills of secrecy.

It is a time when 'All that is solid' in the liberation struggle 'melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.'

The Left gets renewed hope by the Arab Spring. But the new leaders of Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt are midwives for the West. Look how quickly winter has set in.

There is nothing outside of this to indicate some counter-hegemonic force that promises something deeper, more profound, more beautiful. E.P. Thompson's words from Poverty of Theory are apposite:

Obscene contradictions manifest themselves, jest, and then vanish; the known and the unknown change places; even as we examine them, categories dissolve and change into their opposites (Thompson: (1978) 1995: 33).

Some of the fuzziness of understanding the state in South Africa for example is exposed in the recent work of Karl von Holdt (2010). He undertakes an 'analysis of the workings of the post-apartheid South African state bureaucracy, within the state hospitals and provincial health departments, in an effort to understand the reasons for its poor functioning '. Through this case study he hopes to provide insights into the relationship between nationalism and the building of a developmental state (2010: 4). In previous research von Holdt tells us it was found that in public hospitals 'over-centralisation, fragmentation into silo structures, low management capacity and understaffing were the primary causes of institutional stress and poor healthcare outcomes' (2010: 9).

Von Holdt's argument revolves around what he identifies as 'a tension at the heart of the nationalist project between the aspiration to construct a "modern" state and the drive to assert African sovereignty through dismantling white domination' (2010: 4). For von Holdt 'There is little chance of establishing a

developmental state (for which the hallmark is effective bureaucracy) in South Africa unless nationalism can be reshaped to define meeting the needs of the people as the central strategy for overcoming the legacy of apartheid' (2010: 4).

What is remarkable is that von Holdt wants to discuss the problems and challenges faced by public health care without reference to the broadened scope of private health care, the monopolies and price fixing of pharmaceutical companies, the commodification drive by the state and its attendant macro-economic prudence.

Von Holdt in his conclusion tells us that 'The question confronting us as society, and confronting too the ANC, is what sort of state we want, and how we might go about constructing it' (2010: 24).

Von Holdt seems to completely excise from his analysis how the drive to insert South Africa into the global world market produces 'a constant disciplinary pressure on domestic policy-making and limits the room to manoeuvre of states as they compete for mobile capital. But these external pressures are only part of the story. The multifold transformations implied by political gobalisation cannot be adequately measured in degrees of state autonomy; they affect the very form of state autonomy' (Zeuge etl.al. 2004: 4).

On the other end of the spectrum some activists and theorists in South Africa have posed the idea of a politics that values 'distance from the state.' They cite as evidence for this the phenomena of certain new social movements in South Africa, who have developed a 'living politics' from the bottom up (Neocosmos, 2004; 2008; Helliker and Vale, 2009). This living politics is supposedly delinked from the state. Instead of posing demands of the state, it concerns people organizing in radical democratic ways that prefigure a new society. The slow, dignified, courageous march of grassroots democracy and responsiveness to the concerns of ordinary people produces, we are told, a new humanism ala Fanon.

In reality, new social movements do not function this way. They are unfortunately as compromised in their operations as trade unions and other pressure groups. Outside of their representation in academic journals, social movements are as state facing in their marrow presenting their own compendia of demands. This starts with asking the executive for housing, narrows to asking for in situ upgrading, blurs into pleas for consultation and ends in the courts soliciting an end to repression and the relief of being taken seriously.

Empirically, no politics 'at a distance from the state' manifests itself in South African social movements. Those that claim it base their "evidence" on press statements and academic papers written by the most venal of propagandists of movements, whose desire is to pigeon-hole movements into the constructs of the latest European fad. It's not a coincidence that as Holloway is slated to come to South Africa, movements have been "found" that display distance from the state in the orientation. In any event, what would a political programme of 'distance from the state' mean? Why would this kind of politics ensure that there is a deepening of democracy let alone pose new ways of producing and distribution?

The experiments of distance from the state like ashrams and the followers of religious prophets mostly drift into forms of hierarchy and cultish authoritarianism. Ironically while some sections of the academic left urge the movements that they mentor to try to escape the state, big capital has long bolted, relentlessly roaming the world, nestling for a while, only to put themselves on the move once more.

At this juncture in South Africa, social movements for all their militant rhetoric and actions seek to engage with the state (talk to us not about us), to present the state with better plans for delivery (in situ upgrading) and to mitigate the excesses of the market by leaning on the state (provision of free basic services, Basic Income Grant).

In South Africa, those who seek to organise against a neo-liberal state, seem to be caught in a quagmire that cannot go beyond the state as the underwriter of freedom despite its consistent ability to repudiate our hopes and liquidate our dreams.

Anthropologist James C. Scott, who in Southeast Asia identified inspiring examples of anti-state resistance, is sufficiently honest to put the conundrum in context:

'… one of the reasons why I'm not a full-fledged anarchist is because I think the state is both the ground of all of our troubles but also the ground of our emancipation' (Democratic Voice of Burma, 6 October 2011).

The long walk to freedom is stymied by the toll road, our thirst by the water meter, our desires by technocrats in straitjackets preaching mantras of discipline for us while they speculate our futures on the false gods of deregulation and foreign investment.

The ANC touts a 'second transition.' But there is nothing in these documents that envisages a path that can fulfill its own promise of jobs and the eroding of deepening inequality. In reading through the documents purporting to spark a second transition one cannot help but think of Orwell's definition of doublespeak: 'In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible…

Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness… The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. Where there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms ...' (1969: 153-154).

In reality the ANC right now is about a second term not a second transition. The Black petit bourgeoisie is mired in debt, and, as Adcorp just reported, there are 18 percent fewer small businesses today than in 2006 due to a continuing economic crisis that killed 440 000 little firms. The so-called patriotic bourgeoisie is a small coterie that hangs on to the coat-tails of white capital and state tenders. COSATU is caught up in internal division (not about economic policy but once more about the leadership of the ANC) while its membership has to contend with a belligerent and de-racialising middle class and a casualising labour force. The social movements that seek to galvanise the poor, have lost their way, reduced to spectacle and spin.

Marx and Engels (1848) caution that sharpened crisis can raise the spectre of the 'common ruin of the contending classes' rather than a revolutionary outcome is prescient.

If we are to seriously think through a sustained emancipatory politics, if we are going to escape the dead-ends of transition speak 'Everything must be thought through once more; every term must sit for new examinations' (Thompson: (1978) 1995: 34-5).

'The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot derive its poetry from the past, but only from the future' Karl Marx exhorts in the Eighteenth Brumaire:

Earlier revolutions needed to remember previous moments in world history in order to numb themselves with regard to their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury the dead in order to arrive at its own content.

Now more than ever the costumes and phrases that dressed up the national democratic revolution and its attendant appendages must be re-evaluated. Now more than ever is the time for the restlessness, the journeying, the quest/the querying, the hungers and the lusts?

Where are the damn poets when we need them?

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