

**The role of reflection and new ideas in the advancement  
of a strong and responsive democratic system**

**Midrand Group Event**

**25 September 2013**

Mr Zibi, members of the Midrand group, ladies and gentlemen: dumelang, molweni, good evening, goeie nag.

Thanks for the opportunity to be in this esteemed company and take part in a conversation on *The role of reflection and new ideas in the advancement of a strong and responsive democratic system*.

I am going to try and bring together some ideas from different sources and places to address the theme; and later, we can critically reflect whether they are any help in stimulating a conversation on the theme and the extent to which they provide fertile lenses and develop avenues for discussion.

I am going to say something first about *reflection*; then about *new ideas*, and then about a *strong and responsive democracy*. And finally, I want to bring the comments on these three issues together.

To begin with *reflection*: a wise Italian theorist argues in his Prison Notebooks that all people are intellectuals, in that we all have intellectual and rational faculties; not all people, however, have the social function of intellectuals in society.

In this conception, contemporary intellectuals assume significance not through oratory and “eloquence”, which he says “is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser (and) ‘permanent persuader’”.

Intellectuals play a critical function in reproducing the hegemony of ruling classes through, on the one hand, ideas which are systematised as public discourse, orthodoxies, conventional wisdoms and common sense; and through, on the other hand, a range of practical activities in which the terrains of education, media and culture are critically important. In the process certain conditions, ideas and thoughts are naturalized, while others are simultaneously rendered absurd, unthinkable, unworkable and generally squeezed out.

Now in much as everyone is an intellectual, you will grant that everyone also *reflects*. But the issue is not so much that we all engage in *reflection*, as much as how we reflect, the quality of our reflection.

It seems to me that the quality of reflection is enhanced to the extent

- That we are open to and able to make recourse to theoretical and analytical tools that help us see behind and beyond and underneath processes, events and issues; indeed to also different and new ways of knowing
- That we possess good historical, structural and conjunctural awareness
- That we do not make a virtue of what may be contemporary necessities and are open to conceiving of and pursuing imaginative alternatives, and
- That we are open to seriously interrogating our own values, beliefs and ideologies, and to new ways of acting.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum suggests we need three capabilities. ‘First is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one’s traditions. To build this we must develop ‘the capacity to reason logically, to test what one reads or says for consistency of reasoning, correctness of fact, and accuracy of judgement’ (2006:5).

Second, we must see ourselves ‘as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern’. This means we need to have knowledge and understanding of different cultures and ‘of differences of gender, race, and sexuality’ (Nussbaum, 2006:6).

Third, we must have ‘the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have’ (ibid, 2006:6-7).

Long ago, I embraced a certain understanding of the concept ‘critique’ – critique is dispassionate and honest self-clarification based on the kind of reflection that I have just elaborated, clarification of/with others, and social/political action.

Clarification of others is something that you seek to do in your thoughtful writings, which certainly makes interesting reading. It is something that I try and do from time to time through my own media contributions and also actively promote among academics – the idea of universities and scholars proactively engaging with society at the intellectual and, more generally, cultural level, and serving as catalysts of public intellectual debate.

However, it is not a simple one way transmission of knowledge to ‘users’ in the wider society that is intended but an involvement in reflexive communication – a two-way argumentative, critical and thoughtful engagement that comes to shape the very constitution of knowledge (Delanty, 2001:154). The goals are the intellectual and cultural development of citizens, and cultivating an engaged and critical citizenry. This reflexive communication, two-way argumentative, critical and thoughtful engagement is something we can all do much more to stimulate and promote, given the opportunities that are provided by social media.

The notion of the critic ‘speaking truth to power’ is associated with Edward Said. Today it is fashionable to ‘speak truth to power’; all kinds of people claim to do so. But sometimes I worry about their version of ‘truth’; about what the ‘truth’ is.

I like being guided by that great African revolutionary Amilcar Cabral: 'Tell no lies. Expose lies whenever they are told. Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures. Claim no easy victories.' It is not only what we must hold others to but also hold ourselves to. We don't lie deliberately, but sometimes we do make mistakes in how we read situations, do make genuine errors of judgement (as we learn from that great vantage point called hindsight), and do not always have the courage to confess to them.

Let's turn now to the issue of *new ideas*. It seems to me we may want to be more discriminating and talk about good *new ideas*. This is no trivial point, given that our concern is with building a *strong and responsive democracy* in South Africa.

The past three decades have seen many new ideas. And in so far as democracy and more widely social justice is concerned these have been awful and bad ideas. The new paradigm, which has become a powerful orthodoxy, has promoted a possessive individualism, obscene materialism and rationalised a global order "where disparities in wealth, resources and opportunities have grown, where human rights norms and values seem invariably to yield to the dictates of the rich and powerful; which expresses shock and outrage at arbitrary killing but at the same time is complicit in the killing of many more thorough hunger and disease – which could have been avoided (Kollapen, 2003:26).

Today, for "for millions of people the promise of human rights and the vision of a just and caring world remains an illusion. Intolerance, war and impunity; starvation and greed; power and powerlessness all combine in a conspiracy of the powerful against the weak that invariably deepens the faultlines that exist in the world and within nations (ibid.). This is the contemporary world that is the product of the new ideas of recent decades.

We have also seen the marketisation, commercialisation and commodification of almost all areas of social life, in a manner that has corroded education and knowledge. The epoch of globalisation is one in which “constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish this epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air. All that is holy is profaned. (Karl Marx, quoted in Wheen, 1999:121-2).

We need new ideas but good ideas that are related to an intellectual, ethical and social vision of society based on the values of human dignity, equality, social equity, non-sexism and non-racialism, in which *all* people possess the political, social, economic and human rights that are fundamental to living full, decent, productive, rich and rewarding lives.

Take the concept of ‘development’. There are what may be described as “thin” conceptions of development and “thick” conceptions of development.

“Thin” conceptions of development are essentially economistic, and reduce the idea of development to economic growth and enhanced economic performance as measured by various indicators. Development reduced to economic growth gives rise to goals, policies, institutional arrangements and actions that focus primarily on promoting growth and reducing obstacles to growth.

In contrast, “thick” conceptions of development extend beyond a concern with economic growth to embrace issues of a wider economic nature as well as social, cultural and political issues.

At their most extensive, the concern of goals, policies, institutional arrangements and actions are with structural economic change which widens ownership and eliminates or reduces income inequality, unemployment and poverty; greater social equality; equity and redress for socially disadvantaged and marginalised groups; expansion of human, economic and social rights and civil liberties; the existence of a vibrant civil society; decolonisation and deracialisation of intellectual and cultural spaces; and the extension, deepening and consolidation of democracy and political and citizenship participation.

The title of the Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen's 1999 book, *Development as Freedom*, embodies well the "thick" concept of development. Sen writes that "development...is...a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Focusing on human freedoms contrasts with narrower views of development, such as identifying development with the growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with industrialization, or with technological advance. . . (1999:3).

Let's move on to the task of building a *strong and responsive democracy*. As one who was the head of a community newspaper in the Western Cape in the 1980s that was regularly banned, and who was a guest of the Minister of Police on a number of occasions and whose human rights were acknowledged by the TRC as having been violated, I am not blasé as some people seem to be by the formal institutions of democracy, the rule of law and our relevantly independent media and judiciary.

This may be bourgeois democracy with many weaknesses and limitations but it is hell of an advance on what we had before 1994. In any event, as far as I am concerned the challenge is not to dismantle what is called bourgeois democracy, but to extend, deepen and enrich the institutions of people's rule and make much more substantive people's participation in democracy.

Another Italian theorist, Norberto Bobbio, has argued that the quality of democracy must be gauged not by the fact of voting every x number of years, but by the number of places and spaces in which people can vote (read participate) and on the number of issues on which you can vote.

Let me plant the idea that as important as is democracy and a *strong and responsive democratic system*, we should frame our challenges somewhat more widely. As an underdeveloped society, we are confronted by a four-fold development challenge: how do we pursue **economic development**, with **social equity**, do so in a way that is **environmentally sustainable** and also extend, deepen and consolidate **democracy**? And crucially, how do we do all of this simultaneously and not consecutively or sequentially? For many good social reasons it is not an option to postpone one or other elements of this four-fold development challenge or to tackle them in sequence. They have to be confronted, by and large, simultaneously. Ultimately the success of post-1994 South Africa must be measured by how we address and mediate the profound paradoxes of the four-fold development challenge.

As an aside, let me observe that in the African context it has been argued in some quarters that democracy is impossible without particular levels of economic development. The late Claude Ake noted that many regimes tied

the issue of democratization to economic development, asserting that the quest for democracy must be considered in the context of Africa's most pressing needs, especially emancipation from 'ignorance, poverty and disease'. The pursuit of democracy will not, it is argued, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. Nor will it give shelter to the homeless. People must be educated and fed before they can appreciate democracy, for there is no choice in ignorance and there are no possibilities for self-fulfilment in extreme poverty (1991: 35)

This suggests that we have to wait for economic development to ensure democracy. However, can democracy not impact positively on the process of development, as well as on its nature and trajectory? Ake's rejoinder is pertinent:

Africa's failed development experience suggests that postponing democracy does not promote development; (and) (e)ven if it were true that democracy is competitive with development, it does not follow that people must be more concerned with improving nutrition than casting votes, or more concerned with health than with political participation. The primary issue is not whether it is more important to eat well than to vote, but who is entitled to decide which is more important (ibid:35).

Amartya Sen argues much the same point when he speaks of 'freedom as an end and freedom as means' and states that '(o)vercoming the inequalities of power associated with economic privilege is an important aspect of democracy in the full sense of the term' (cited in Motala and Chaka, nd:14;15).

Let me conclude, and also offer a provocation: that there is currently a paucity of illuminating critical *reflection* and a dearth of imagination and good *new ideas*.

Without doubt, certain kinds of critical reflection are crucial if we are to build a society that is animated by the values of our Constitution and Bill of Rights. This reflection must draw on knowledge, reason and experience, clarify, further clarify in conversation with others, and point the possible ways to social action.

It must, in Cabral's words, proceed with feet firmly on the ground, from what is what exists. It must provide a rigorous current analysis of the current situation and lay bare what is at stake and the contending social forces.

Next year will be the 20th anniversary of our freedom. Our reflections will characterise this anniversary as what: as we did in 1981 with the slogan 'No cause to celebrate'?; 'Nothing to celebrate'?; 'Little to celebrate'?; 'Some things to celebrate but much more needed'? – what is the truth?



Earlier this year at the Franschhoek Festival, Antjie Krog made a very interesting comment which may speak to one of our predicaments – that we may not as yet have the language and vocabulary to adequately capture our present and that this could be related to us having different ontologies. I wrote to her and said that I was fascinated by this proposition and could she elaborate on her comment. She has not as yet, but I want to engage her when I have chance.

In so far as *good new ideas* are concerned, there is currently little cognitive praxis of the kind that gave us the exciting philosophy and movement of Black Consciousness in the late 1960s. Similarly there is little of the innovative and sustained organisational praxis that was a feature of the United Democratic Front and its mass formations in the 1980s. But there are interesting stirrings here and there at the local level and it will be interesting to see how the local and particular will be universalised and coalesce at the national and political level.

In so far as democracy is concerned, on the final page of *Long Walk to Freedom*, Tatamkulu Mandela writes: ‘The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning’. He adds: ‘I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended’.

‘The truth is that’ in 2013:

- We are a democracy and citizens, but our democracy and citizenship are inadequately developed and we are yet to ‘live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others’.
- ‘Our devotion’ in practice to a thick idea of democracy and citizenship is debatable and must continue to be struggled for
- The idea that ‘with freedom (and citizenship) comes responsibilities’ has all too quickly been forgotten or has to still be fully grasped in many quarters in South Africa.