Article

The South African nation

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In 1996 the South African Labour Bulletin made a startling comparison. It suggested that the movement of trade-unions to invest members' contributions in 'investment companies' resembled models for Afrikaner economic empowerment. In particular Nail (New Africa Investment Limited), one of the flagships of Black Economic Empowerment, was compared to Rembrandt, one of the flagships of Afrikaner economic power (*SALB* 1996). What was being juxtaposed here was African and Afrikaner nationalism. Indeed, it was hinted that they were somehow, even if modestly, similar. What was important was the principle of the comparison: that they could be compared at all! Since then, even if it is not commonplace, it is at least not unusual to hear journalists and others draw similarities between them (see, for example, Heribert Adam in the *Weekly Mail & Guardian*, April 9, 1998). Today it is even possible to hear members of government or the ANC hold Afrikaner nationalism up as a model for Black Economic Empowerment (see Deputy Minister of Finance, MB Mpahlwa 2001).

In this vein African and Afrikaner nationalism are beginning to receive comparative treatment in the academic literature as well. Christoph Marx in a recent article discusses continuities between the cultural nationalist ideas of Afrikaner nationalism and those of current day Africanism. Marx finds, for example, that elements of the Christian fundamentalist anthropology that informed Afrikaner Nationalism can be found in African Nationalism (2002:8). He suggests that even the 'soft nationalism' of the Mandela period and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), predicated on the notion of Ubuntu, appealed to some version of cultural anthropology. What is neglected in this approach is the startling question that it begs. How is it possible that a movement formed, in part, to resist Afrikaner nationalism and its effects could mutate into something that resembled it?

Now, the grounds for a comparison between Afrikaner and African nationalism lie less in their respective *contents* than in their respective *forms*. They are both nationalisms! The basis of a comparison, therefore, lies not simply in drawing out similarities in their language and/or practice, but in making the case that their respective politics are symptomatic of something else: that they are both *national* politics. What, in other words, is *nationalist* about their nationalism? Now, I do not intend to make such a comparison here. Instead, what I want to do is undertake half this task; to address this question to two important traditions within the discourse and the practice of the anti-apartheid movement(s): that of the theory of National Democratic Revolution and that of Black Consciousness.

Contrary to much of the literature on the nation and nationalism, the *general* form of the nation must be related to the general 'question of democracy' – who are the '*people*' of '*power to the people*'? In other words, treating it in relation to a 'style of thinking' (Anderson) or 'industrialization' (Gellner) or 'capitalism' (Poulantzas) forces us to mistake its proper referent. Nationalism is a particular response to the general 'question of the people'. Here I will propose that the substance of *a* nation must be located in the determinate history of the 'struggle for democracy' in which it was elaborated. In short, how was the 'question of democracy' treated in the context in question? We can note that this is, in effect, where Partha Chatterjee (1993) locates his discussion of the 'nationalist imagination' in Asia and Africa. Although he does not derive the substance of this imagination from the concepts and language available to the 'democratic movements', he does consider it as a 'domain of sovereignty within colonial society'. In other words, the postcolonial nation is imagined as a space of *freedom* in a context of subjection and violence.

In relation to South Africa what I want to do here is demonstrate that the substance of the nation does not simply bear a contingent relationship to the 'struggle for democracy'. It is derived from the very repertoire of concepts of the anti-apartheid struggle, its language and its metaphors. We will consider here two primary sources: the politics of National Democratic Revolution and also that of Black Consciousness. We will see that in both cases, freedom is associated with a determinate state of being – being a Modern Man in the case of the first and being a Black African Man in the case of the second. As an imaginary generated from the democratic 'will to freedom', the nation is always elaborated as in-the-making. Central, therefore, to the national project in South Africa is a struggle over agency: who are the

authentic agents of Nation Building?

To situate a genealogy of the South African nation in the history of 'struggle for liberation' is potentially banal. Apartheid refused precisely such a notion, or, more precisely, defined the boundaries of the nation precisely to exclude the vast majority of inhabitants in South Africa. Hence, to say that the national and democratic questions in South Africa are deeply implicated in one another is a truism. Granting democratic rights to 'Blacks' in South Africa, raised the question of the limits of the South African nation.

The tendency in South Africa, however, is to treat this relationship as contingent although historically contemporaneous. That is, the majority of authors treat the 'national question' in South Africa quite distinctly from how they treat that of democracy. Typically, the former is posed in the following way: how to reconcile a 'deeply divided' people. In the words of the 1994 ANC election manifesto, *A Better Life for All*, the challenge was to build a 'nation [...] by developing our different cultures, beliefs and languages as a source of our common strength' (ANC 1994). Here nation-building is essentially a question of 'identity'. Indeed, this is how the question is widely treated in South Africa. Typically, Brendan Boyce writes that the major task at hand is to 'reconcile the issue of identity redefinition [...] given South Africa's unique historical limitations and opportunities' (1999:231). Now, even if one does not conclude that 'identity redefinition' has to be in the direction of a national identity, the point above remains valid: nation-building is discussed as a problem of identification. We can note, in this vein, the contribution by Gerhard Maré to the same collection. Even though he states resolutely that the South African nation is unimaginable in the local context, he argues this from the same principles as Boyce above: the prospect of constructing a national identity (1999:245). The titles of their papers too are suggestive: 'Nation-building in a democracy' and '"Nation" and "nation-building" in post-apartheid South Africa'. Nation-building and democratisation are treated as separate questions and when they are linked it is to wonder about the constraints/opportunities which democracies place on/open up for nation-building. This is how 'racism' is more and more dealt with in South Africa. It is treated as an obstacle to *national reconciliation*. Let us note the Final Report of the National Conference on Racism hosted by the South African Human Rights Commission. There, the Chairperson, Barney Pityana remarks:

> Reconciliation in South Africa is a big challenge. It is often bedevilled
> by confrontational politics. It has to transcend the hurdles erected by

our past and the legacy of that past which lives with us today. More seriously, it is made all the more difficult by a predilection to denial and skewed understandings of democracy and liberalism! This suggests also that the past does not matter. We must simply look to the future. [...] The result is cynicism about our national efforts. It also leads to indifference about the specter of racism in our society [...]. (Pityana 2001)

When they are linked it is always to pose the following question: how can national unity be achieved in and through democratic institutions? Now, if this is how the relationship is usually treated in the academic literature, Thabo Mbeki distinguishes himself in relating the 'national question' explicitly to that of the 'democratic question'. What he asks in 'I am an African' is who are the veritable bearers of the democratic mission. It is worthwhile considering his speech more closely:

I owe my being to the Khoi and the San whose desolate souls haunt the great expanses of the beautiful Cape.[...] I am formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land. [...] In my veins courses the blood of the Malay slaves who came from the East. [...] I am the grandchild of the warrior men and women that Hintsa and Sekhukhune led, the patriots Cetshwayo and Mpephu took to battle, the soldiers Moshoeshoe and Ngungunyane taught never to dishonour the cause of freedom. My mind and my knowledge of myself is formed by the victories that are the jewels in our African crown, the victories we earned from Isandlwana to Khartoum, as Ethiopians and as the Ashanti of Ghana, as the Berbers of the desert. I am the grandchild that lays fresh flowers on the Boer graves St Helena and the Bahamas [...] I am the child of Nongqause. [...] I come from those were transported from India and China [...]. (Mbeki 1998:31-32)

These lines, treating the identity of the African, are punctuated with the following declaration (and, elsewhere, something very similar): 'Being part of all these people, and in the knowledge that none dare contest the assertion, I shall claim that I am an African!" (Mbeki 1998:32). Now Mbeki deliberately invokes a term that, in the context, is profoundly ambiguous. Why does he declare 'I am an African' instead of 'I am a South African'? Why does his verse slide between allusions to the continent in general and to South Africa specifically? The South African people, that is, are also the people of the continent of Africa. These terms are mixed throughout the speech: 'Today it feels good to stand here as an African'. 'It feels good that I can stand here as a South African' (Mbeki 1998:35). In this respect they

are not of any particular language, not of any particular background. What is it, therefore, that unites these peoples as Africans? In the first place they belong to a common territory:

> I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land. [...] The dramatic shapes of the Drakensberg, the soil-coloured waters of the Lekoa, iGqili no Thukela, and the sands of the Kgalagadi have all been panels of the set of the natural stage on which we act out the foolish deeds of the theatre of our day. [...]. (Mbeki 1998:31)

But that is not all. 'Africans', despite their heterogeneity, do share a common history:

> I have seen our country torn asunder as these, all of whom are my people, engaged one another in a titanic battle, the one to redress a wrong that had been caused by one to another, and the other to defend the indefensible. (Mbeki 1998:31)

But the people are also 'heroes and heroines', those that would not tolerate oppression, nor allow fear of death, torture, imprisonment, exile or persecution result in the perpetuation of injustice (Mbeki 1998:34). Africans are those that have seen what happens when those with the superiority of force deny the divine injunction that all men and women are created equally in the image of God. They know what it means when race and colour are used to distinguish between humans and sub-humans and when they are used to enrich some and impoverish others. An African has seen the effects of the destruction of self-esteem, and the way minds are corrupted when they perpetrate a veritable crime against humanity. As an African, one has seen the concrete expression of the denial of the dignity of a human being resulting from systemic and deliberate oppression and repression (Mbeki 1998:33).

The speech 'I am an African' is profoundly ambivalent about the precise identity of the people. There is a constant shifting between two registers. On the one hand, it includes both the *perpetrators* and the *survivors* of the colonial 'crime against humanity'. On the other hand, it refers exclusively to those who lived and struggled against this terrible injustice. In the first definition those 'migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land' are included in the people. They are not easily 'Africans', however, according to the second. Or rather, they only become Africans when, in the words of the Constitution, they 'recognise the injustices of the past'. What

should we make, though, of the phrase *'our* native land' in the reference above? Who is the subject there? The *indigenous* inhabitants of Africa? Does he imply a hierarchy of 'African-ness'? Or worse: does it imply that immigrants, especially those from Europe but including those from India and Malaysia and China, can never quite become authentically African? More of this in a moment.

What President Mbeki does here is situate 'being African' in the context of the struggle against colonialism. The nation, in other words, is produced in and through the struggle for democracy. This is precise. It is not important if the nation in question is composed exclusively of the people of South Africa or of the people of the continent as a whole. What is important to note is that during the course of the speech the meaning of 'being African' changes. We heard that in the course of the struggle against injustice 'being African' meant refusing to allow 'a few' to describe one as barbaric. Indeed, it meant refusing to be defined in terms of race, colour, gender or historical origins. Being African under such conditions meant not belonging to a group or class defined by others. With the advent of democracy, however, being African is not simply about refusal. It means being able to define for oneself who one is and who one should be (Mbeki:34). Recalling that 'I am an African' was the speech Thabo Mbeki made on the occasion of the adoption of the Constitution in 1996, he declares:

> We are assembled here today to mark their victory in acquiring and exercising their right to formulate their own definition of what it means to be African. (Mbeki 1998:34)

Who is an African today? Mbeki is very precise. The Constitution, in giving concrete expression to the sentiment 'the people shall govern', recognises the fact that 'the dignity of the individual is both an objective which society must pursue, and is a goal which cannot be separated from the material well-being (sic) of that individual' (Mbeki 1998:34). The African in a democracy is a new sort of being. S/he is an individual, free to belong or not belong to any group s/he sees fit. The democratic nation, therefore, is not simply a nation of multiple identities, it is a nation composed of *individuals*!

Now, let us note two features of the 'people' according to Mbeki. They are Africans and they are individuals. Or rather, they are individuals when African. We may wonder whether according to his own definition all Africans are individuals. We recall that being African was intimately linked to combating racism and refusing apartheid/colonial social taxonomies. But

we know too that not all people *in* (South) Africa were partisans of the anti-apartheid struggle. What of the 'white' South Africans who only began to question the apartheid political-economy well into the 1990s – usually, moreover, on the basis of its effects on the quality of life and the economy than on its justice. What do we make of the tens of thousands of 'homeland' politicians and officials (of the so-called independent and autonomous states), the 'kitskonstabels' or 'blackjacks' ('black' municipal police responsible for enforcing apartheid bylaws), councillors that stood for office in Black Local Authorities or those that participated in the structures and the elections of the Tri-Cameral Parliament? What of 'askaris' (former ANC soldiers that were 'turned' to become apartheid killers) and 'impimpis' (spies or informers) of all kinds? What do we make of 'umatshingelane' (persons that vaunted whatever minor power they had over other 'blacks' but were obsequious in front of 'whites')? Are all these people Africans too? Did they refuse apartheid taxonomies, did they oppose and resist the violence of colonialism?

What this means is that being African, or being an individual, is contingent on something very special: being able to understand the racist power at work in colonial and apartheid taxonomies. Africans are authentically so when able to 'see' themselves through liberated eyes. This is the mark of authenticity. Now, what are the conditions of that?

The Politics of National Democratic Revolution

In order to keep these remarks brief we shall assume some familiarity with the theory of National Democratic Revolution (NDR). What is the nature of the subjects that NDR supposed. Who are they? Where are they? What animates them? Do they have more than an abstract presence? It is to this that we turn. We are not so much interested in a sociological description of the *people* as they are – how many languages they speak, where they live, etc. We want to know: when are they deemed *free*.

We do not need to establish the (classical) Marxist pedigree of the theory of National Democratic Revolution. Others, especially Peter Hudson (1986), have already done this. As far as the 'people' consisted of the 'nationally oppressed', it was the working class that was deemed the veritable bearer of the National Democratic Revolution. Other classes (petit bourgeois, peasants, and so on) may have shared a common (short term) interest with the working-class, but it was ultimately they that were deemed the genuine bearers of the national project:

The realisation of the basic guidelines set out in the Freedom Charter and their ongoing consolidation after the seizure of power, will be determined by a number of factors. Among the major ones are: the correlation of class forces within the liberation alliance, the strength of this alliance relative to the overthrown classes, and the international balance of forces. In the final analysis, this depends on the extent to which the working class, the landless rural masses and progressive sections of the middle strata assume decisive positions within the democratic alliance. Among these forces – which are objectively interested in thorough-going revolutionary transformation – the working class is the leading force [...]

Objectively, because of the numbers at their command, and because of their concentration and collective organisation within the strategic points of the economy, black workers are better placed than any other class or stratum among the oppressed to lead the national democratic struggle. Their actions affect the economic foundation of the system of colonialism of a special type. And it is black workers, a class with no property stakes in present-day South Africa, who are most capable of taking the national democratic struggle to its fullest conclusion.

Workers, more than any other class in our society, understand from their own lives the importance of collective solutions to social problems. Their very position within production and their daily struggles have schooled our working class in the need for organisation and united action. The existence of a large, class conscious proletariat is the greatest asset to our revolution. (SACP 2001)

Let us wonder, however, who was a worker that was ultimately the authentic national subject. What did he (and it was a he!) 'look' like? We know that proletarianisation according to the early Marx (that is, before the appearance of *Capital*) is accompanied by a cultural transformation: the dissolution of bonds associated with the clan or the lineage group. In other words, the worker is simultaneously an individual. Or rather the individual is an industrial worker. According to the theory of NDR, therefore, the authentic bearer of the Revolution is an inhabitant of an industrial landscape. Moreover, their culture is one produced in and through industrialisation.

Now, even if the theory of NDR ultimately identifies the key feature of South African capitalism as the system of migrant labour ('cheap labour') – which entails the reproduction of (in Gellner's terms 1999) 'agrarian' cultural forms – and hence posits South African society as culturally heterogeneous, the task of the democratic state will be to overcome such differences. After all the theory of NDR is not simply an analysis of

apartheid. It is a vision of a liberated nation (Suttner and Cronin 1986:ix). Let us note that a free South Africa will not simply be democratic. It will be modern. Indeed, the National Democratic State will complete the partial modernisation started under apartheid-capitalism.[1]

- If under apartheid the mineral wealth beneath the soil, the banks and monopoly industry were at the service of a minority, the National democratic State will transfer their ownership to the people.
- If under apartheid not all people had the right to live where they chose, to be decently housed and to raise their families in comfort and security, the National Democratic State will provide preventative health care and free hospitalisation to mothers and young children, it will demolish slums and build new suburbs. It will provide transport, roads, lighting, playing fields, crèches and social centers (Suttner and Cronin 1986:263). And so on.

What we have here is an account of a free people, where freedom is associated with a determinate cultural form: being an individual in a modern, industrial society. That is what it means to be liberated:

> The South African *industrial proletariat*, concentrated in the *large urban complexes*, has emerged as the most organised and powerful *mass revolutionary contingent in our country*. Its proletariat class consciousness has been developed and deepened by decades of militant trade unionism. This tradition is today embodied in the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and in the giant federation, the Congress of South African Trade Union (COSATU). It is a working class that has responded in its millions to calls for national stayaways, shutting down the mines, factories, shops, and bringing the capitalist economy to a grinding halt for days at a time. It is a working class from among whom increasingly large numbers are actively rallying to the Marxist-Leninist positions of the SACP, openly espousing the perspectives of socialism. Within our own country this proletariat is *gathering its forces to fulfil the historical role predicted over one hundred years ago by Marx and Engels for the working class movement on a world scale*. Assembled in millions within the very heartland of an advanced capitalist economy, and leading the struggle against national oppression, the South African working class is poised to be the gravedigger of capitalist exploitation itself. (SACP 2001, my emphasis)

Let us note too that the references in this 1989 text are to the 'early Marx'; to the Marx of the Communist Manifesto. This is important because it helps us understand what kind of individuals South African workers are supposed

to be. Individualisation here refers to the separation of the worker from the clan, the tribe, the extended family. This cultural transformation – deemed in the work prior to *Capital* an ordinary effect of the shift from handicrafts to manufacture – was an essential condition of being free. What was at stake was the freedom of workers from the hold of the past and of the demystification of their relationship to reality. In other words, individualisation was a condition of them being able to apprehend the world as it really was; to refuse to see the world in the 'false' categories of 'ideology'. In contrast, 'tribalism' was a condition of colonial rule precisely because it kept subjects in darkness about their real conditions and prevented them, therefore, from acting in their proper interests. Refusal to accept the apartheid social taxonomy, to resist racism and colonial oppression necessarily implied being an individual in an industrial society. We can now understand why 'traditional authorities' are difficult to reconcile to the terms of the National Democratic state. It is not simply that they are not democratic. The problem lies rather with the fact that they produce and reproduce their subjects, not in the image of the nation, but in the image of the lineage group and the clan.

Let us summarise, according to the theory of NDR, the argument so far:

* A democratic society is one where its members are free;
* being free means being an individual in an industrial society;
* being free means being able to vote in elections;
* being free means to share in the country's wealth;
* therefore, a democratic society is an industrial society, composed of individuals, that has democratic institutions and public ownership of the means of production.

What we have here is a strange subversion of the democratic project. The measure of democracy is not the public domain. It is the degree to which society is composed of *individuals* and there is public ownership of a *modern industrial economy*. In other words, the public domain is deemed contingent on realising the nation! Now, once we forsake the 'socialist' allusions, then it is a simple step to say that society is democratic when the economy is industrial and it is composed of individuals. This is exactly what has happened today in South Africa. Realising democracy is more and more treated as a question of nation-building. Becoming free is reduced to being a consumer in an industrial society!

Now, to what extent is this rendition of NDR recognisable in current debates? To what extent has it recently been taken to unforeseen heights that

have little or no relation to its original template?[2] Simply put, does what goes for NDR today still invoke industrial individuals (modern man) as the authentic bearers of the nation? At stake is the degree to which the measure of freedom is an industrial society. Has NDR reconciled itself to feminism and/or to other movements that do not predicate 'freedom' on patriarchy and/or industrialisation? Does NDR today have room for women and/or communal figures (members of clans, tribes, extended families etc.) as 'motive forces' for Revolution?

We can approach these questions in the light of contemporary debates about NDR 'on the terrain of capitalism' (SACP 2001). Let us start by returning to an important discussion document, attributed to Thabo Mbeki, and prepared for the 1998 Alliance Summit: 'State, property relations and social transformation' (ANC 1998). It brings to the fore many of the shifts, contradictions and continuities that characterise the current situation. What we will notice is that the working-class is forsaken as the agent of the National Democratic Revolution in favour of the state and a black bourgeoisie. What we will notice too, however, is that the political-economic objective remains the same: a modern industrial society. Simply put, the working-class is no longer deemed the pre-eminent agent of modernisation.

'The strategic challenge of the current phase', the document begins, 'is to transform South African society to become truly non-racial, united, non-sexist and democratic'. In pursuit of these goals 'it should be underlined that a critical element of this process is the active participation of the *people* as the drivers of change' (ANC 1998:1, my emphasis). For this end, the paper continues, it is necessary to liberate Africans, and black people in general, from political and economic bondage. The document adds that the primary beneficiaries of NDR should be the poor, the majority of whom are African and female. Here we have the *people* seeking to eliminate the 'basic causes of the national grievance' in pursuit of new society that benefits especially the poor. So what is this 'national grievance'? The document continues that the 'state represents class interests and therefore it is part of, and a player in defining, social relations' (1998:2).

> [A]s a concentrated expression of social relations, as an institution wielding enormous power and resources, the state is for this reason the most critical area of contestation among classes: transfer of state power is thus characterised as the most visible and critical expression of a revolution. (ANC 1998:2)

Does this help us understand better the nature of the 'national grievance'? Is it primarily a question of class? Indeed, what are the class interests that the apartheid state served? And here there is a curious displacement. Packed into the term 'class' is another concept entirely. Now, if class here refers to a property relation and the state represents a class interest then it follows that social transformation is predicated on changing the property relation. But this is precisely what the document says will *not* be done! The National Democratic Revolution 'will not eliminate the basic antagonism between capital and labour' (1998:1). Indeed, we are told that 'NDR is not aimed at resolving the central question of property relations: it does not seek to create a classless society' (1998:2). Class is used here, rather deceptively, as one might use the term 'group', as a colloquial expression that merely denotes a collection of people. It has certainly lost its theoretical and political bearings *vis-à-vis* Marxism. So, if the term does not invoke a class in the proper sense, to what does it refer? We are told that the apartheid state was 'illegitimate and structured to serve the interests of the White minority' (1998:3). Class here refers to a racial group!

> In the final analysis, one of the objectives of the NDR is to transform property relations: to redefine the relationship that individuals, sectors and groups have to capital. The NDR does not aim to reshape property relations in the most fundamental way of creating a classless society. It does not seek to eliminate capital and capitalism. [T]he NDR must see to the *deracialisation* of ownership, accumulation and allocation of capital [...].

As an afterthought the sentence finishes:

> and it should do this in a manner that benefits the poor. (ANC 1998:5, my emphasis)

If the *people* in general are not the 'motive forces' of change, nor are certain *classes* in the sense that the NDR once invoked the term, then who is the agent of National Democratic Revolution? We learn that:

> An important element of the task of the state is ensuring the glass ceiling of apartheid is removed from above the aspirations and ambitions of the black middle strata and capitalist class. In a systemic way, the NDR has to ensure that ownership of private capital at all levels [...] is not defined in racial terms. Thus the new state – in its procurement policy, its programme of restructuring state assets, utilization of instruments of empowerment, pressure and other measures – *promotes the emergence of a black capitalist class.* (ANC 1998:6, my emphasis).

In this way the state promotes the involvement of private capital to expand the economy, it guides the owners of capital towards projects that create jobs and contribute to development. Moreover, we are told, a growing economy assists redistribution by expanding the tax base, through job creation, by improving services and further developing human resources (1998:7). Let us note a series of fundamental departures from the template theory of NDR. In the first place, capitalism *per se* is acquitted of charges of producing and reproducing poverty. Only a 'skewed' capitalism is said to be at fault. Secondly, the 'motive forces' of the NDR are no longer, primarily, the working-class, but are deemed, rather, the state and the black bourgeoisie. Thirdly, the interests of the poor are, at best, only indirectly satisfied; provided, that is, that the economy grows and that the black bourgeoisie can be made to invest in job creating enterprises.

But let us note too a key continuity with the theory of National Democratic Revolution as elaborated from 1962. The objective remains the same. The NDR still intends to create a modern industrial economy and society. What has changed is the identity of the 'motive forces'. Under conditions of globalisation, the collapse of the Soviet Union and so on, the working-class is no longer deemed the best agent of the industrial society. The 'capitalist state' is. It is still Industrial Man that is the authentic bearer of the NDR; though he is no longer a worker but a bourgeois! There is still no role here for communal figures (clans, tribes, extended families). Despite lip service to gender concerns, women are very much an add-on extra.[3] Women *qua* women are only potentially (indirect) beneficiaries of the Revolution – if everything goes according to plan, the economy grows, the black bourgeoisie invest in the appropriate industries, etc. As 'motive forces' of transformation there is no role here for women except as Modern Men!

Now, at least here the nation has certain empirical measures: the degree to which people have jobs, houses, transport and so on. This is not always the case.

Being free in Black Consciousness

What does it mean to be free for Black Consciousness? Let us recall that what is at stake is the capacity to apprehend the world, not necessarily as it really is, but at least in terms that do not speak of race, patriarchy or class power.

The political defeat of the ANC and the Communist Party during the 1960s, created opportunities for new discourses of resistance to make

themselves felt on the South African scene. The most important of these was the Black Consciousness movement that emerged in the early 1970s. I have chosen in this section to concentrate on Black Consciousness as it was enunciated by Steve Biko. This, for several reasons. In the first place, Biko gave to BC its most explicit and coherent political and theoretical expression. In the second place, despite the length of time since the publication of his essays and his active political role, Biko's terms and concepts continue to play a pre-eminent role in the contemporary expressions of Black Consciousness in South Africa. This is especially true since the formation of the Steve Biko Foundation in 1998 and the active dissemination of his ideas in weekly newspaper columns by people like Xolela Mangcu.

Biko had entered the University of Natal (Durban) (Non-European section) in 1965. There he became active in student politics through the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). NUSAS was a 'racially' mixed student body, however in 1968 Biko broke away to form SASO (South African Students Organisation) – which restricted membership exclusively to black students.

What was uppermost in his mind and that of his colleagues in the early 1970s was the 'fragmentation of black resistance'. He writes:

> since the banning and harassment of black political parties – a dangerous vacuum has been created [...] [P]eople's hearts were gripped by some kind of foreboding fear for anything political. Not only were politics a closed book, but at every corner one was greeted by a slave-like apathy that often bordered on timidity. [...] After this brief spell of silence during which political activity was mainly taken up by liberals, blacks started dabbling with the dangerous theory – that of working within the system. (Biko 1978:34)

Independence was being granted to the Transkei and former opponents of apartheid had thrown in their lot with the bantustans. Most importantly, Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, while refusing independence for KwaZulu, accepted political autonomy in the Zulu Territorial Authority in 1970. Biko's first interventions thus responded to a double concern: to resist the fragmentation of resistance to apartheid and to wrest control of anti-apartheid activities from 'white liberals'.

Amongst his first articles as chair of SASO publications, Biko contributed 'Black souls in white skins' to the monthly newsletter. It was one of the first major expositions of the 'philosophy of Black Consciousness'. Writing under the pseudonym 'Frank Talk', Biko analysed the problem in South

Africa as that of 'white racism'. The fact that apartheid – 'the arrogant assumption that a clique of foreigners has the right to decide on the lives of a majority' (Biko 1978:27) – was simultaneously tied up with 'capitalist exploitation' and 'deliberate oppression', merely complicated matters. It does not detract from its central feature. Hence:

> The sooner liberals [a term he used to include Communists and other 'Leftists'] realize this the better for us blacks. Their presence amongst us is irksome and of nuisance value. It removes the focus of attention from essentials and shifts it to ill-defined philosophical concepts that are both irrelevant to the black man and merely a red herring across the track. White liberals must leave blacks to take care of their own business while they concern themselves with the real evil in our society – white racism. (Biko 1978:23)

In treating the problem as one of 'segregation' or even of capitalism, white liberals – these 'do-gooders', 'non-conformists' – misrecognise the nature of the beast. They propose, for example, that integration is the correct step towards the total liberation of blacks. The supposition here is that the problem is one of racial reconciliation:

> The myth of integration [...] must be cracked and killed because it makes people believe that something is being done when in actual fact the artificial integrated circles are a soporific on the blacks and provide a vague satisfaction for the guilt-stricken whites. (Biko 1978:22)

What for Biko are the real effects of white racism? If they are not principally oppression, segregation and capitalism, what are they? The title of the essay 'Black souls and white skins' is instructive. This is clearly a reference to Frantz Fanon's *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*). What might we say about the relationship between them? Was Fanon Biko's major intellectual interlocutor? The paternity between them has important consequences for how BC understood the conditions of *freedom*. Fortunately we are in a better position to understand the intellectual relation between them since the publication of David Macey's (2000) extraordinary biography of Frantz Fanon.

In 'We blacks', Biko asks the following question: 'what makes the black man fail to tick?' (Biko 1978:28). For the most part, he replies, it is because he is a 'defeated man'. White domination, this machine that prepares the black man for subservience, produces 'at the output end' a man who is a 'man only in form'. He has lost his manhood. Reduced to an 'obliging shell' the black man can do nothing but look in awe at the 'white power structure'

and accept what is given to him as his 'inevitable position'. He yearns for the material comforts of white society but does not believe himself worthy because not sufficiently educated. He hazily understands the scientific achievements of white men and so resigns himself to status quo because convinced of the futility of resistance.

> All in all the black man has become a shell, a shadow of a man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity. (Biko 1978:29)

What is at stake for Fanon is the white gaze. 'I arrived in the world', he writes, 'anxious to extract a meaning from things, my soul full of the desire to be at the origin of the world, and here I find myself an object in the midst of other objects'. And yet the moment he establishes his own being-in-the world it collapses, under the white gaze, into being-for-others (Macey 2000:166).

> 'Look, a negro!' It was an external stimulus that flicked me in passing. I smiled slightly.
>
> 'Look, a negro!' It was true. I laughed.
>
> 'Look, a negro!' The circle was gradually getting smaller. I laughed openly.
>
> 'Mum, look at the Negro, I'm frightened!' Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be frightened of me. I wanted to laugh till I burst, but that had become impossible. [...]
>
> Having come under attack at several points, the corporeal schema collapsed, giving way to an epidermal racial schema. (Fanon 1998:90)

Like the Sartrean Jew that is created by the anti-Semite, the 'Negro' is produced through the gaze of the 'white man'. And yet unlike the Jew who is created as a 'character', the black is created in and through his *skin*. The character of the black arises, in other words, because he is *black*. In a colonised society the black is not simply black. He is *black* in the eyes of the white man. Césaire's adaptation of *The Tempest (Une Tempête)* explored the relationship between Prospero the coloniser and his colonial subjects, Caliban and Ariel.

> Prospero, you are the master of illusion.
> Lying is your trademark.
> And you have lied so much to me
> (lied about the world, lied about me)
> that you have ended by imposing on me
> an image of myself.
> Underdeveloped, you brand me, inferior,

that's the way you have forced me to see myself.
I detest that image! What's more, it's a lie!
But now I know you, you old cancer,
and I know myself as well.

The revolt of the colonised, therefore, must be based on the assumption of his *blackness*. This was the basis of the politics of 'negritude' and it situates *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* within the tradition of Aime Césaire (the Martinican poet and later member of the Parti Communiste Francais), Leopold Sedar Senghor (elected the first President of an independent Senegal in 1960), Leon-Gontran Damas and Suzanne Lascade (the writer, born in Guadeloupe, whose novel *Claire Solange: âme africaine* scandalised Paris before the World War II).

Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* defiantly reclaims 'my original geography [Martinique]; the map of the world made for my use, dyed not with the arbitrary colours of the scientists, but with the geometry of my spilt blood […] and the determination of my biology […] and the nigger every day more debased, more cowardly, more spread out of himself, more estranged from himself, more cunning with himself, less immediate with himself, I accept, I accept all this' (Césaire in Macey 2000:182). Most famously, the poem declares:

  my negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against the
    clamour of the day
  my negritude is not an opaque spot of dead water on the dead eye
    of the earth
  my negritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral

  it plunges into the red flesh of the soil
  it plunges into the blazing flesh of the sky
  it pierces opaque prostration with its straight patience. (Cesaire in
  Macey 2000:182)

The relationship between Fanon and Césaire, however, was no easy one. David Macey discusses it in terms of a 'fault line' running through negritude. At stake were the theoretical implications of metaphors like 'the nigger every day […] *more estranged from himself*' (my emphasis). Underpinning Senghor and Césaire's politics of negritude was the celebration of a specifically 'black-African culture and values'. The white gaze, that is, alienated the black from the 'collective Negro-African personality' that was his essence (Senghor in Macey 2000:185). For Aimé Césaire, in particular, Surrealism was an extension of his search for a new black subjectivity,

which he had sought in negritude. 'This, for me, was a call to Africa. I said to myself: it's true that superficially we are French, we bear the marks of French customs; we have been branded by Cartesian philosophy, by French rhetoric; but if we break with all that, if we plumb the depths, then what we will find is fundamentally black'. The accomplice of 'negritude' was a resurrection of a noble African past. Cheikh Anta Diop claimed that the ancient Egyptians were black. The Afro-Asiatic roots of Greek culture were said to be obscured by an 'Aryan' foundation myth (Macey 2000:184). Senghor argued that what the 'black man' contributed to world civilisation was an innate sense of rhythm.

By 1959 Fanon had become critical of such sentiments and distanced himself especially from Senghor:

> In no way must I strive to bring back to life a Negro civilization that has been unfairly misrecognised. I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to sing the past at the expense of my present and my future [...] My black skin is not the repository of specific values. (Fanon 1998:183-4)

What he rejected in *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* was any form of determinism, insisting that his freedom was both absolute and *self-founding* (Macey 2000:186). Fanon asserted the freedom to be what he *willed*. This is what eventually distanced him from the politics of negritude. He sought freedom not in *being black*, that is being African – 'a great black mirage' (Fanon in Macey 2000:375). As he become more and more involved in the war for independence from 1953, Fanon willed himself *Algerian*! Now, what he took to be Algerian was quite distinctive and departed from the official thinking of the Front Nationale de Liberation (FLN). Any individual living in Algeria could, for Fanon, become Algerian simply by *deciding* to be one. The FLN, in contrast, was more and more appealing to an ethnicity. To be Algerian meant being an Arab Muslim. Macey writes: 'Fanon's "nation" is the dynamic creation of the action of the people, and his nationalism is a nationalism of the political will to be Algerian, not of ethnicity [...] It required the gaze of a white child to teach Fanon that he was a *nègre* ; he needed no one to tell him he was Algerian – he was Algérien because he willed himself Algérien' (Macey 2000:389).

Fanon's idea of nationalism was certainly out of step with those that appealed to Pan-Africanism or to negritude. The nation was a political and cultural unit but not one that contained a 'universal black culture'. Freedom was not about inverting the white gaze: making that which whites deemed

inferior, worthy. It was not about rediscovering a noble black-African past. Pan-Africanism in this regard was a chimera. What Fanon's nationalism referred to was the dissolution of blackness.

We can now understand why Fanon has received such an ambivalent reception in South Africa. More specifically, despite allusion to his work, Steve Biko does not refer to him by name. He does quote, however, from none other than Aime Césaire. Even the essay referred to earlier 'Black souls in white skins' is more a parody of Fanon than anything else. If in *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, Fanon is discussing the 'lived experience' (*l'expérience vécu*) of a 'black man' – that he could never be anything but black (according to whites) because always betrayed by his skin – Biko is discussing white liberals! Liberals pretend to have black souls, but always act on the basis of their white skins. Now, it is no small thing that Biko chooses to replace the word 'mask' with that of 'soul'. Fanon, let us recall, never spoke of Black Skins, White Souls. But for Biko, and for the politics of 'negritude' this is precisely what was at stake. In Césaire's terms black freedom was contingent on a 'return to self' or in Biko's, 'pumping life into an empty shell'. In short: freedom was contingent on restoring an alienated soul.

For Biko, freedom, Black Consciousness, was unambiguously about a return to Nature (Biko 1978:49). Biko writes:

> I am against the belief that African culture is time-bound, the notion that with the conquest of the African all his culture was obliterated. [...] Obviously the African culture has had to sustain severe blows and may have been battered nearly out of shape by the belligerent cultures it collided with, yet in essence even today one can easily find the fundamental aspects of the *pure African culture*. (Biko 1978:41, my emphasis)

What defines this culture, Biko tells us, is the importance it attaches to 'Man': 'Ours has always been a Man-centred society'. Such humanism is evident, for example, in how Africans talk to each other – not, like Westerners, to arrive at a particular conclusion, but simply to enjoy the communication for its own sake (1978:41). Intimacy for an African, moreover, is not reserved exclusively for friends but extends to any group that happens to find itself together through work or 'residential requirements' (1978:41).

> We believe in the inherent goodness of man. We enjoy man for himself.
> We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting

> endless competition among us but as a deliberate act of God to make
> us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for
> a composite answer to the varied problems of life. Hence in all we do
> we always place Man first and hence all our action is usually joint
> community oriented action rather than the individualism which is the
> hallmark of the capitalist approach. We always refrain from using
> people as stepping stones. Instead we are prepared to have a much
> slower progress in an effort to make sure that all of us are marching to
> the same tune. (1978:42)

Africans love song and rhythm (1978:42), they are not individualistic
1978:43), they have a 'situation-experiencing' approach to life instead of
the Westerner's 'problem-solving' one (1978:43). Africans are sentient
beings. He quotes sympathetically from Kenneth Kaunda (former president
of Zambia) to the extent that 'Westerners' have an 'aggressive' mentality,
not being able to rest until they have solved a problem. They cannot live
with contradiction, vigorously rejecting solutions for which there is no
basis in science or logic. In contrast, Africans,

> [...] being a pre-scientific people do not recognize any conceptual
> cleavage between the natural and the supernatural. They experience a
> situation rather than face a problem. [T]hey allow both the rational and
> the non-rational elements to make an impact upon them, and any action
> they may take could be described more as a response of the total
> personality to the situation than the result of some mental exercise.
> (1978:44)

This is true, Biko adds, for the 'detribalised' African as well. 'There
remains, in spite of the superficial cultural similarities between the
detribalised and the Westerner, a number of cultural characteristics that
mark out the detribalised as an African'. This is evident, for example, in the
field of music. Jazz is an aspect of a modern African culture that expresses
'real feelings' (1978:45).

Who is free according to Black Consciousness? Or: What can we say
about the conditions of freedom? The first step, Biko tells us, is to 'remind
the black man of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be
misused' (1978:29, 'We blacks'). Secondly, black consciousness has to be
directed to the past, to 'rewrite the history of the black man and to produce
in it heroes who form the core of the African background'. This, he tells us,
because: a people without a *positive* history is like a vehicle without an
engine. It is necessary to protect the black man's 'sense of belonging to the
community', his 'oneness of community' that is so different to 'whiteys

highly impersonal world' (1978:30). In this regard he must not lose himself by, for example, becoming a 'slave to technology and the machine' (1978:30). Black people are deeply religious. If the white God has been talking, however, it is time for the black God to raise his voice (1978:30). What this means is that black people must find in the bible a message that is relevant to them. Instead of preaching that all authority is divinely instituted, black theologians must teach, rather, that it is a sin to be oppressed (1978:31). Freedom, finally, for Black Consciousness involves a return to an essential state of nature: a fundamental state of *being free*.

Let us conclude: Freedom here invokes a determinate being. He is a man. He is Black. He is African. This is the inherent tension in the politics of President Mbeki. On the one hand the nation is composed of Fanonian beings: those merely willing to be who they want. On the other it is composed of Black African Men.

Let us note that the frequent masculine injunctive 'men' in Biko's writings above is not just stylistic. 'Man' is not a synonym for 'human being' and a 'black man' does not just signify a 'black human-being'. When Biko calls the 'black man' to action that is exactly what he means. In treating black alienation as an affair of 'white racism', or in Fanon's terms the 'white gaze', neither Biko or Fanon take seriously or, for that matter, can take seriously the black woman. She is not simply produced and reproduced through a white gaze/white machine. She is overdetermined through a male gaze too. By making freedom, therefore, contingent on the dissolution of the white gaze, Black Consciousness (and Fanon's 'Third Worldism') forsakes the woman to patriarchy. Indeed, Biko goes one step further. In returning to a 'pure African culture' does he not, indeed, valorise patriarchy as a condition of freedom? In this regard, however, NDR is no less complicit than BC. We recall that NDR treats individualisation as a condition of freedom – the condition of seeing the world as it really is. By treating this process as the normal result of the forces of production, NDR, even on its own terms, obscures the ways women are prevented from becoming individuals in patriarchal family settings. Even in its more recent version, women are free not as women but only when they resemble Modern Men.

We have seen that in both the politics of National Democratic Revolution and that of Black Consciousness freedom is made contingent on determinate states of being: Modern Men in the case of the first and Black African Men in the case of the second. At the moment, therefore, when both NDR or BC assert the freedom of the people they intend, not the public domain, but

nations composed of their respective beings. In the name of freedom, therefore, nationalists substitute the goal of a democratic society for something else: that of the nation.

Notes
1. Classical Marxism could be profoundly ambivalent about colonialism. It may certainly have been brutal and violent but it was frequently viewed as progressive. Marx, for example, wrote about British colonialism in India, that it was the condition of a Western society and the 'annihilation' of the old Asiatic one. 'England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindustan was actuated by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfill its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia. If not, whatever the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that evolution' (Marx cited in Said 1978:153). Engels too deemed the French colonisation of Algeria 'favourable to the progress of civilization'. An industrial society, he argued, was immediately preferable to one composed of Bedouin 'thieves', dominated by feudal lords and characterised by plunder and barbarism (Engels cited in Macey 2000:480).
2. Thanks to Ulrike Kistner for this formulation.
3. For a fuller discussion of the difficult relation between the women's movement and the nationalist movement see Hassim (2002).

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