

Apartheid Futures and the Limits of Racial Reconciliation

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Race has been a powerful, if destructive, force in the making of the modern world. It has separated masters from slaves, colonizers from colonized, settlers from natives, citizens from subjects. In response, historical struggles against racism and white supremacy have contributed to a deepening of the key normative pillars of the modern international order.

Various rights, including the right to self-determination, have been universalized. So have been core concepts of modern life such as freedom and justice, the equality of all human beings, or the belief that political power is meant to protect human life. The persistent conviction that democracy is the best form of realization of human freedom is owed in no small way to the relentless critique of racial rule by various abolitionist, anti-colonial and civil rights movements. The historical commitments to bring about a non-racial world have not only been underpinned by various philosophies of redress and reparation. At their core has also been some idea of a *shared humanity*.

Perhaps no other country in the world has experienced a proliferation of traditions of non-racialism as South Africa. After all, it is here that the utopia of a non-racial political community was forcefully captured in the 1955 Freedom Charter. The post-apartheid State has also fostered a normative project with the aim of achieving justice through reconciliation, equality through economic redress, democracy through the transformation of the law and the rehabilitation of a variety of rights, including the right to dignity. This normative project has been enshrined in a utopian Constitution that attempts to establish a new relationship between law and society on the one hand and law and life on the other.

As a result, twenty years after the formal abolition of apartheid, South Africa is no longer what it used to be. It is coming out of the dark age of white supremacy. Whether by design or not, the country is undergoing multiple and systemic transitions, at different paces and rhythms. In an age that has witnessed an exacerbation of historically entrenched racial hierarchies, it is involved in one of the few contemporary global experiments with a view of creating the first credible non racial society on the planet. To a large extent, this involves deracialising the ownership of assets and cultural capital while reconciling the principles of equal protection, affirmative action and non-discrimination. The chances of this experiment to succeed cannot be ruled out. But nor can they be taken for granted.

Today, there are significantly more blacks in the middle and upper classes than twenty years ago. More than 7,700 000 Blacks (African, Coloured, Indian/Asian) own fully paid homes¹. The number of households with motor vehicles and appliances (electric stove, Hi-fi music centre, microwave oven, refrigerator, television) has increased². Monthly earnings by various categories as well as long-term income trends show substantial progress. The annual total disposable income among Africans has grown by 481% between 1996 and 2013³. So has the annual income per capita (from R5 859 in 1996 to R 26 594 in 2013)⁴. In the words of a black female entrepreneur, some have more than one luxury vehicle. They own more than one home and can afford private school education for their children who own cell phones. Notwithstanding the extent of the abuse and daily humiliation and degradation of farm workers and tenants in rural areas and small towns, there has been a dramatic decline in the overt daily horrors of segregation, at least in the major metropolitan centers⁵. Although a lot remains to be done, blacks are visible in positions of leadership, affluence and influence in almost every sector of South African life (government, business, industry, banking and commerce, higher education, health, media and so on). The meaning of race and the nature of racial identity are now far more complex and ambiguous than they have ever been. Who is “black”, “Afrikaner”, “white”, “colored” or “Asian” is no longer pre-fixed. The discourses in which South Africans represent race relations are changing. Racism itself no longer seems to reside exclusively in the economic and social settings of yesteryear as it migrates into the realm of privately held beliefs.

But the defeat of legalized white supremacy has not meant that the struggle for racial equality is over. In fact, the project of non-racialism has lost much of the aura it enjoyed during the struggle against Apartheid. Meanwhile, we now realize that there is probably more to race than we had ever imagined. New configurations of racism are emerging worldwide. Because race-thinking increasingly entails profound questions about the nature of species in general, the need to rethink the politics of racialisation and the terms under which the struggle for racial justice unfolds here and elsewhere in the world today has become ever more urgent. Racism is still acting as a constitutive supplement to nationalism. How do we create a world beyond nationalism? Behind the veil of neutrality and impartiality, racial power still structurally depends on various legal regimes for its reproduction. How do we radically transform the law?

¹ Source: Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), *General Household Survey 2013*, Statistical Release P0318, 18 June 2014, p. 129.

² Cf. Eighty20, *XtracT* based on AMPS 2013 Individual January-December 2013 Data.

³ HIS Global Insight Southern Africa, *Regional eXplorer ver 752*, 2014.

⁴ During the same period, the annual income per capita among whites has increased from R42 943 in 1996 to R199 726. Among Indians, it has increased from R 19 573 in 1996 to R 107 608.

⁵ See for instance Wonder Hlongwa, “A place where black life is cheap”, *City Press*, 22 July 2007, p. 8.

Even more ominously, race politics is taking a *genomic turn*. In their attempts to explain human origins, to predict behavior or to cure or prevent diseases, evolutionary theory, genomics and neurosciences are re-racializing human difference. Evolutionary metaphors and genetic determinism are spreading far beyond their biological domains. Current genocentrism operates as if genes acted independently and were not in constant interaction with each other and with the social and cultural environment in which they are embedded. As a result, the social is being erased and human nature is being biologized. What was once part of culture is increasingly naturalized.

The regimes of the racial in the making are part of the ongoing cultural shift towards the values of neoliberalism, the deepening alienation from ourselves and our increasingly commodified selves. Framed within neoliberal individualism, this new wave of racism is less about the culling of the unfit and the selection for breeding of the fit than the creation of new genes and new qualities yet undreamed of. At stake in the contemporary reconfigurations and mutations of race and racism is the splitting of humanity itself into separate species and sub-species as a result of market libertarianism and genetic technology. At stake are also, once again, the old questions of who is whom, who can make what kinds of claims on whom and on what grounds, and who is to own whom and what. In a contemporary neoliberal order that claims to have gone beyond the racial, the struggle for racial justice must take new forms. In order to invigorate anti-racist thought and praxis and to reanimate the project of non-racialism, we particularly need to explore the emerging nexus between biology, genes, technologies and their articulations with new forms of human destitution.

As far as South Africa is concerned, pervasive material inequality between whites and blacks coexists with formal legal equality. Almost 16,000,000 Africans lived in relative poverty in 1996. A peak was reached between 2000-2005 when the figures reached almost 21,000,000. In 2012, they stood at 17,446,657. Having reached 157,690 in 2001, the number of poor whites fell to 36,436 in 2012⁶. To be sure, in major corporations, substantial sales of shares to blacks have taken place. In virtually all cases, these were people who did not have the requisite capital to acquire the stakes being sold. A drive to ensure representation at board and management level is underway. Preferential procurement of goods and services from black and female-owned enterprises is now the rule.

Far from leading to a wider distribution of wealth, most of these efforts, including employment equity measures and skills development, seem to foster a culture of cronyism, clientelism and corruption. Many participants in equity transactions have financed their acquisitions using debt, or a mix of debt and equity finance. Black South Africans still command less than 10% of the national economy. Whites still occupy about 75% of top management posts in South Africa. Racial

⁶ The percentage of people living in relative poverty by race are as follows in 2012: 1.9% (Africans), 24.5% (Coloured), 11.1% (Indian), and 0.8% (White). See HIS Global Insight Southern Africa, *Regional Explorer ver 676*, 2013.

and gender imbalances in the distribution of wealth, income and opportunity are still the rule⁷. Too many poor black are still not in a position where they can create something meaningful with their lives.

The moment when South Africa will be able to recognize itself and be recognized as a truly *non-racial community* is still far away. The dirty little secret of prejudice keeps breaking wide open, often in the guise of debates about things that, apparently, have nothing to do with race as such - poverty, crime, corruption, HIV-AIDS, rape, sports, questions of linguistic and cultural pluralism, or more recently the change of names of roads, dams, boulevards, avenues and public places, cities and airports, or the erection of monuments commemorating past struggles or celebrating newfound freedoms.

Because “transformation” or “empowerment” (the set of policies designed by the government and the private sector to redress past racial discriminations and to redistribute wealth and income to previously disadvantaged groups) involves both moral questions of justice and equality and pragmatic and instrumental questions of power and social engineering, it epitomizes more than any other post-apartheid project the current difficulty of overcoming whiteness and blackness. It is therefore not surprising that the debate on “transformation” has become more and more contentious, even at times acrimonious. It is as if South Africa was unable to face up to race at the very moment when the walls of racism, while still firmly in place here, are nevertheless tumbling there.

Proponents of “transformation” (not all of whom are black) and those who oppose it (not all of whom are white) disagree about what it is, why it is needed and how it should be implemented. Is it a form of reparation, redress or, rather, a temporary expedient that will at some point wither away? Can an injustice rendered in the past against a black person be compensated for by discriminating against a white in the present? Do claims for racial rectification advanced by former victims of racial discrimination irremediably compromise the non-racialist principles enshrined in the Constitution?

In a country where very few apartheid-era atrocities have been prosecuted, where key political figures refused to testify to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where there have hardly been any act of public contrition from former executioners and where most killers and torturers have escaped jail time, the persistent denial of white privilege partly explains the acrimonious nature of the controversy. But so does the drive to assert a form of black identity predicated on the idea of victimhood. The two defensive logics of black victimhood and white denialism collide and collude, often in unexpected ways. Together, they gradually foster a culture of mutual *ressentiment* which, in turn, isolates freedom from responsibility and seriously undermines the prospect of a

⁷ Department of Labour, *Commission of Employment Equity Annual Report 2006-2007* (Pretoria: Government Printers, 2007).

truly non-racial future. Furthermore, the logic of mutual *ressentiment* frustrates blacks' sense of *ownership of this country* while foreclosing whites' sense of truly *belonging to this place* and to this nation.

Self-Absolution

Current South African disputes about race and “transformation” are therefore expressive of the extent to which, twenty years into democracy, the country finds it difficult to clearly articulate the ethics of care and responsibility, duties and obligations that freedom demands. These disputes are not unlike similar controversies in other formerly racist states. Take, for instance, the United States where there have been two relatively unsuccessful historic efforts to undo the legacy of racial inequality. The first – the Reconstruction – was initiated after the Civil War⁸. The second was the civil rights revolution in the sixties.

It helps to see each of these historic efforts as an attempt by the United States to negotiate the contradictions between the nation's ideals of egalitarianism and its practices of racial subordination and victimization. It also helps to remember that after each of these major initiatives, the operations of white privilege and supremacy could not proceed as before. White racism in an era of legal racial equality had to don new clothes. For instance, in the aftermath of the civil rights revolution, the principle of racial equality found widespread acceptance among whites even as substantial numbers later rejected policies to implement it. Although most whites came to consider themselves free of racial bias, they nevertheless sought to maintain their social distance from people of color⁹.

They continued to embrace the privileges of white skin and devoted an extraordinary amount of energy to restoring their normalcy. Not only did racism become subtle and often unconsciously practiced, many whites went as far as declaring that racism was a thing of the past. They argued that in fact, white men were now suffering from reverse discrimination. Today, the dominant claim in America is that racism is dead. America, we are told, has solved its race problem and can now be “color-blind.” As a result, race-specific policies such as affirmative action can no longer be justified¹⁰.

Similar developments can be observed in South Africa. To be sure, all white South Africans do not think alike. Nor do they share the same political and economic interests. Very often, those whites who are the most committed to

⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1992).

⁹ See Linda Faye Williams, *The Constraint of Race: Legacies of White Skin Privilege in America* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Michael K. Brown and al., *White-Washing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

achieving genuine racial equality are not recognized and are hardly heard. Many – including former anti-apartheid activists – have been sidelined. Keen to protect their newly gained positions against challenges, the new ruling black élite has not been able to tap into the immense reservoir of goodwill and talent among white professionals, some of whom do not support the governing party (the African National Congress) but are keen to fully exercise their citizenship and contribute to the building of a non-racial society.

It is nevertheless a fact that for many former beneficiaries of past racial atrocities, reconciliation means that blacks should forget about South Africa's fractured past and move on. It is argued that white youth in particular cannot be blamed for acts of racial discrimination committed long before they were born. Many whites have retreated to a comfortable position of personal non-culpability and are unwilling to tell the truth about past misdeeds. Born to positions of enormous social and economic advantage, they are reluctant to wash their hands of the privileges they accumulated over three centuries and a half.

They have whole heartedly espoused the promises of individualistic liberty which they now oppose to the requisites of racial justice. Perhaps more than South African black citizens, they now believe in the liberal conservative ideology of the self-reliant and self-made subject and pretend that thirteen years after liberation, white racism can no longer be considered the most fundamental cause of black poverty. Nor can it be held responsible any longer for the troubling gaps in life-chances between black South Africans and their white compatriots¹¹.

Instead, they argue that once blacks have been granted equality before the law, no further action is needed. They also believe that racial disparities in South Africa today are either the result of the misguided policies of a corrupt and incompetent black government, or simply a manifestation of the moral failure of many individual blacks who do not work hard enough, do not go to school, do not live an ethical life and do not know how to stay out of crime, corruption and ill-health. To advocate the redress of past injustices and the undoing of a racist legacy that cumulatively resulted in a profound imbalance in the most fundamental structures of opportunity (housing, education, income, transportation, employment, social insurance) is proclaimed to be akin to reverse racism.

Many doubt whether “transformation” has accomplished anything of value¹². “Transformation” is said to interfere with market rationality, discourage foreign direct investment and act as a form of discrimination against whites who,

¹¹ See Stanley Uys, “Afrikaners ‘Tired of Saying Sorry’”, *ever-fasternews.com*, June 13, 2007. Consulted on July 19, 2007 on http://www.ever-fasternews.com/index.php?php_action=read_article&article_id=440

¹²“It has enriched only a small elite”, writes Nikki de Havilland, Deputy Director of FW de Klerk Foundation Centre for Constitutional Rights. It only favours “well-connected businessmen for state contracts”, he adds. See “Affirmative Action is not working”, *Legalbrief Today*, 26 April 2007 (consulted on July 19, 2007, <http://www.legalbrief.co.za/article.php?story=20070426162211935>

disenfranchised, therefore have no choice but to leave the country or to retreat in the sphere of the private. Those who cannot leave have but a fleeting attachment to the new democratic order. Unable to give up their former investment in the psychic and material benefits of whiteness, they vacillate. As their former identity unravels and its old symbols crumble, they retire into racially secluded enclaves.

The kind of casuistry and formalism used by conservative opponents of “affirmative action” in the United States is now peddled in some white South African academic circles, business and political organizations, trade unions and think tanks : the more fortunate black South Africans receive a disproportionate share of the benefits of “transformation”; “transformation” has done relatively little, on net balance, to help blacks in general or poor blacks in particular; “transformation” generates major social costs that fall disproportionately on whites; redistribution is at best a zero-sum process in which what is lost by one group exceeds what is gained by another, making the society as a whole worse off¹³.

A radical revision in South Africa’s white supremacist ideology is therefore under way. It is no longer a matter of asserting the “natural inferiority” of blacks. The assault is no longer on the idea of a common humanity, a world of individuals endowed with common rights. Instead, the defense of racial inequality and stratification is articulated in two ways. First, it assumes the form of a contest over the moral legitimacy and appropriateness of policies of redress. Here, the belief is that law should neither mandate social equality, nor attempt to eradicate conditions of racial inequality and the legacy of past victimization.

Second, the apology of racial inequality is gradually couched in the rhetoric of rights, fairness and equality. Such rhetoric is mobilized in an effort to institutionalize racial privilege that is trying to mask its racial nature. By denying the fact that past racial injustices can be rectified by legally enforced and race-conscious remedies in the present, it is hoped that real differences among racial groups will be protected and preserved and the imperative of justice and redress indefinitely postponed.

Such a racially-inspired critique of “transformation” is different from the class-based critique emanating from certain quarters of native opinion, predominantly black trade unions such as the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and political parties allied with the ruling party such as the South African Communist Party. Thus, for Moeletsi Mbeki, South Africa’s ruling class is composed of two groups. The first is a white economic oligarchy. It owns and controls the minerals-energy complex which constitutes the dominant core of

¹³ Read Thomas Sowell, *Affirmative Action Around the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). For a local version of casuistry and formalism, see David Benatar, “Affirmative Action Not the Way to Tackle Injustice”, [ever-fasternews.com](http://www.ever-fasternews.com), 14 April 2007 (Consulted on July 19, http://www.ever-fasternews.com/index.php?php_action=read_article&article_id=376).

the productive economy of South Africa. The second is a politically dominant black upper middle class. It oversees the redistribution of wealth towards consumption.

For Moeletsi Mbeki, “transformation” is the name of the historical compromise achieved by these two groups during the negotiations that led to the 1994 political settlement. “Transformation” entails wealth distribution from white capital and large corporations to the black upper middle class, and the creation of a class of blacks with capital. Less than a policy, it is a method perfected by the oligarchy to placate the political elites and to buy protection. Among the many effects of this wealth redistribution programme are not only political stability and economic prosperity, but also the emergence of an unproductive, comprador class of rich black politicians and ex-politicians who depend on white capital and entertain a parasitic relationship with the government¹⁴.

For more radical black critics, this accumulation path is not only a betrayal of the poor. It also increases inequality among black people and reproduces a situation not too dissimilar to the racial, class and gender regime under apartheid. It exacerbates racialised poverty, and more ominously, it fosters the creation of a vast urban black underclass – a quietly ticking bomb¹⁵. Still, for other critics, what needs to be done is to allow capital accumulation to concentrate in the hands of a small group of black tycoons since the dispersion of wealth among many shareholders is unlikely to achieve the leverage that people with concentrated wealth are able to wield¹⁶.

Amnesia

It is one of the many ironies of the 1994 “negotiated settlement” that a large number of white South Africans can stigmatize the project of “transformation” at the same time as they continue to feel entitled to their privileged position in society. They are willing to fight for their constitutional rights, but they are not ready to contemplate, and deal with, the accumulated atrocities on which these privileges rest.

For centuries, whites in South Africa – and not only Afrikaners – enjoyed unfair advantages in the labor market. As in the United States, they were able to rig the rules of the game and control access to jobs and promotions while closing off access to training or education for blacks. The disempowerment and dispossession of black people goes further back than earlier processes of proletarianisation in the nineteenth century. The introduction of the pass system, the institutionalization of the cheap labour system, the exclusion from property

¹⁴ Moeletsi Mbeki, “Concepts of Transformation and the Social Structure of South Africa”, in *Visions of Black Economic Empowerment*, 216-226.

¹⁵ Blade Nzimande, in *Umsebenzi Online*, the online journal of the South African Communist Party, 6 October 2004.

¹⁶ Khehla Shubane, “An Argument for Capital Concentration and Socially Responsible Investing”, in *Visions*, 162-176.

ownership - these tactics were instrumental to the accumulation of white wealth, land and power on the one hand and the development of patterns of dispossession for blacks on the other hand¹⁷.

To protect white privilege, boundaries were created that took the form of laws, customs and traditions. A deeply embedded *racist ethos* helped to justify whites' loss of feeling for human fellowship with blacks. This is how white privilege came to be seen as an entitlement that was hardly ever contested. Over many centuries, whites developed an ability to pass on to succeeding generations the spoils of racial violence and atrocities. These took the form of monetary or property value, banking practices, housing and land assets, educational resources, cultural capital, insider networks, good jobs, a sense of self-esteem, dignity and superiority.

The process by which white privilege was legislated has been well documented. It started as a genuine concern for the real problem of white poverty. But from the early 1920s, the more concerned the state became with alleviating white poverty and rehabilitating the white poor, the more racist it turned out to be. Already with the Pact's victory in 1924, W.F. Hertzog wanted to replace large numbers of cheap black labor with unskilled or semi-skilled whites. "Uncivilized labor" was replaced with "civilized labor" at "civilized wages." Such was particularly the case in the railways, harbours, post office and local government.

Employers who hired "whites only" received preference for state contracts. Under the policy of import substitution, customs were relaxed for protected industries which employed a certain percentage of whites. A Wage Board allowed the state to enforce minimum wages. Meanwhile, the trades were closed to blacks as a result of the Apprentices Act. Welfare was reorganized. Extended state assistance was provided to the white poor in the form of public works, vocational guidance, health services and housing, social clubs, pensions for poor mothers, old age pensions or sick and disability grants¹⁸.

Later, the capital accumulated in farming flowed into financial institutions, which in turn helped greatly to diversify the range of Afrikaner commerce. A recapitalization of the education sector, especially at university level, expanded Afrikaner involvement in a whole range of professions in the public and private sector. A new generation of Afrikaner entrepreneurs spearheaded upward social mobility. Sanlam and Trustbank, amongst others, gave Afrikaners a footing in a commercial world dominated by English corporations. Anglophone mining houses made space for Afrikaner-controlled corporations to buy into this sector. Per capita income amongst Afrikaans-speaking whites was less than half that of English-speakers in 1946. In the late 1970's, it had risen to 80 per cent and was

¹⁷ Colin Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (London: Heinemann, 1979).

¹⁸ Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2003).

heading towards parity. This is how white South Africa came to enjoy a standard of living equal to that of the richest countries in the North¹⁹.

Today, large sections of the South African white population can no longer see the advantages they gained from these arrangements. Indeed, in order to oppose “transformation,” the past has to be erased. The element of cruelty and brutality it took to maintain white privilege has to be forgotten. Whites have to be discouraged from understanding the benefits that still accompany their own skin colour, including in the new democratic dispensation. Instead, in a typically neo-conservative move, they are encouraged to absolve themselves from the sins of the past and to perceive themselves as the new victims of a corrupt and incompetent black government which, in addition, is “soft on crime.”

The white poor’s predicament

But what about today’s poor white? A century ago, the African-American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois remarked that white workers’ choice to define themselves by their whiteness was understandable in view of its short-term advantages. These short-term advantages were manifested in, for instance, higher wages than those of people of colour. But even when white workers received a low wage, Du Bois added, they were compensated in part by a public and psychological wage that amounted to a tangible benefit acquired at the expense of people of colour.

In the US today, white poor are encouraged to support the dismantling of the welfare state and the cutting of specific policies that could improve their life chances. Although policies stigmatized as “affirmative action” have helped hundreds of thousands of white women enter colleges, secure employment, and gain promotions, white poor are persuaded that “the blacks get more.” For this reason, they are the most virulent opponents of “affirmative action” although they, too, suffer from economic hardship, social stigma and political disempowerment.

South Africa has a long history of poor whites – a destitute class, and as in the American South described by Du Bois, an illiterate class, with little self-respect and no self-reliance, with an intense religious excitability and a deep rooted antagonism to the black. Here, racism has always played an important role in maintaining the self-esteem of the white poor. Very often, the white working class has thought of itself and its interests as predominantly white. As a result, it has been unable to contemplate a struggle of united white and black labour against the exploiters. White poor have always believed that black emancipation will

¹⁹ Sampie Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652-2002* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002).

keep them out of work, threaten their human worth, or even their masculinity. That is one of the reasons why, as in America, white society in South Africa long stood against democracy which might have emancipated blacks.

Historically, race has therefore played a powerful role in fracturing classes while serving as a barrier to alternative forms of cross-racial solidarity. It is estimated that, of about 4,5 million white South Africans, the white poor figure today is about 400 000 – most of whom come from “historically poor white families”. Since 1994 and the advent of globalization, they are forced to compete with blacks in an unstable labour market without the privilege of their whiteness. No wonder they cling so tightly to the symbolic vestiges of a racist past as a way of softening their newfound material precariousness. Consumed by nostalgia and melancholia, they cannot imagine what it means to be white in Africa without the paraphernalia of Apartheid (the church, the national-Christian ideology, the army, black servants and so on). But evidence also suggests that while they navigate cross-racial inner-city life as beggars and destitute, some members of the new white underclass are forced to undo the racism of earlier generations.

On the other hand, the end of apartheid has not affected the structural positions the white propertied classes enjoyed during the period of white supremacy. If anything, they are doing economically better today than ever before. To be sure they lost political power. But they did not die as a class. In most instances, they can still use their economic muscle and social capital to co-opt an increasingly predatory black élite, therefore gaining the upper hand, to the point of turning the “transformation project” to their own advantage.

Passage to Freedom

What to do with the inequalities which are the result of unfair policies consistently applied over centuries is both an ethical and a pragmatic question. To achieve a modicum of social justice after apartheid has been abolished and racial segregation outlawed, South Africa must dismantle the barriers that were erected against full justice for all and attend to distributional inequalities. For black South Africans in particular, freedom must translate into an expanded control over their labor and their lives. It should be the goal of “transformation” to galvanize them as they struggle to stop the violence that preyed on their vulnerabilities during the years of racial oppression. But as they labor to make their lives anew, what they create is conditioned by what they had endured in the past.

In principle, there is nothing fundamentally illegitimate in providing relief to those who, in the past, have been injured by race-based state action. This is not the same as systematically denying to innocent white citizens equal rights and opportunities. Yet, it is true that policies of racial rectification might constrain their opportunities in certain areas of public and economic life. The deprivation

they might endure in the process should, in any case, be temporary. It can, in no way, be equated with the race discrimination and the dehumanization blacks suffered under colonialism and apartheid.

On the other hand, the project of “transformation” cannot be confined to a largely managerial, bureaucratic or quantitative exercise with the primary concern of ensuring that adequate numbers of blacks find places in government, higher education, commerce and industry in general. South Africa cannot afford to simply replicate the old Afrikaner model of filling state corporations, civil service and the universities with incompetent citizens while using state patronage to promote dubious business ventures.

Devoid of any ethical consideration, the project of “transformation” can be catastrophic in terms of its costs and its consequences. Opponents of “transformation” are right when they point to loss of efficiency especially when unqualified black persons are chosen over more qualified whites. The “transformation” project can easily turn into a social quackery - blacks coming to make havoc in the former master’s house after the latter has relinquished political power. This is indeed what has been observed in countless African postcolonial societies under the rubric of “indigenization”. The morality of the project of “transformation” should be judged by the extent to which it fosters equality and restores capabilities to those who have been deprived of these by unjust laws and racist policies.

But equality does not mean equal distribution of everything to everyone. It means instead the equal treatment of everyone, the granting of the same weight to everyone. South Africa constitutionally subscribes to the idea that all South Africans, black and white, are subjected to the same rule. Furthermore, the latter should be applied in a manner that is always equal. “Transformation” on the other hand requires that for the same qualifications, preference be given to “formerly disadvantaged” individuals. It therefore objectively introduces a degree of inequality in the very process by which it aims at reaching the goal of equality. Indeed, in the calculus of “transformation”, everyone does not count as much as everyone else. Everyone does not have the same weight as everyone else. This, in itself, constitutes a serious risk for the ethical consensus among equals that is the essence of democracy.

Furthermore, morally bankrupt as it was, something can be learnt from the Afrikaner model of “empowerment” (*reddingsdaad*). To a large extent, this was a social movement and not simply a state-inspired initiative. It is significant that this was an economic movement with intellectual and social foundations. In order to foster their economic revolution, the Afrikaners created two structures: the *Federale Volksbelegging* (Federal People’s Investment) and the *Redingsdaadbond*. Their role was to mobilize capital, to pool the financial resources of white Afrikaans commercial farmers, entrepreneurs and workers

with the goal of launching Afrikaner businesses. That is how almost every Afrikaner came to have something at stake in the future of South Africa – a home, education, a job, something they were ready to fight for and to protect.

For Afrikaners to emerge from the weight of oligopolistic English political and economic domination, they needed to pool their financial resources, regain control over their savings, labour and buying power while promoting empowerment at various levels, including language, culture and politics. This is how they achieved a transformation of ownership in the domestic economy.

Today, there is no ethical consensus in so far as “transformation” is concerned. The task facing South Africa is therefore to rebuild a cross-racial ethical consensus around this project. Used as an expediency, “transformation” is also susceptible to leading to moral corruption. It risks codifying within the law and in the psyche of its beneficiaries the very powerlessness it aims to redress. It can socially stigmatize black South Africans by turning their past injuries into lucrative assets and entitlements. Furthermore, it risks turning victimhood into an *affect* as well as a social position.

Were blackness to be solely rooted in an unredeemable injury and seldom in the duties and obligations that black citizens have with regard to everyone else, South Africa would be unable to achieve the particular forms of ethical life its Constitution requires it to strive for. At the same time, neither political stability nor genuine democracy will be achieved if the beneficiaries of past racial atrocities yield political power while still clinging to the rule of property, that is, the monopoly of ownership of land, capital, access to universities, holiday resorts and corporate boardrooms, and wages three to six times those of blacks doing the same labor. If the ethical risks involved in the implementation of the project of “transformation” are real, so would be the endless deferral of black hopes and, ultimately, freedom. The risk is also that of a reversion of times - the disjointed times of black and white South Africans curving uncertainly towards each other, coming apart once again, reverting and taking up once again their segregated paths.

If the goal of “transformation” is to restore capabilities to those who have been deprived of these by past unjust laws, barriers that have operated in the past to favor “whites only” should be removed. This is not the same as to argue that the less qualified be preferred over the better qualified simply because they are black or have been “disadvantaged” in the past. But the formal-legal removal of these barriers is not enough. As evidenced by countless anecdotes in sectors as diverse as higher education, business and industry, practices and procedures neutral on their face, or in intent, may in fact operate to freeze the status quo and to keep in place, under a new guise, prior discriminations. Moreover, the racist ethos written in the life of institutions, in the public mind and in popular culture is the hardest to tackle once the legal and coercive apparatus of apartheid is gone. The removal of these immaterial barriers is mostly the result of new forms of cultural

creativity and imagination – a realm whose power is so thoroughly misunderstood by the current government.

Conclusion

Free from the shackles of white supremacy, South Africa was well positioned to lead the world into undoing the damage racism has historically inflicted upon the idea of democracy. The new nation could have become a shining light for social movements struggling for racial equality in different parts of the world. Instead it chose not to move far away, and fast enough, from the old politics of birth, ancestry and pigmentation even as the richly textured stories of its citizens lives kept disrupting and interrupting the sirens of racial essentialism.

The failure to articulate a politics that would have released all South Africans from the stigma of blackness and the delusion of whiteness is intellectual and political. The void it has opened in South Africa's moral imagination is now filled either by misguided and self-serving polemics about the lack of "transformation", a sickening nostalgia for a brutal and corrupt past or more ominously, the return of that which has been repressed. A major revision in South Africa's white supremacist ideology is under way. It involves a renewed contestation of the idea of a common humanity and a common nation of individuals endowed with common rights, and repeated attacks on the legitimacy and appropriateness of policies of redress. Apology of racial separation is couched in the rhetoric of cultural, linguistic or private rights. It is argued that past injustices should not be rectified by legally enforced and race-conscious remedies in the present. Since white racism is no longer the primary cause of black poverty, blacks should forget about South Africa's fractured past and move on.

Although black South Africans are at the helm of the most powerful country in the continent, many still think and act as if they were powerless. Their belief in their ability to effect meaningful social change is minimal. Meanwhile actual killings of African nationals, or looting of their property in various townships and squatter camps, have disclosed the lie of Black South African innocence. The daily suffering and humiliation meted upon African migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers in this insecure and anxious nation by fellow blacks has brutally exposed the false comforts of this country's claims to moral self-righteousness and the limits of ideologies of black solidarity.

In spite of substantial changes, South Africa today is still a nation composed of too many black people in possession of almost nothing – no meaningful foundation for social and economic autonomy. For too many, the possibility of purchasing much of anything in freedom is still foreclosed²⁰. In this context,

²⁰ This is not dissimilar to how black people's experiences in slavery shaped their lives in freedom in the Southern part of the United States. See Susan Eva O'Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007).

“transformation” is a justified claim that requires urgent treatment. It will be a justified claim so long as South Africa can establish that it is not pursuing the good by violating the basic requirements of justice itself. Because it is the most likely device to shield the nation from calls for retribution or vengeance, “transformation” is also one of the various mechanisms to achieve true racial equality and, ultimately, real freedom.

Real freedom means “freedom from race” - the kind of freedom that South Africa is likely to enjoy because this nation will have built, for the very first time in the history of humankind, a society, a culture and a civilization in which, for once, the color of one’s skin will be superfluous in the overall calculus of status, dignity, opportunities, rights and obligations. It’s a freedom that will originate purely and simply from our being human. In this relation between race, freedom and democracy is where might potentially lie South Africa’s unique gift to humanity.

For South Africa to contribute to the project of defeating racism in today’s world will require a radical shift from a politics of melancholia and nostalgia whose main goal is to defer the prospect of racial justice to a politics of responsibility – including a full acceptance of moral responsibility for the long years of systemic brutality and human degradation suffered by blacks in this country. It will also require a departure from a politics of victimhood, entitlement and expediency that masquerades as “transformation”, “black economic empowerment” or “service delivery”.

Yesterday appeals to blackness were warranted when blacks were oppressed on account of their blackness. Political blackness was an expression of their desire to escape the suffering caused by racial injustice, to overcome their common vulnerability and to live in a just society in which they could rule themselves and shape their own destinies while remaining in control of their own lives. For those who have suffered in the past because they were black, such appeals might still retain a measure of significance. They might even appear as a just and necessary political and moral choice in today’s circumstances. But they also reveal a profound degree of racial self-hatred and self-loathing.

South Africa is neither a color-blind, nor a post-racial society. But contrary to the United States or Brazil, it is the only nation on the planet where black people rule over a sizable, powerful and well connected white minority. How black South Africans think about themselves, imagine their own history, memorialize their losses, conceive of their own actions and morally project their own responses to the problems confronting their nation will determine the fate of South Africa’s fragile experiment in democracy. It will also determine whether or not white people have a future in this continent. For the future to belong to all, the concepts of blackness, whiteness and African-ness must remain open and pluralized. Simply looking into past and present local and global rearticulations of race will not suffice. To tease out alternative possibilities for thinking life and human

futures in this age of neoliberal individualism, we need to connect in entirely new ways the project of non-racialism to that of human mutuality.

This openness to the future and to the world will be jeopardized if blackness is severed from the core values of a democratic and constitutional state. On the contrary, it will be enhanced if blacks and whites can reinvigorate the dream of racial reconciliation and reactivate the possibilities of cross-racial solidarities as the basis for progressive and radical political practice here and now.

Finally, the task of black and white self-creation and self-transformation in this continent is inseparable from the project of Africa's regeneration. South Africa should remain open to Africa and its diasporas. Many Africans will keep embracing this flawed country so long as the duty of hospitality remains a cornerstone of its self-definition.