

## Of Pretence and Protest

At the end of his recent *Mail & Guardian* article, "In the rainbow nation, colour and class still count", David Smith recalls "a cynic whispering" in his ear that's not easy to forget: "The whites are pretending it didn't happen; the blacks are pretending to forgive." As I thought further about this, I concluded that, in the light of the interracial events Smith recalls in his article, there may in fact be a positive value to pretence.

Pretence could be a coping mechanism in which one owns up to the fact that one is unable to respond confidently and appropriately to human relations conundrums of the kind that race, gender and class tensions can throw up from time to time. Resorting to pretence may not necessarily be an indication of hypocrisy, but rather a desire to buy time or a muted cry for help.

The situation that leads to pretence may work somewhat this way: if you are a white South African, you may realise the many times you recognised and acknowledged that you were complicit, willingly or by default, in social, economic and political practices in the past that resulted in the extreme pain and suffering of others. You further recognised that although that past was unsustainable, you have not entirely shaken off the hold that its emotional and material benefits once had on you. This is a most distressing realisation. How then do you translate your distress into corrective behaviour?

Until and unless you find answers to this question, you enter and live in the world of pretence. There, you make no choices; you amble along from one ethical challenge to the next, doing your best. You may discover in yourself a tendency to be harsh on fellow whites and to understand blacks and their demands, until you realise that such behaviour choices are untenable, if not demeaning. Many whites may, in fact, be in a situation similar to yours. Your harshness towards them could be a form of self-

flagellation; while blacks, on the other hand, simply hate to be “understood”. You are then locked in a space of anguish.

If you are black, the world around you confirms your historical anguish. Much as you may try, you are unable to forget that your anger and sometimes hatred gave justification and legitimacy to acts of resistance against the unjust system of apartheid in the past. The moral imperative of your vision for equality, nonracialism and others enshrined in the Constitution has enjoined you to look ahead to new and positive relationships with your fellow white citizens.

However, your wish for such a world is constantly undermined by the persistence of the landscape of inequality and by recidivist acts of racism that enrage you. You experience your ethical resolve being eroded, a condition you feel driving you towards lowest-common-denominator responses that are easy to make but never fulfilling.

You find yourself then being constantly pushed back to the alluring hatreds of the past and their call for activism. But then you pause: is it the whites who are responsible for my anguish or is it a black government that is not providing the requisite leadership and delivering the heaven it promised? Protest against a black government could be a form of betrayal. Protest against whites may be safer, but could really be no more than posturing when you discover that in lashing out against perceived white racism, all you are doing is replaying what you were good at in the past: “discovering and unmasking acts of racism” and then assailing them.

While in the past this may have been seen as a progressive onslaught against the legitimacy of apartheid, today it can be read as the failure of the new leadership, predominantly black, to provide an alternative model of multiracial and multicultural relationships in South Africa. The total effect is to replay acts of indictment with often predictable conclusions,

which offer only fleeting satisfaction. Meanwhile, the resilient landscape of inequality continues to wreak havoc on your capacity to hope for a different future, until the next anti-racism protest. So you move along in an unresolved situation, hoping for the best: locked in a space of anguish.

It is not improbable that a great number of South Africans are locked in this space of anguish, leading us to a critical question: on what basis can we achieve a new social cohesion that enables us to find the most enabling human environment that can accord us, as South Africans, a sustainable human capacity to solve our toughest problems in the social domain and in a far less harsh and more permissive political environment?

First, the existence of such a collective space of anguish may have to be recognised and acknowledged as the one feature in our public and private lives that has the potential to bind us. Beyond that it is vital to recognise that, being in that space, South Africans may not hold the same quantum of responsibility and accountability. If you are black at this historic juncture you hold the greater share of responsibility, because we told ourselves that we were at the helm of one of the 20th century's most inspiring human transformations; that, in the spirit Paulo Freire captured in his unforgettable *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, we had the mission not only to free ourselves from oppression, but also to free the oppressor. We deeply believed in this. What, at this point, is our assessment of how we have carried out this task and responsibility?

It seems as if instead of setting out to create a new reality, we worked merely to inherit an old one. Perhaps in retrospect some of the elements of the negotiated settlement that led to the historic elections of 1994 served to subvert the higher order mission. Redistribution was given priority over creation and invention. That way we reaffirmed the structures of inequality by seeking to work within their inherent logic.

Perhaps it was in this way that the promise of the human revolution once dreamed of was conceptually subverted.

While the new political elites were incorporated into the structures of corporate reward and incentive cultures, millions of other South Africans were demobilised by social grants and truth commission reparations, some aspects of which are difficult not to see as material rewards for surviving the horrors of apartheid. This may have engendered an unintended expectation that the world will yield its rewards to me without an attendant obligation on my part to be engaged in changing my relationship with the world under the steam of my own leadership.

From time to time I will make demands on that world and this may include calling on white people to change without a concomitant obligation on my part to do the same. I may say from time to time that whites are ungrateful. They still have everything, yet they continue to disrespect me. When I say so, I may forget that I was part of the agreement that led to the current state of affairs in which I am intimately implicated and that the future may require other kinds of agreements for which I am obliged to provide leadership.

Failure to exercise leadership is dangerous. It may even take away your right to "good sense". This happens when the way you react to events and "good sense" is articulated by others who you now feel compelled to oppose to reassert your leadership, losing it further in the process. The Zimbabwean situation illustrates this danger. The Southern African Development Community's positions on Zimbabwe should in reality be recognised as a failure of SADC governments to take leadership and responsibility for their sub-continent. This happens each time they racialise the Zimbabwean situation as a contest between the white north and the black south.

The white north tends to come across as holding the moral high ground on Zimbabwe. This comes from its unambiguous statements about the sufferings of the people of Zimbabwe and the direct responsibility that Robert Mugabe bears for this situation. The black south never articulates a clear position.

Instead, murky statements are made that add up to inarticulate solidarities. The black south is unable to articulate "good sense" because it has allowed "good sense" to be appropriated by "the West". The promise of northern financial assistance obscures the situation further. The white north is thus in a position to be resented at the same time as it is needed. It is in this way that the black south, in failing to exercise responsibility and provide leadership, has given away "good sense" on a silver platter to a perceived enemy who is nevertheless needed.

Jean-Paul Sartre captures our condition of anguish so well in his short reflective piece, *The Republic of Silence*. "Never were we freer than under the German Occupation." According to Sartre, the French during the occupation existed outside the domain of German law, which they refused to recognise. Paradoxically, this gave the French an invigorated sense of freedom. "Because," writes Sartre, "the Nazi venom seeped into our very thoughts, every accurate thought was a triumph. Because an all-powerful police force tried to gag us, every word became precious as a declaration of principle. Because we were wanted, men and women, every one of our acts was a solemn commitment."

For us now in South Africa, 15 years into our freedom, the sacred space of what I should now call "resuscitative lawlessness" has been ironically handed over to the proverbial "white racist", who is then deemed to display contempt for black people by saying the things black people ought to say but choose not to say because their "precious declarations of principle" have been replaced by the uncritical solidarities of the day. Equally so, black people have given up the space to "triumph" with a

rigorous “accuracy of thought”. The “solemn commitment” that their actions used to signify has been reduced to the whimper of anti-racist protest. To lead and create a world, or to protest endlessly, that is the question!

To choose to lead, there is no doubt in my mind, bears the greater responsibility and is the higher-order challenge of history. It is to choose to place the shared anguish of coping through pretence within the realm of responsibility and to use it as a basis for a sensitive attempt to create ever-expanding circles of social solidarity across the great barriers of race, ethnicity, gender and class without fudging their impact. It is to choose to commit to finding an appropriate political instrument that will set a foundation of trust for South Africans to recover their shared idealism.

This demands that we reconnect with the founding compromises of the negotiated settlement that led to 1994. When we did so we chose the path of the rigorous “application of thought” by which we would embrace the complexities and ambiguities of managing a modern state. We entered a terrain of no easy answers, which nevertheless demands answers. In this we have to develop the disposition as a national trait to make complex connections. I mention only a few which strike me because their resonant connections with the theme of race defy simplification.

For a start, the whirlwind of capital accumulation is still blowing. It is a sign of the times and has the real capacity to undermine the ethical will of government and the body politic. It can be read as a historically unavoidable redistribution of capital and assets to an ascendant power. That being the case, this process can be read in two ways. It can be read only as a movement of wealth from whites to blacks, in which blacks structurally join whites within the inherited social and economic structures of whiteness and all its rules and regulations governing rewards and incentives.

Or it can be read as an unavoidable step in the journey towards the reordering of South African society; an opportunity, albeit a problematic one, to lay new foundations for social justice. It is easy to see how the first reading lands us in the anguish of pretence. It is also easy to see how the second reading imposes enormous leadership and ethical responsibilities of whatever political movement deems itself as leading South Africa into being a just, nonracial and prosperous society. How does the movement succeed in infusing leadership and vision into all aspects of organisational life and public service and remain linked to civil society? In the first reading race is a political ball to be kicked in perpetuity in a society structurally retained as unjust. In the second reading race is a tool for principled long-range planning.

The relationship between race and leadership shows up in two more examples. First, for a people traumatised by the dormitory enclaves of township life, we have not developed a hard-nosed approach to eradicate these enclaves in time. There is nothing that could demonstrate more to South Africans and to the world that the new democracy fundamentally values the lives of its newly enfranchised citizens. Although we have built millions of new houses, we did not build communities. We merely added to the dormitory. To transform the dormitory over planned time into coherent, integrated communities, each with a new tax base in which responsible taxpaying citizens make local decisions about their livelihood, would be a signal of the greatest love the country has for itself and its people.

It goes without saying that with the greatest number of South Africans living in self-referential communities interacting with others on common objectives, racial consciousness will dwindle in the face of the predominant self-actualisation of black communities across the land.

I need hardly dwell on the long-term value of a high-quality schooling system to the eradication of racial thinking in South Africa. Admirably, we

have allocated enormous financial resources to education, and the schooling system in particular, perhaps in the logic of redistribution or redress, but have yet to succeed in leading and managing the system as a “solemn commitment”. A successful schooling system will see the end of affirmative action, a short-term measure that should never have been allowed to assume the status of a strategic objective. The development of all should have been the strategic guide.

The overriding issue is not that race has no role in our attempts to understand and explain both the history and the contemporary challenge of South Africa; rather, it is about how much we are willing to accord it primacy of explanation.

Depending on the choice we make, we either relive the past to no end or we create the future. The latter is the bigger challenge and requires that we recommit to our solemn commitment to nonracialism, accompanied by visionary and ethical leadership.

We must recommit to diversity in solidarity, collaboration, trust, accountability and civility, all of which have a binding effect that should allow us to be aware of barriers that could be permissive or inhibitive, but to learn to think and feel beyond them and across time.