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engaging with Raymond Suttner's view of our national heritage

Catherine Ndinda
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The dichotomies that enslave us: engaging with Raymond Suttner’s view of our national heritage

Catherine Ndinda


This review essay appreciates the broadness and open-mindedness with which Suttner’s article was crafted. He begins by acknowledging the cultural diversity of South Africa society by correctly asserting that ‘there are sites and monuments and individuals that have meaning for a section of our people but are nevertheless treated as national monuments or parts of our heritage’ (p. 4). This essay identifies the notion of dichotomies and its contradictory applications in practice.

In speaking about indigenous knowledge systems, Suttner makes reference to the plurality of these systems, explaining that there are various ‘knowledges’. While he recognises difference within South African society, he ironically castigates analysts who identify differences in this society. Examples include the formal versus the informal economy, and feminism versus nationalism. Yet we cannot ignore such dichotomies, as they are a lived reality for the masses of the people he writes about; for us to ignore these is to overlook the very diversity that he so cogently argues we ought to acknowledge.

Although he correctly argues that there is interaction between the formal and informal economies, this does not necessarily suggest that they are one and the same, because the principles that operate in the formal are not necessarily applicable in the informal, although there might be some overlapping. What has become more evident is that as a result of the dominance of the neo-liberalism that calls for free trade, privatization and deregulation of labour markets, the formal sector that was formerly characterised by job security, benefits and long-term employment appears to be taking on the characteristics of the informal sector. Permanent jobs are no longer the norm; their place is being taken by contracts. The deregulation of labour markets has resulted in the casualisation of both skilled and unskilled workers, the majority of whom are women, as they are the ones who tend to work in insecure occupations and when retrenchments have to happen are the first to be fired, a situation which entrenches the feminisation of poverty.

The other dichotomy Suttner refers to is feminism versus nationalism, which he calls national liberation. My view is that women as members of the liberation movements were as interested in the liberation of the country as a whole from oppression as they were in the liberation of women from sexist oppression both in the home and in the public sphere. Worldwide, there are numerous examples that suggest achieving nationalist goals does not always lead to achieving feminist goals. During the struggle for

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1Research Fellow, School of Architecture, Planning and Housing, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban.
liberation the talk was that Black women needed to focus first on getting South Africa liberated before they could bring in feminist agendas, for feminism was considered to be divisive to the liberation movement [I use the term ‘Black’ to refer to Africans, Coloureds and Indians, i.e. those who were previously classified ‘non-White’ under apartheid]. Although gender equality is inscribed as an independent clause in the constitution, affirmative action and sectoral policies have gone further to emphasise gender equality. Yet this has not radically altered the position of the masses of women in South African society. How can we not distinguish feminism from nationalism when the feminisation of poverty is a glaring reality; when affirmative action policies benefit only a minority of women who have both the human capital and the social capital required to reach the top leadership positions; when the statistics show that more women than men continue to be unemployed; when violence against women has spiralled out of control and the media correctly shows us that women raped by men in power continue to experience intimidation?

Indeed, it is a sad indictment of our society that women can come out in public and contemptuously intimidate a fellow woman traumatised by rape, while singing praises in support of the alleged perpetrator. It is not enough to be flabbergasted by such behaviour – we need to ask what has gone wrong that even in this country which claims to have the most progressive constitution and gender-sensitive policies we witness such awful behaviour towards victims of violence. Most scandalous is that when women in leadership came out to condemn such open support for an alleged rapist it was like a pat on the hand that came too late when the rape victim had already been through considerable humiliation.

On the positive side, the Zuma rape case provides us with the opportunity to re-examine the implementation of gender policies in the country. Could we perhaps say that, despite the obvious advancement of women into leadership, this has not been accompanied by concerted efforts to raise gender consciousness among poor, marginalised women? Could we perhaps say that with institutions such as the Commission for Gender Equality, the focus has been more on the bigger issues of equality while overlooking the small but important issues of raising gender awareness to help women stand up for their rights and support fellow victims of violence? Whether it is a question of not being gender aware or an issue of showing loyalty to a party leader, it has become quite obvious that having gender-sensitive legislation is not enough to change the patriarchal ideology that causes women to view fellow women as enemies and to collaborate with their own oppressors. In India, Kenya and Ireland, the achievement of nationalist goals has certainly not resulted in the achievement of feminist goals and the same will be the case in South Africa for a long time, until women have their basic needs met and the majority become sufficiently gender aware not to support people accused of violating their rights.

Suttner argues that both the Freedom Charter and the Constitution are our democratic heritage despite their differences in one being a political document and the other a legal one. What he does not mention is that parts of the Charter such as socio-economic rights were included in the 1996 Constitution. He correctly argues that while some of our monuments, such as the Voortrekkers Museum and the Rhodes statue, are indeed national monuments they certainly represent the interests of narrow sections of our society. It is ironic that monuments of former oppressors of the majority continue to mark the landscape while few monuments have been erected in honour of African heroes and heroines. People’s eyes are the window to their minds, and what they see is what they remember. Similarly, the monuments that we see represent certain ideologies, and
while monuments in honour of some of the butchers of (indigenous) Africans continue to mark our landscapes their ideologies continue to dominate. Otherwise how are we to explain the continued existence of statues such as that of Cecil Rhodes, whose aim was to have African states from Cape to Cairo colonised by the British?

Perhaps one of the ways to counter the ideas represented by some of what is considered national heritage is also to erect monuments to individuals and groups who contest the ideologies that have been dominant for centuries in this country. In this way we will be able to decolonise the minds of the oppressed (Ngugi, 1988), for the transition to democracy does not mean that we have all become liberated, but rather that the process of liberation has begun.

The formulation of equitable policies and one of the most progressive constitutions in the world do not automatically translate into the democratisation of the masses. Just as the apartheid city remains intact, so does the apartheid mentality in which some groups see the rest as the ‘Other’. How can we speak of democratisation when people’s voting patterns reflect their ethnic bigotry and idiosyncrasies; when locals see migrants as the ‘Other’ and therefore the enemy; when people are used as bait for police dogs; and when a worker may be fed to a lion, or killed in an industrial washing machine, as has happened? I would argue that democracy is not just about the right to vote and the formulation of equitable policies, even though these are important. Democracy is also about the mind, about transforming the way we see ourselves and those around us and recognising that difference is not a threat but that it adds diversity and is what makes this country unique. It is instructive that Suttner writes about the Freedom Charter – and at this point I will add that to be fully liberated we all need to stop seeing people as groups the way apartheid did and begin seeing them as individuals, in terms of their personalities; in other words, we need to ‘de-apartheidise’ our minds.

Suttner indicates that by ‘the people’ he means the indigenous African population of South Africa. Before Mbeki’s ‘I am an African’ speech in 1999 there was no doubt who an African was, but after that it became fashionable for people to consider themselves Africans. I find this interesting, because in the past there were those who might have considered it an affront to their dignity if they were referred to as Africans. For centuries, Africans have been stripped of their resources: human resources through the Indian Ocean and trans-Atlantic slave trade; mineral resources through violent conquest, colonialism and finally apartheid; and land through appropriation, displacement and violent removals. It is interesting that we now have to debate who is an African and who is not. While identity politics continue to take centre stage, they have often been used to distract us from the real issues confronting us, which are issues of social justice and inequality – and these affect all.

In his article Suttner identifies the inclusive nature of human rights referred to in the Freedom Charter and contrasts this with the exclusivist notion that, in the democratic state, human rights have become reserved for citizens only. It is a sad indictment that after centuries of oppression the formerly oppressed should turn back and deny others the very rights they themselves were denied by the apartheid regime. Human rights, according to the United Nations Human Rights Charter, are indivisible and inalienable. Human rights are so-called because they apply to all who are considered human. Excluding certain groups from enjoying basic human rights borders on inhuman.

To sum up, Suttner’s article deals with controversial issues in a robust way and also raises important points for debate. He is certainly right that the Freedom Charter consti-
tutes part of the democratic heritage of this country. Yet so long as human rights violations such as racism, xenophobia and sexism continue, the Charter remains just one of those things that the liberators of this country wrote and did not follow up to implement the vision it encapsulates. The question I pose is, will the country continue to celebrate the Charter merely as an artefact of the past or will we begin to make it an integral part of our daily life in post-apartheid South Africa? There are no easy answers; however, there is a need to be self-critical when re-evaluating practice against the wonderfully crafted legal and policy statements that this country has produced in abundance.

**REFERENCE**