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The heritage of struggle: a dialogue with Raymond Suttner’s ancestral fidelity

Michael Neocosmos


It is very easy to be a patriot in South Africa today. All one has to do is to ‘buy South African’ or even ‘proudly’ South African, support the 99% white ‘national’ rugby team, read cheap books on ubuntu written by white experts and advocate ‘Tshwane’ rather than ‘Pretoria’ for the name of our capital city. In the meantime, whiteness and Western (liberal and neo-colonial) values are to be idealised (after all, we know this country is an island off southern Europe, or perhaps Latin America, as it has a ‘middle-ranking’ economy!) while Africa is to be seen as the place of ‘the Other’, to be ‘led’, ‘advised’, ‘developed’ and excluded when it has the temerity to actually come to this country. We are constantly told, in all seriousness, that we have a buoyant and expanding economy (and that the economic future looks rosy) when just under half of the population is said to live in poverty; a proportion which has, by all accounts, been growing and not declining since we have had all the benefits of liberal democracy. Under such circumstances, the progressive legislation enacted since 1994 seems to have benefited primarily the new Black middle-class (as well as the old White one) with the result that this new hegemonic nationalism evidently reflects that class’s interests.

A proud African nationalism – one which had caught the imagination of the whole world through its universalistic humanistic struggle against a dirty crime against humanity – seems to be gradually degenerating into a simulacrum of itself, dominated by a frankly business and neo-liberal conception of nationhood and the national interest. One sometimes wonders what is indeed ‘African’ about the leadership of the African National Congress these days. The most staggering transformation since liberation has arguably been the rate at which the African political and class leadership of this country has jettisoned its ‘Africanness’, as if there had been some kind of collective addiction to cultural skin-lighteners as part of our acceptance into the ‘civilised world’ of globalised neo-liberalism, a conception which the African people, if not always their leaderships, have heartily rejected. The worshipping of this particular golden calf has extracted a heavy toll indeed in the intellectual and cultural sphere.

It takes a number of years after independence for an intelligentsia to be sufficiently alienated from the structure of power and privilege to be able to produce a critical social analysis. Many years ago an observant intellectual had this to say about post-colonial African intellectuals in 1968:

The African Intelligentsia as a whole is far too deeply embedded in the post-colonial structures of power and privilege – or to put it another way, is as yet

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not sufficiently detached or alienated from the whole system – to be able to undertake social analysis, which could prove uncannily and uncomfortably like self-analysis. (Mohan, 1968)

There are indications that South African intellectuals may be gradually coming out of the celebration mode and taking critical thinking more seriously. Raymond Suttner’s paper and his work generally is part of this process and he is to be commended, as he has never been afraid of critical analysis in this sense; an analysis that necessarily becomes self-analysis, as he was a member of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and African National Congress (ANC) leaderships himself. This is also important because Suttner is a political figure with a long history of struggle. His analyses therefore become doubly significant, as pieces of scholarly work and as political statements by a committed activist. It is in this context, then, that reading Suttner provides one with a sense of relief that all is not lost. There are apparently still some people within the intricate corridors of the ANC who are still capable of thinking along the lines of a tradition which had been its guiding light: a tradition of openness, especially to the travails and cultural experiences of ordinary people, the famous or infamous ‘masses’ in whose name the most beautiful acts of humanity as well as some of the most barbaric ones have been committed.

Suttner personifies the former, that commitment to humanity and the liberatory traditions of his organisation. His personal experience of prison reminds us that, unlike the situation today, it was not easy to be a patriot under apartheid. It was a time when not only personal courage but critical political thought was required in order to make decisions about what kind of politics to engage in. Moreover, such politics had to be undertaken in a way that did not make one lose one’s humanity by turning one into a machine, and hence today into an unthinking bureaucrat and/or accumulating zombie, as so many have become. Suttner – unlike most of the leadership of his organisation today, it seems – has actually carried on thinking critically into the present. The way he has done this, I suggest, is by remaining faithful to the emancipatory ideals of the organisation which he joined in his youth. This is not an easy task: it requires much resolve in the face of ‘sugar-coated bullets’ (as Mao used to say) and the growing cynicism and appeals to the practical exigencies of state administration through which one can justify one’s ‘deployment’ into lucrative positions. Practice easily collapses into state practice under notions of ‘the duty to lead the people’ or a morality to ‘govern the country’. In this way the allure of power is easily justified. Suttner has so far been able to resist this, with beneficial results for critical thought in this country.

The context of his current thinking has been the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Charter, the core document without which it is impossible to understand the mode of politics behind the national liberation struggle in South Africa. The document has been so forgotten in its spirit as well as its form since the 1980s that even the national party – the architect of apartheid – saw fit to adhere to it, clearly for totally opportunistic reasons, some time last year. Not many blushes were seen on the faces of the ANC leadership when this happened. Perhaps, as the masses say, this is because they have become ‘coconuts’ – black on the outside, white on the inside, an observation which shows that even Fanon’s formulations (‘Black Skin White Masks’) can be reinvented by popular culture. Here, Suttner is attempting to re-engage with the ideas of the political heritage of those ancestors who struggled against oppression in this country in all its complex multifaceted forms. The tradition to which he is faithful then is the popular-democratic one which had provided the thinking behind the emancipatory vision of the ANC, expressed in the popular vision of the Freedom Charter and realised especially...
during the mid-1980s within the mass movement led by the UDF. In order to comment on Suttner’s fidelity I will briefly discuss a few points related to his concerns about the Freedom Charter (FC) itself, the idea of democracy, culture and knowledge, and the character of the nation. My comments will be both appreciative and critical.

Suttner emphasises the universalistic references of the FC throughout, a point which is very important. He also recognises that the ideas of the charter were often the excuse for excesses committed against those who did not agree with it; an admission which is important and which in fact shows that there is a distinction to be drawn between a democratic ideal and its imposition through force, something which state politics today throughout the world has not yet understood. The FC was a flag in the 1980s and not all could be persuaded to fly it.

Yet the idea of freedom which the FC embodied did have a universal significance not captured in other documents. There is, to my mind, a difficulty in comparing the FC with the current constitution as Suttner does (p. 5). The constitution is a legal state document, one moreover which is firmly founded on the liberal tradition. The FC, on the other hand, was not a legal or state document. It was popularly canvassed but, more than this, it was not a Human Rights document. In fact the expression ‘human rights’ occurs only once, while the term ‘right’ or ‘rights’ occurs 15 times. The point is simply that the document was not written-up as part of contemporary ‘human rights discourse’, it does not make pleas to a state agency (e.g. the judiciary) to defend those rights; rather it asserts and prescribes to the state: ‘South Africa belongs to all who live in it’, ‘the People Shall Govern’ and so on. These prescriptions to the state are assertions of rights to be fought for, not pleas for human rights to be conferred by one or other state agency. As Suttner rightly points out (p. 11), the struggle was never a mere ‘civil rights movement’ which restricted itself to asking for inclusion in an existing system (a mere extension of the franchise) but a revolutionary one. The FC thus ends with the statement that ‘these freedoms will be fought for...’. In other words, this is a truly political document and not a legal one, as Suttner indeed recognises (p. 5). I do not think it can be compared with the constitution, without mentioning in the same breath that the FC could only be actualised by a popular-democratic politics. On the other hand, a constitution is ultimately actualised by the state and its agencies: particularly, but not exclusively in our case, by the constitutional court. The distinction is crucial because it points to precisely the different forms of politics that Suttner is keen to point to.

Of course, I am not maintaining that a constitution is unwelcome; only that it interpellates its audience (the people) as legal agents, while the Freedom Charter interpellated them as political agents. There is a world of difference, and it is precisely the latter – political agency – which needs to be recaptured in post-apartheid South Africa. The existence of a universal franchise since 1994 has thus not meant emancipation in the language of the Freedom Charter and, apart from anything else, it cannot be suggested with any stretch of the imagination that the people (however conceived) are governing; only a narrow elite is doing so. This is common to all liberal democratic political systems. Suttner is concerned here to insist on the importance of the popular-democratic stream of politics from which the FC emanates and to stress that without this kind of politics ‘governability, democratic rule and constitutionalism’ (p. 7) would not have been possible. The FC is part of a heritage which ‘is tied to a [popular] democratic stream in South African politics... not the history of the oppressors or of the elites’ (p. 8, emphasis in original). This suggests, although Suttner does not mention this explicitly,
that several forms of democracy are possible and that the current ‘representative’ or ‘liberal’ type is not the only one. We should therefore cease to refer to ‘democracy’ without qualification, for to do so silences a debate on what democracy is and what it means today for the majority, including those who show their discontent by not registering or not voting at elections. This popular democratic stream is one for which people are political agents, full participants in their own liberation – as the FC makes clear – not passive recipients of state ‘delivery’ which, however useful its provisions – and there is no denying this – can only encourage a passive citizenship. Hence popular democracy tends to emphasise struggle, while representative democracy emphasises passivity. In insisting on ‘delivery’, there is a certain ‘fear of the masses’ felt by intellectuals as well as by ruling elites (pp. 7–8). These points are crucial and link up with Suttner’s interests in popular – hence in our case mainly African – culture. The marginalisation of what Foucault has called ‘subjugated knowledges’ among the people is what Suttner rightly deplores, especially given the fact that any conception of the nation has to be founded on such popular culture (pp. 15–16). The concept of ‘ubuntu [must not be handed over] to the business entrepreneurs’ as it has a meaning which embodies a universal notion of brotherhood (p. 18).

Finally, the construction of a nation can also be problematic, not only because it must be inclusive along the lines of the FC so that rights cannot be restricted to citizens (p. 17) but also, Suttner stresses, because ‘the liberation movement depicts itself as a proto-state’ with the result that popular nationalism may be transformed into state nationalism (p. 24). The difficulty here for me is that by referring to a political organisation, the ANC, as a ‘movement’ which is by its very nature ‘national’, are we not in danger precisely of contributing to the identification of the organisation with the nation and the state? Surely the ANC is now a political party like any other, and as such it has sectional interests like any other, and indeed it attempts to dominate thinking like any other party. Nevertheless, Suttner is absolutely right to insist that such formulations mean that there tends to be exclusion of [popular?] politics and contestation both ‘inside and outside the liberation movement’ (p. 24), with the result that there is from the perspective of the dominant party ‘a legacy of suspicion of pluralism’ (p. 24). Moreover, Suttner insists that such pluralism must be understood in a particular way, something which I feel is particularly encouraging. Rather than restricting this notion to a liberal notion of ‘multi-partyism’, Suttner notes that organisations on the left of the ANC should be encouraged to form even if they are independent of the ANC and should not be dismissed with hostility as ‘ultra-leftist’ (p. 25); ‘the ANC and the state, where they disagree, can then engage and debate with such formations’ (p. 25).

Such a conception is absolutely crucial, for if one is to revive the transition process towards democracy – i.e. if such democracy is not to be understood as already attained, but that emancipation of all, along the lines of the FC, is yet to be reached – then we need to think of a set of political relations which will help to propel us forward. Where is such propulsion to come from? From the pro-business ideology of the ‘Democratic Alliance’ and others, or from popularly based organisations? Encouraging the development of independent popular organisations which can remind the ANC of its popular-democratic traditions and hence contest and debate its path should be not only tolerated but encouraged. Of course, some of these organisations often still adhere to insurrectionary-type politics, simply because they themselves – like the ANC itself – have not been able to shed their vanguardist and statist baggage. What is clear is that without the shedding of such baggage, Suttner tells us, the democratic struggle cannot move forward. Perhaps
in this way fidelity to an emancipatory project can be actualised today. This is surely worth debating.

REFERENCE