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Creating a culture of democracy and debate: response to Ndinda and Neocosmos

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I appreciate *Development Southern Africa* opening up and encouraging debate around some of the issues that I raised in my recent article in this journal (Suttner, 2006). Both Neocosmos (2006) and Ndinda (2006) provide challenging responses. What I wrote was not intended as a finished product, but part of a process of grappling with intellectual questions to which I still do not have adequate answers. Their responses certainly help realise these goals. The existing literature in South Africa has in many respects not adequately addressed or given inadequate answers to these questions relating to the nation, gender, democracy and knowledge, among others. My article was aimed at opening up debate and it is evident that a culture of debate has not been adequately entrenched within our country. The type of engagement that we are having in this journal can only help to open up serious discussion on issues of public concern.

Ndinda and I have concerns that converge in ensuring that a feminist project does not become submerged or displaced by national liberation, and since my original contribution there have been discouraging signs that make it even more urgent to pursue this quest. (See discussion of the trial of ANC Deputy President, Jacob Zuma, below.) But despite this common goal, there is a distinction that I am making which I may have expressed in a manner that Ndinda reads differently from my intention. She appears to be equating my opposition to dichotomies with an unwillingness to recognise differences (Ndinda, 2006: 327–8). On the contrary, it is crucial that we acknowledge differences, especially in the notions of feminism and liberation.

At the same time, recognising differences does not presuppose how the relationship between the different, although overlapping, concepts and struggles plays itself out. My objection to the use of dichotomies, or binary opposites, is that it poses two phenomena as inevitably standing in an antagonistic relationship. Now, the relationship between feminism and nationalism is sometimes a constructive one, where a liberation struggle plays some role in ensuring gender equality as has happened, despite some problems, in South Africa. This is something that may not have occurred anywhere else on the continent. But in South Africa there have been areas of substantial convergence between feminist struggles and the liberation struggle, and that is why one cannot see the difference between the two as inevitably entailing a dichotomous relationship (see Ndinda, 2006: 327–8; Suttner, 2006: 4–5 for evidence of differences in emphases, despite shared goals).

My reason for opposing dichotomies is that they are deployed by a variety of mainly conservative writers in various contexts and forms which see the relationship between phenomena as constituting antagonistic relationships, and there is an infinite range of...

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such dichotomies, for example democracy and nationalism. Such writers see nationalism as leading by inexorable logic to the suppression of democracy. Another is reason (presumed to be an attribute of man) and emotion (presumed to be the special realm of women). The main fear I have is that by posing the relationship between different phenomena in this way one is over-simplifying what are very complex problems and, by posing them as antagonistic to each other, preventing a thorough analysis of what their relationship entails, one that may entail a variety of permutations.

While I appreciate Ndinda’s desire to highlight and not lose sight of the distinct quality of feminist demands that desire is not, I believe, served by using dichotomies. In fact, the overwhelming body of feminist literature appears to see greater dangers in posing problems through dichotomous thinking than through many other epistemological processes. (See, for example, Andermahr et al., 2000: 21–22; Code, 2000: 44, 135; Humm, 1995: 22–23; Nagl-Docekal, 2004: 21, 118, 121; Bryson, 2003: 150, 234, 235, 236–7, 241–2, 245, 247; Hughes, 2002: 77, 119, 127, 150, 154, 173; Cranny-Francis et al., 2003: 1, 4, 183, 197.) By rejecting dichotomies one is not denying differences.

What I am arguing, therefore, is that we need to engage not only with what is different but with what links phenomena and the diverse character that such linkages may take. With regard to feminism and nationalism, Ndinda and I agree that we need to engage in a project that ensures feminism is not subsumed or dissolved within any nationalist programme. In the course of engaging in the South African liberation struggle women secured certain feminist demands, many of which are now constitutionally entrenched. This is not to suggest that they are adequately safeguarded, and the recent discussion of the Zuma case and the reaction of certain organisations has, I think, been a setback to feminist demands, especially in relation to gender violence. (Jacob Zuma, formerly Deputy President of the country, now still Deputy President of the ANC, was acquitted on a rape charge. In the course of his defence, the ‘sexual history’ of the complainant was probed, revealing a history of traumatic experiences. The objective was said to be to demonstrate that she was a ‘serial rape accuser’. Outside the court, Zuma supporters amassed on a daily basis. At one stage they burnt an image of the complainant. At other times they incited supporters to attack individuals who had publicly supported the complainant.)

But the objection against framing such problems within dichotomies is that it implies that one of the opposites, usually associated with the male, is superior to the other.

Binaries (also known as dichotomies) are common in Western social and political thought and reflect the fundamental dichotomy male/female. The first term in any binary (‘man’) is usually seen as positive and superior to the other term (‘woman’) but to depend on the second term for its meaning: for example, male/female, culture/nature, active/passive. (Humm, 1995: 22)

This use of binaries has implications for what one uncovers, which I believe is thereby impeded. When one is locked into the notion of opposites, one erects barriers that hinder the discovery of relationships which may not tally with such a characterisation and which may reveal characteristics that are more complex. The notion itself is antithetical in most cases to posing relationships in a way that is advantageous to those who are the weaker party and wish to secure rights.

The possibility that feminist goals are generally not met in nationalist struggles was not specifically addressed by me, although Ndinda warns of such a danger (2006: 328). Some
writers regard it as a law of history that women who engage in such struggles tend to be returned to the kitchen after liberation (see Ranchod-Nilsson, 2000). There are many examples of this in fact happening, besides those to which Ndinda refers. But what may have been the case historically or predominantly so does not make it an invariable outcome for now or the future that gender struggles and nationalist struggles must be in opposition to each other.

In South Africa, Cherryl Walker is a pioneering historian of women’s struggles, yet by the use of such dichotomous characterisations she makes it impossible to understand the dynamics of an important period of history in general, quite apart from feminist questions. She writes:

In the early 1980s progressive politics were the politics of resistance-urgent, often heroic, but essentially oppositional, attuned to the past rather than the future. (Walker, 1991: ix)

The assumption made here is that progressive politics cannot simultaneously encapsulate achievements of the past and visions of the future; that is, they must be binary opposites. In talking about ‘the past rather than the future’ (further evidence of the dichotomous thinking which suffuses her work), Walker is presumably referring to the United Democratic Front (UDF)’s drawing inspiration from the politics of the 1950s, including the Freedom Charter. But far from these being opposites that are irreconcilable, they represented components of a vision that drew on the past as well as creating embryonic visions of a future that in fact goes beyond what we find in present-day South Africa.

While claiming inspiration from the Freedom Charter, activists in the period of popular power in the 1980s developed structures with meanings and implications for democracy that had never been seen before (Neocosmos, 1998; Suttner, 2004, 2005). At the same time, in line with Marx’s description in The Eighteenth Brumaire, while doing what was new the activists often dressed themselves in the garb of the 1950s, legitimating their every action or most actions by reference to what had been said or done by the African National Congress (ANC)-led liberation movement, to whom they deferred (Marx, 1984: 10; Suttner, 2005: 70).

The narrower context within which Ndinda raises the relationship between feminist and broader nationalist demands remains contested. The Zuma case demonstrated such contestation especially in so far as it starkly revealed the attempts of Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and South African Communist Party (SACP) leaders to obscure the gender violence issue by focusing on the wider issue of whether there was some conspiracy or other against Zuma. The silence over Zuma’s mode of defence, which was to attack the complainant as a human being, was a condoning of sexist stereotypes. That there was considerable debate as well as threats and abusive behaviour indicates that it is not an issue that has been resolved, but that the feminist struggle and its relationship to the character of our democracy remains to be settled. It will not be decided by decree or by dogma, saying that the issue of feminism is already settled or that it will definitely be sidelined by nationalist objectives. I should think that both Ndinda and I may agree more than we disagree on that.

With regard to Ndinda’s reference to heritage and the continued presence of sites commemorating those who conquered the black people of this country, it seems again that one is dealing with ‘work in progress’. Very soon after the inauguration of the first democratic parliament, a statue of Dr Verwoerd was wrapped in something akin to plaster of Paris and stored in some vault. Similarly, a huge mural of a Nationalist Party cabinet
meeting has somehow been removed from a dining room in the Parliament building in Cape Town. In all such cases, as indicated in my original article in this journal (Suttner, 2006), there is a dilemma. That certain events, atrocities of various kinds, happened is part of our history. We want people to know about them and in some cases removal of the evidence may not serve that purpose. I believe that certain heritage workers have instead opted for leaving the sites in place but arranged that they be contextualised in such a manner that people today will understand what happened against the backdrop of the democracy that has, we hope, ensured that such things will never happen again.

In referring to my interpretation of the Charter, Ndinda advocates recognising differences but then says ‘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’ (Ndinda, 2006: 329). Now, I think that Ndinda needs to consider precisely how one can simultaneously wish to have difference respected but only see people as individuals? We need to recognise that people relate as groups of various kinds and it is only when ethnicity is politicised in a divisive way that it is a problem. For people to act together as a group is part of their cultural rights, whether religious or other. We need to monitor such formations and see whether or not they contribute towards marginalisation or harmonious coexistence of the various peoples who inhabit this land.

Ndinda makes the interesting observation that there is now a clamour among all sections of the population to be regarded as African. It was not so long ago that whites referred to themselves as Europeans. This appropriation of things African can be seen in the Nguni word *ubuntu*, which is known to have resonance with people. The original meaning relates to mutual dependence in order to realise the self. But it has been taken over by business operations with such names as Ubuntu Armed Response, Ubuntu Financial Services and many others, as South African telephone directories reveal.

Neocosmos tackles my article by pointing out some theoretical differences, some of which I accept as enriching the argument I was making. He takes issue with my comparison of the Freedom Charter (FC) with the Constitution, the former being a popularly created document and the latter a legal one. He relates this to a distinction between rights that are claimed by the people and human rights which require the agency of the state for their realisation (Neocosmos, 2006: 323). This is part of a broader trend in Neocosmos’s continued and very original contributions to democratic debate: a repeated but partly ambiguous attempt to base rights and democracy, primarily or by possible interpretation, almost exclusively outside the state. That is why he has previously written, correctly, of the distinction between popular nationalism, manifested in the UDF period, and state nationalism, where the popular will becomes subsumed within the state, which represents the people, instead of the people themselves acting (Neocosmos, 1998).

I am completely in sympathy with the broader framework within which Neocosmos’s work is located, which sees democracy in its original meaning, as people acting and claiming rights directly and not through any agency doing things on their behalf (see e.g. Arblaster, 2002; Holden, 2006: 146). However, does the term ‘human rights’ only have the connotation Neocosmos gives to it, when he says the Freedom Charter ‘was not a Human Rights document’ (Neocosmos, 2006: 323)? He refers to the Charter not making pleas to state agencies, asserting and prescribing to the state. I agree with him that the Charter can only be ‘actualised by a popular-democratic politics’ (Neocosmos,
2006: 323); but he continues by counterposing this to the presence of the state: ‘On the other hand, a constitution is ultimately actualised by the state and its agencies...’ (Neocosmos, 2006: 323). I accept that I may not have adequately distinguished the origins of the Charter from those of legal documents and institutions. However, to say that it is to be realised through popular democratic means does not mean that the state is irrelevant, and it is not clear whether or not Neocosmos is seeking to displace the state as a central factor in realising democracy.

We are not in ancient Athens, where everyone (who qualified) participated immediately in everything. Specialised institutions are needed for the actualisation of certain rights. The punishment of offenders in the manner prescribed by the Charter has to be realised through the state. Neocosmos is, however, ambiguous about the relationship between the popular demand that must always be there and reinterpreted as conditions change and how this demand impacts on the state. But the state also needs to be on the scene for execution. The difference between the 1950s, the 1980s and today is that the proponents of the Charter now have a democratically elected state, whatever its imperfections. It is their job to interact with that state in order to ensure that the most popular and democratic way of realising their rights is achieved. Personally, I do not attach any stigma to the term ‘human rights’ nor to the state per se. I am not sure that it is Neocosmos’s intention to jettison the state, but it is a possible implication of the views he expresses.

I agree with his distinction between legal and political agents and that political agency needs to be reinserted. The emphasis on delivery has tended to turn us into spectators, rather than political actors. We are in agreement on the blanket term ‘democracy’ being wrongly equated with representative democracy. The problem that is not addressed by either of us is exactly how an interface can be created between popular direct democracy and the representative democracy that is now in place. In the oppositional period of the 1980s it was very clear that organs of popular power, despite some abuses, acted with their own authority and acted directly in accordance with the original meaning of democracy (cf. Arblaster, 2002). Now, solving that problem is a broader issue than driving the interpretation of the Charter. Reading between Neocosmos’s lines, one may see that a popular impact on the meaning to be given to rights is there, but implicitly executed by the state. That is not, in my view popular or direct democracy, but participatory democracy. By that I mean an interaction with the processes of the state realising certain rights for people. That is not the same as the people doing things directly themselves; and that, as indicated, is the original meaning of the word ‘democracy’. Representative democracy is a later adaptation of the idea or a corruption, in so far as it is equated with democracy per se (see Arblaster, 2002).

In South Africa there are contemporary examples of direct democracy in the area of crime, where street committees continue to exist or have been established recently, possibly for wider reasons in some places, but in Yeoville, Johannesburg, in order to combat crime. These are people who receive inadequate protection from the police and cannot afford the services of armed response companies. Consequently, independently of the state, but not in an oppositional manner, which was the character of the 1980s intervention, they have taken upon themselves an element of the policing function.

Neocosmos uses the word ‘emancipatory’ to describe the project to which he adheres and this word is important in that it implies joining the original popular aspirations to their mode of realisation. Our task is to probe whether or not acting in one or other way on the part of the masses or the state is emancipatory. This is a task which has a particular
salience at the time of writing: only weeks after Jacob Zuma’s acquittal on the rape charge. The actions surrounding the case and subsequent to the case have revealed deep intolerance and even threats to those holding perfectly lawful views, positions on gender equality that may be completely in line with those of the current constitution and the emancipatory goals to which the ANC, COSATU and SACP profess to adhere.

From the threats and other attempts at silencing on the part of some of the Zuma supporters, whatever the merits of their claims of a conspiracy, it is clear that a culture of debate and democracy has not yet become rooted in this country. We may have some of the most advanced constitutional and democratic institutions in the world, yet that does not mean that democratic values are borne within the consciousness of our populace.

It seems that instilling these values throughout our society is part of the work of popular democracy and it is only at the mass, popular level that this can be achieved, at the level of the very people who have displayed great intolerance. This is a job that has to be undertaken also by the state and the ruling organisation, the ANC. But the main place of such work is in the popular space, a space that needs to be reopened and which should embody the emancipatory values for which so many fought and died.

REFERENCES

