Cahiers d'études africaines

The Sublime Object of Blackness

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I want to identify and name here a certain discursive mechanism that pertains to the notion of Blackness. This term is increasingly detached from its historical referents (notions of oppression, alienation and exploitation) to refer to a *sublime* object that has the form of the Sadeian victim: a corpse that endures all torments and survives with its beauty immaculate[1]. Now, the accomplice of this mechanism is a dangerous, nationalist politics: irrespective of what government does or does not do it is found sublimely beautiful and pristine.

Let us start with a paradox of two terms: non-racialism and Blackness. The struggle against apartheid was largely, if not loosely, waged in the name of "non-racialism". The struggle against apartheid was waged in the name of a Black people. Now, if these terms were reconciled during the 1980's (Black struggle and Non-Racial struggle) by way of a third term: National Democratic Revolution, today Blackness is more and more spinning out of the symbolic fields that once gave it meaning in South Africa. This is in part a sign of the times: the crisis of the theory of National Democratic Revolution and the declining influence of its political repertoire. Simply put, Blackness is less and less referenced to National Democratic Revolution. But nor does this mean that National Democratic Revolution has finally been trumped by another always powerful political stream: Black Consciousness. In other words, and despite appearances, we are not simply witnessing notions of Blackness increasingly referenced to Biko rather than to Marx. The meaning of Blackness, and with it the meaning of apartheid, the identity of the anti-apartheid struggle and the legitimate form of the post-apartheid state, is increasingly referenced to a third register. It does not yet have a name, but let us call it Nation Building (NB). What being Black means today is increasingly linked to the production of the South African *nation*. What this means is that Blackness has three, competing, sociological referents: the working-class and the poor (National Democratic Revolution), those evidencing a certain psychological condition (Black Consciousness) and most ominously, *patriots* of the South African state (Nation-Building)! We will see that the politics of Nation-Building borrows

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1. This metaphor comes from ZIZEK (1992).

terms and phrases from both National Democratic Revolution and Black Consciousness, combines them, and references them to a new object: not Democracy, not Socialism, not Black Liberation but *National* Sovereignty. Unless we recognise that there is a profoundly new articulation of Blackness today we are in danger of not being able properly to evaluate its politics. In other words, we are in danger of misrecognising its real aim for those of Black Liberation, Democracy or even Socialism. Here is the paradox: what looks like a politics intending equality or empowerment, etc., is really about consolidating National Sovereignty. That is, the measure of NB is not the degree to which people have been freed from poverty, from exploitation, from psychological alienation, but the degree to which authentic representatives of the Nation are in power. Simply put: democracy and poverty-relief, etc., are, at best, only valued to the extent that they help achieve National Sovereignty. It is in this context that I suggest we locate the current debate around race.

Before continuing let me make briefly a methodological point. This is important so that this paper is understood for what it is. Now, there are two ways of going about trying to make the argument above. The first is what we can call a sociological approach. It might demonstrate that despite the speeches and the documents, the current government is less involved in poverty relief, in empowerment, in community participation, etc., than it is in consolidating party control over state institutions. Even if these are not exactly their conclusions, such a sociological approach is what we find in the work of, for example, Hein Marais, Patrick Bond and Patrick Heller. This is not how the argument will proceed here. Instead I want to demonstrate that these activities are premised on a certain political *logic,* on certain theoretical premises that are combined and articulated in a very particular way. In this regard, I do not want simply to describe certain empirical processes and to reach conclusions. I want to show how these "facts" betray a certain theoretical logic. Now, in excavating this discursive mechanism we need be clear what is meant here by *National* Sovereignty. It is important, therefore, that we enter a conceptual distinction. It concerns the difference between National and State Sovereignty. Now, I do not intend *State* Sovereignty. If the latter refers to processes and mechanisms that grant state institutions effectiveness on the ground, that is, enable them to govern, National Sovereignty refers to the control of state institutions by *authentic* representatives of the Nation. This, irrespective of whether or not they are able effectively to operate the "levers of state". In this regard I will make the following claims:

Premise One: Nationalism supposes an Authentic National Community.

Premise Two: National Sovereignty is realised when the Authentic National Community controls the state.

Argument One: If the Nation is composed of Blacks, then the Nation is Sovereign when Blacks control the state.

Argument Two: If Blacks are defined as the poor/the working class/the ANC/those people supportive of President Mbeki, then the Nation State is Sovereign when the poor/the working class/the ANC/supporters of Mbeki control State institutions.

Before continuing let us note too that we are not necessarily discussing citizenship. The hypothesis above does not speak to the relationship between the State and citizens, to rights and so on. It is not a question here of *access* to the political community (who is a South African citizen? what rights does citizenship grant? what responsibilities does it imply? how is it exercised/expressed?). An Authentic National Community is merely that group deemed the veritable bearer of the national mission; whatever it may be. Democracy. Socialism. Nationalism. In other words, a distinction must be entered between a citizen and an authentic national subject. So, even if citizenship is founded on principles of human rights, equality and so on, Nation-Building would have us say that there are those amongst the citizens who more authentically bear the national mission than others. What we are discussing here, essentially, is the *nature of legitimate authority*. Who, in other words is a legitimate bearer of state power in the nation? This is how I want to discuss the notion of Blackness. To capture the full force of the change that is upon us, it is useful briefly to discuss Blackness as defined in and through the politics of Black Consciousness and National Democratic Revolution respectively. It is to this that I now turn.

Being Black in Consciousness

What did it mean to be Black? This, in essence, was the question posed by black writers and intellectuals of the 1970's. And their response was that it was a certain kind of experience, and in particular a peculiar type of suffering:

"We as black people are all oppressed, landless and at the mercy of the government. So how can we as black people be different from one another? It is called a Black Experience" (Matlou cited in Sole 1993: 74).

Now, what exactly was this experience that defined being Black? Or rather, what was the nature of this suffering? If previous explanations of apartheid stressed oppression, material lack and exploitation, what was innovative about Black Consciousness was that it analysed racial domination as a psychological experience; a "spiritual poverty" that "emasculated" and "passified" black persons. At the heart of apartheid was an anti-humanism that reduced the "black man to a man only in form". "All in all the black man has become a shell, a shadow of a man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity" (Biko 1996: 29). Black Consciousness as a form of "psychotherapy" intended to treat these symptoms. In this regard cure came from

"showing the black people the value of their own standards and outlook" (*ibid.:* 31).   In so doing it intended to "make the black man come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity".   The "truth" of apartheid was thus a primitive alienation that estranged the black man from himself.   Black Consciousness thus emphasised the positive elements of African history and culture as a condition of psychological synthesis and political re-awakening.   Now, if Blacks suffered, not simply exploitation and oppression, but from a peculiar form of psychic alienation, then a struggle against racist institutions and practices could never be enough for Black Liberation.   What was needed, in addition, was a politics of psychological self-affirmation.   Now, if Black Liberation was simply about freedom from a host of material conditions (exploitation, institutional racism and so on) then such a politics did not necessarily exclude alliances with other groups interested in the same or similar things (Communists, Liberals, religious groups).   The moment it was conceived as a kind of therapy, a cure for alienation, it excluded such alliances.   It required that Blacks were the unique authors of their freedom as a condition of psychic health.   In this regard, Steve Biko (*ibid.:* 90) famously argued:

"The basic problem in South Africa has been analysed by liberal whites as being apartheid.   They argue that in order to oppose it we have to form non-racial groups...   For the liberals, the thesis is apartheid, the anti-thesis is non-racialism... Black Consciousness defines the situation differently.   The thesis is in fact a strong white racism and therefore the antithesis must *ipso facto* be a strong solidarity amongst blacks..."

This notion of politics, however, was frought with ambiguity.   This arose from a slippage between the psychoanalytic model and Biko's reading of Hegel.   The dialectical principles were premised on a notion of white homogeneity that required their negative: black unity.   Black Consciousness authors were thus at pains to describe and emphasise the shared circumstances of black people that issued a common interest in "black" liberation. If this implied, however, that these political interests (in liberation, etc.) arose directly from experience, the psychoanalytic model suggested otherwise.

The centre-piece of the black experience was for Biko a psychological alienation that was the cause of political immobilisation.   In other words, experience yielded not knowledge of one's political interests but rather, political acquiescence: feelings of inferiority, helplessness, intimidation. This was the implicit vacillation at the heart of Black Consciousness.   The moment Black Consciousness directed political action to the institutions of White racism, it hesitated before cultural programmes intending psychological affirmation.   This was manifest in its failure to build durable *political* organisations.   The case in point was Black Consciousness's approach to trade-unionism.   When Black Consciousness activists did engage workers they tended to stress leadership, recreational programmes, black dignity and so on.   Conspicuously absent from their early rhetoric were the notions of

class and exploitation. Black Consciousness thus resonated less and less with the growing tide of trade-unionism after 1973, informed as it was by various readings of Marx and Lenin. As the labour movement began to have a greater presence in South African politics the term Black was invested with a new "experiential" referent: that of racial capitalist exploitation. Now, before continuing let us note what was the measure of Black Consciousness politics: freedom was, in the first place, the degree to which racial oppression was defeated as the elementary condition of *Black psychic health*. But such an understanding of apartheid was never coupled to a concept of the post-apartheid state. What was not theorised, in other words, was Black Liberation as a *state* project; that is, as a politics intending a certain kind of Black state. Indeed, it was precisely this lacunae (both theoretical and political) that allowed some rapprochement between Black Consciousness (as a politics, if not as a movement) and the politics of National Democratic Revolution. Without its own concept of state, Black Consciousness was often (especially within the ANC), and still is, invoked to animate National Democratic Revolution. After all, the latter seemed to address the first condition of Black Liberation: the end of apartheid. This point has been made by Xolela Mangcu, though in a different context. He has argued that the current stress on "material" redress in the planning and building of the "post-apartheid" city fails to deal with what is the fundamental legacy of apartheid: alienation (Mangcu 1999: 1-22). Hence his concern that as much emphasis should be on cultural centres, theatres and so on, in transforming the apartheid urban form, as on services and housing. In effect, he suggests, the current politics of redress is premised on a mistaken reading of what apartheid was and, therefore, of how to deal with its legacy. Black Liberation was not a question of bricks and mortar! All that they had in common ultimately, National Democratic Revolution and Black Consciousness, was a common interest in the defeat of apartheid. To the questions: what was the fundamental effect of apartheid, and what was needed to reverse its legacy, Black Consciousness and the theory of National Democratic Revolution answered in different tongues.

Being Black in the Theory of National Democratic Revolution

The rise of organised black workers from the 1970's onwards saw also the growing political and theoretical importance of the theory of National Democratic Revolution. In this regard, trade-union leaders, activists and intellectuals complained that the Black Consciousness experience failed to capture the critical experience of workers: exploitation. Like the Black Consciousness literature above, being Black was referenced to a shared or

common experience of apartheid. If the Black Consciousness literati, however, emphasised its racial and psychological experience, National Democratic Revolution defined it differently. Apartheid was not simply a racial system. It was rather, and in addition, a system of racial *capitalism.*

"One of the peculiarities of the South African society", wrote Cronin & Suttner (1986: 129), "is that written into its structure is this systematic national oppression of all the blacks. It is one of the factors that facilitates capitalist exploitation in South Africa. National oppression and capitalist exploitation are inextricably interlinked". As a result, they continue, "a programme to end racial oppression in South Africa has to attack the key power centres of capitalism with which racial oppression is interlocked" (*ibid.:* 129).

This reading drew heavily from Lenin's analysis of imperialism and colonialism. In the *Road to South African Freedom,* the SACP's politico-strategic document of 1963, "white South Africa" was identified with an advanced stage of monopoly capitalism. The argument is well known and it will not be rehearsed here. Suffice it to say that on Lenin's analysis the capitalist state was driven to deprive political autonomy from other "peoples and countries" in order to extract superprofits via the exploitation of two proletariats. In this regard, South African social relations resembled colonial relations because a certain category of agents were not only exploited but had lost their political autonomy too. What distinguished South African colonialism from the classical model was the presence of the colonisers (white South Africans) and the colonised (the "non-white" majority) within a common political territory. South Africa was thus a colonial society "of a special type".

Now, given that imperial capitalism produced a form of *national* domination (domination of one people over another), class relations were experienced as something else: in this case as racism. Racial oppression in South Africa, argued Cronin & Suttner (1986), effected all black persons irrespective of class. As a result "...traders, small farmers and petty manufacturers are nationally oppressed by Group Areas, and other forms of racial discrimination... These middle elements, and not just those among them who are black, are themselves in the thrall of the big monopolies who are squeezing them... [As a result] the nationalisation of monopoly industry, banks and other financial institutions speaks not only to the interests of the workers, but is also aimed at all others who are dominated by the monopolies..." (Cronin & Suttner 1986: 178-179). The local bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie thus shared with the working class and interest in defeating imperial, monopoly capital. This made possible a class alliance that would struggle for national democracy through national liberation.

Now, let us note: National Liberation was not Black Liberation. Indeed, they implied quite different notions of freedom. The first suggested that the defeat of apartheid was the elementary condition of liberating *classes* from exploitation. In the second, as we have seen, Black Liberation was

a politics of psychological healing. Simply put, if the theory of National Democratic Revolution used Black as the description of social *position;* that is, a position in the South African national-class structure (the poor), Black Consciousness invoked the term to describe a psychological *condition:* a person dehumanised by racial oppression. Even if the state was not always formally conceptualised (the case of Black Consciousness), the measure of a post-apartheid state was never simply the extent to which the old one was removed and a new one put in its place. It was always the extent to which either the poor/the working class were freed from poverty/economic exploitation or the degree to which Blacks recovered their humanity.

Now, a peculiar displacement is currently taking place. The theory of National Democratic Revolution and Black Consciousness are both invoked today to support a state project that nominally intends National Liberation or Black Liberation. Or rather, the measure of a politics intending the liberation of Blacks (understood in either way) is no longer the degree to which they are economically or psychologically emancipated, but the degree to which the Nation is in power! Here the measure of the post-apartheid state is not Black or National Liberation, but the extent to which *authentic Black people are in power—irrespective of their effectiveness with regard to Black Liberation or National Liberation*. In this regard, the current political project only resembles these other two in so far as the creation of the new Power involves defeating White racism, sometimes attending to the worst visible signs of poverty, making concessions to the organised working-class (less and less!), promoting a Black bourgeoisie and emphasising the worth of Black culture. The value of these ambitions, however, is more and more indexed to their *contribution to National Sovereignty*. Now, the situation is not as absolute as the statement before might imply. This is precisely the state-of-play in South African politics today; that diverse projects compete, merge, contradict each other throughout the state. A local government in one place takes seriously working with "communities". In another the emphasis is on "efficient and effective" delivery—usually an euphemism for paying lip service to consultation and using private contractors and consultants to do the job at hand. Certainly there is complexity; but this should not prevent us from stating what is a profoundly new political logic.

We are fortunate to have an excellent short-cut to the argument above. It is a recent advertisement that, in the way it combines terms, is a clear statement of what I have called the politics of Nation Building.

Being Black Today?

What to make of "The Media vs President T.M Mbeki", an advertisement placed in the *Sunday Times* on the 6 May 2001? There Ashley Mabogoane, Jabu Mabuza, Pearl Mashabela, Prof. Sam Mokgokong, Kgomotso Moroka, Don Ncube, Ndaba Ntsele, Christine Qunta, Mfundi Vundla, Peter Vundla

and Sindiwe Zilwa, accused the media of providing a platform for a right-wing conspiracy to subvert South African democracy! They cautioned the President not to "be distracted by the current campaign against you", and add, certainly a missive against a Mail and Guardian editorial, that "under [Mbeki's] leadership we have the best government this country has ever had". Finally, they advise the President to "go ahead and govern: govern fairly; govern with compassion but govern decisively". Now, let us note the terms of the argument.

On the one hand there is a right-wing conspiracy. It is spearheaded by *White* so-called liberals from the Apartheid era, certain so-called independent/research organisations (it is not clear who) run by whites and a "few" members of the white business community. They are aided by a few black commentators "who unwittingly contribute to this campaign". These forces act in concert; spreading vicious, underhanded "disinformation" about the President. Their intentions are malicious: to discredit him personally; and by way of him, the competence of Black people generally. Even more sinister is their sabotage of the country's economy (by portraying the country as a place not to do business in) and their attempt to subvert the will of the people (by questioning the fitness of a democratically elected President). In doing all this, Whites want to obstruct the dismantling of the apartheid system to secure the benefits they gained from its workings.

On the other hand, there are *Blacks* who deeply love their country, who balance criticism with constructive mention of the government's landmark achievements, who see in the attacks on the President a hateful, contemptuous assault on democracy. Blacks have faith in the potential of the country to be a well managed, technologically advanced and (truly) egalitarian society. Moreover, whereas racist Whites see in the "errors" of the President the necessary failure of a black man, they observe in them the all too human weaknesses of a man. Whereas Whites question the very competence of Mbeki's leadership, and by association the leadership of all Blacks, they propose guidance to a leader whose only weakness is that he is human.

Let us postpone for a moment the question about the truthfulness of this claim. Let us note rather that the advert makes certain epistemological claims that will help us determine its political genealogy. In particular, what is at stake is the nature of certain "facts". Do they consist of independent and mostly unrelated actions or events? Or are they merely moments in a larger drama that is unfolding. Take, for example, the question of the media "campaign". Here a number of articles, appearing in different newspapers and at different times, and written by diverse journalists, are seen to evidence an underlying unity, one that exceeds their literality (as newspaper articles), to reveal the secret and underhanded work of (racist) conspirators. Of course, many journalists and newspaper editors, in countering this claim, assert precisely the opposite. Abbey Makoe wrote in the Saturday Star, for example, that "[t]he era of white-owned media dominating public opinion in South Africa can no longer be used as an excuse for lazy

black professionals who hardly ever make an effort to participate in matters of public debate"[2]. Rather than symptomatic of a conspiracy, he suggests that these "awful" claims against Mbeki are the work of "individuals". More importantly, their predominance is less a sign of White conspiracy than it is of something else: the "quietude of silence" into which black commentators have fallen. Unlike the 1960's and 1970's, continues Makoe, that "ticked" to the eloquence of writers like Steve Biko, Barney Pityana, Nchaupe Mokoape, Mamphela Ramphela (and many others), the new elite ("self-styled struggle heroes") do not read, they do not write and they fail, therefore, to participate in the processes of national agenda-setting. Instead of whining privately, winging amongst themselves, and then dangling fat chequebooks in front of editors, they should state their views in public debate. Unfounded perceptions about Mbeki, Makoe implies, are prevalent in the media because they have not been shown-up for the "horrible" views that they are by literate and articulate black writers. If Makoe, nonetheless, sympathises with their frustration (that Mbeki is the subject of offensive articles), John Matshikiza is more dismissive. In the Mail and Guardian he called it, "nonsense"! "So, where are these whites?" he asked. "And where are the forums that are endemically racist and reactionary [...]"[3]. Now, what both authors criticise are the so-called facts of the advert: that there is a White right-wing media campaign. What neither doubt, however, are the very terms of the argument: that there are White views and that there are Black views. Let us pause here for a moment to notice that Matshikiza and Makoe treat this "racial" polarisation differently. If Makoe wants the view of "our people", presumably Blacks, to made in a way that does not smack of sycophantism or lackeyism, Matshikiza is unhappy that this is what South African politics has come to. What is not raised at all is the quite dangerous logic of the argument. It is composed of the following premises:

• Blacks want to dismantle the legacy of apartheid.
• President Mbeki is Black.
• He is head of a democratic Black government that wants to dismantle the remnants of apartheid.
• For this purpose a million houses have been built, 1,3 million housing subsidies approved, 400 000 homes electrified and 120 clinics completed.
• Mbeki as the successful leader of a Black government redressing the legacy of apartheid is helping Black people regain their dignity.
• To criticise President Mbeki is to want to preserve the legacy of apartheid, to undermine Black rule, threaten democracy and to insult the dignity of Blacks.

    Now, the syllogisms above rest on three argumentative devices. The first is what we might call logical, the second empirical and the third is a

2. *Saturday Star,* 12/05/2001.
3. *Mail & Guardian,* 24/05/2001.

rhetorical device. Now, the least interesting part of this argument is its circularity: turning back the legacy of apartheid is included in the very definition of being Black! This makes it *logically* indifferent to any empirical proof. Blacks are, by definition, reversing the apartheid inheritance! Yet the advert is not content with such argumentative fiat. Rather, it invites us to measure the truthfulness of its claims by a "factual" measure: number of houses built and so on. Now, if the President cannot be shown empirically to be reversing the legacy of apartheid then the rest of the argument does not follow. For the most part this is the level at which debate happens. For example, and in the opposite direction, it is pointed out that the new houses are built on marginal land, peripheral to the city; that this in turn merely reproduces a key feature of the apartheid urban form: that the poor live far from jobs and shopping opportunities. As a result a significant portion of their monthly expenses are those of transport. Moreover, the location of new houses massively increases the cost of providing them municipal services and infrastructure. This, in turn, reduces that portion of the subsidy available for the top-structure itself. Step forward, the so-called "matchbox" house! One might say, moreover, that housing is delivered exclusively through private tenure, that no rental stock is available, that bonds are often unaffordable (especially under conditions of growing unemployment), and that responsibility for maintenance is shifted away from the state to the household. One might say that this evidences a government more inclined to cast off its responsibilities to others; and in particular to the private sector or the individual. This, in effect, is the sort of argument found in the Editorial of the Mail and Guardian[4]. It wonders how committed the government is to democracy when it uses state resources to try settle party-political disputes. It wonders if the government is seriously interested in the poor when it spends R50 billion on arms, notwithstanding reported warnings from the Minister of Finance that this would damage the country's ability to deal with poverty. It doubts the commitment of the government seriously to deal with AIDS when equivocation on the causal relationship between it and HIV precludes treatment for whole classes of sufferers. Now, if these arguments could be made successfully (which they can be!) the advert might be driven to the following, surprising conclusion: President Mbeki is not an authentic Black leader!

Now, this line of reasoning, whatever its merits and demerits, obscures another more worrying argumentative device. The advert employs a rhetorical claim that appeals to a different standard of evidence than that of the record *in fact* of President Mbeki and his government. On the advert's terms the argument can still be true even if the "facts" are wrong. Or even: the "bad" facts are enrolled as further support of why the President is so good! What is at stake is the criteria of good and bad, true and false.

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4.   *Mail & Guardian,* 26/04/2001.

Discussing when people have the "right to criticise", the advert makes the following claims:

"[The White rightwing forces] do not realise that the right to criticise is accompanied by a responsibility to be fair and to recognise the landmarks and the achievements of the government and Black people in the way Black journalists and commentators do. In the absence of such balance, no amount of self-righteous claims of the public interest, transparency and press freedom will conceal their real motives"[5].

Valid criticism is premised on love for the country and its people. It is predicated on loyalty to the government. This is what authentic Blacks do: they caution when the President "errs", they lift him when he "stumbles", they know that he is human and sometimes behaves as such, they know too that his government is the best South Africa has ever had. This is the standard of authentic criticism. To act differently is evidence of, at least, a lack of patriotism at worst, racism and treason. This is why Black writers and journalists balance their criticism with praise. But there is an anomaly. Certain Blacks, it would seem, do not. In discussing the identities of the plotters, the advertisment makes the following startling claim: "Separately from them (the White right-wingers), there are a few Black commentators who unwittingly contribute to this campaign." What these unspecified Blacks lack is authenticity. They fail to act as authentic Blacks, presumably because they find fault without praise. Now, it is precisely this rhetorical device that Xolela Mangcu rebuts. He writes:

"[T]he advertisement raises an important point about the moral autonomy of black people. The ad relies on a logic of black authenticity that urges them to put solidarity with their leaders or heroes above everything else. In this case the history of racial oppression is used as racial blackmail, or what Mothubi Mutloatse describes as the liberation handcuffs that have given us Mugabe, Nujoma and now Chiluba"[6].

Mangcu is troubled that the appeal to Black solidarity is elevated above what he calls "moral reasoning": the autonomy to make ethical judgements about what is right or wrong. This, in contrast to the terms of the advert: Blackness/loyalty to the President and government. His remarks go to the core of what is novel in the way Blackness is sometimes (and more and more) discussed. Authentic Blacks support the President and the government, not on the basis of its record in advancing a certain project, but simply because it is populated by Blacks. Herein lies the fundamental rupture with Black Consciousness and the politics of National Democratic Revolution. Blackness no longer denotes a social position (in the racial capitalist relations of production) or a psychological condition. It designates an authentic national subject loyal to the state simply because it is controlled by others

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5. *Sunday Times,* 06/05/2001.
6. *Sunday Independent,* 13/5/2001.

like him! Let us note that Blackness has undergone a fundamental displace-
ment. It is no longer referenced to a *social* being (a being with qualities
derived from social relations) but a metaphysical one! President Mbeki is
an excellent leader irrespective of whether he and his government advance
the cause of Black Consciousness or National Democratic Revolution; or
any other political project for that matter. The "facts" are irrelevant to the
proof. Or rather, the argument appeals to other "facts". But what are these
facts? Or rather, what is the new mark of authenticity? Who is Black
and not merely black? If the measure of Blackness is not given by the
degree to which the legacy of apartheid is reversed, nor is it simply a ques-
tion of complexion. We recall that there are Blacks (more correctly, blacks)
in the service of the plotters. So, to what does Blackness refer? Something
curious, indeed, is upon us.

  Let us approach this displacement in the following way. In terms of
Black Consciousness and National Democratic Revolution a black was
Black to the extent that he/she undertook certain concrete, particular actions:
resisted racial oppression, struggled against exploitation and so on. In the
same way, and following this logic, a government was Black, that is, *libéra-
toire,* to the extent that it took certain actions to reverse the legacy of apart-
heid: ended racial discrimination, redressed the material inequality between
blacks and whites, and so on. Authenticity had a measure that was eviden-
ced by particular facts. Now, what is at stake here is a certain epistemol-
ogy: that belief *follows* from evidence. "I support the government because,
through a process of reasoning and verification, I have come to the con-
clusion that it is truly reversing the legacy of apartheid." Or rather, "the
government of President Mbeki is, on the basis of its record, an authentically
Black government". We recall, however, that this is not the standard of
truth suggested by the advert. Valid criticism, criticism in other words that
is true, is by definition balanced by praise. And how do we know this?
Precisely because blacks that reproach the ANC government (without com-
plimenting it) lose their claim to authenticity! "Certainly, President Mbeki
makes mistakes, but in essence", the advert holds, "he is in some way turn-
ing back the apartheid tide!" Or rather: President Mbeki is an excellent
Black leader; over and above the details of his actual political record. Now,
what is the condition of truth in such a claim? What is at stake is a
certain ontology: belief (that the government is authentically Black) derives
not from evidence (datum, collected, sorted and interrogated by reason).
Rather, the facts are *revealed through belief!* A mysterious inversion!
Only loyalty to the government (patriotism) grants insight into the remark-
able and mysterious way President Mbeki and his government are address-
ing the vestiges of apartheid. Knowledge follows from belief. Or, access
to the truth is only attained through *faith*. This last term is precise here.
For the analogy is Christian religious conviction.

"[...] to believe in Christ because we consider him wise and good is a dreadful
blasphemy—it is, on the contrary, only the act of belief itself which can give us
insight into his goodness and wisdom" (Kierkegaard cited in Zizek 1992: 37).

We might say: to gauge the excellence of President Mbeki on the basis of his record is unpatriotic! On the contrary, belief itself in his excellence will reveal just how the legacy of apartheid is being redressed. The "facts" by which we measure the merit of President Mbeki (as a Black) are those of a mysterious and sublime quality. Blackness here is attached to a spiritual knowing; a knowing through faith, where turning back the vestiges of apartheid refers to some spiritual, metaphysical redress. And: this knowledge is accessible only to authentic Blacks because they alone are true believers! What Nation Building does is transform the presidency and the government into quasi-religious objects that endure all torments and survive with immaculate beauty. It is the discursive condition of a dangerous, authoritarian politics.

In concluding let me risk a further hypothesis. The empirical and the sublime register are potentially connected in the following way: the more the ANC government fails to create jobs, provide housing, ensure services, etc., the more Blackness will be referenced to this sublime object. The less the legitimacy of the government can be defended on the basis of its record, the stronger will become the appeal of metaphysical reasoning.

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers an advert placed in one of the major South African Sunday newspapers. The advert in question proposes that there is a white, right-wing conspiracy against President Thabo Mbeki, to discredit his leadership and the leadership of Blacks *tout court.* We will suggest here that the advert both reflects and is a harbinger of a radically new form of nationalist politics in South Africa. In the way that the term Black is invoked, the Presidency and the government are transformed into quasi-religious objects that are immune to proof and to criticism.

RÉSUMÉ

Le sublime objet de la «négritude ». — Cet article traite d'une publicité parue dans l'un des plus importants journaux sud-africains. Cette publicité suggère qu'il existe une conspiration d'extrême droite blanche contre le Président Thabo Mbeki, conspiration destinée à discréditer son leadership et le leadership des Noirs en général. On

défend ici l'idée que cette publicité est à la fois le reflet et le signe avant-coureur d'une forme radicalement nouvelle de nationalisme. À travers l'usage qui est fait du terme « Noir », le Président et le gouvernement deviennent des objets quasi-religieux et infaillibles.