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The referendum in South Africa: a triumph of the spirit?

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I can sing a hymn
to the glory of my land,
from the ashes something stirs,
new voices are being heard.
I can look with love
at the harsh landscape
pockmarked by ghettos,
in the dust and the dirt
new voices sing new songs. (Achmat Dangor). [1]

Tuesday 17 March 1992 has already etched itself, mythologically, into the narrative that South Africans tell themselves and that the Western World conspires in: it is the day on which white South Africans went to the polls in unprecedented numbers (nearly 70% of a notoriously apathetic white electorate crowded into the polling booths during the course of the day.) Besieged by an almost hysterical campaign of images and exhortations from both the far right (the AWB and the CP) [2] and the now -- ironically -- 'left' leaning NP, white South Africans both inside and outside the country were to be hailed -- as the votes were tallied at the end of the day -- as having made a moral choice seldom demanded of a people: to vote themselves out of power as F.W de Klerk led them inexorably down the path of political reform which would see them marginalised in a democratic society where blacks would significantly outnumber them. Our World Cup cricketers, with a berth in the semi-final, were swept up in the flow of moral rhetoric, offering to do the right thing should a 'No' vote be returned, and withdraw from the tournament. Shudders of horror swept living rooms in South Africa at the prospect of a return to the sporting wilderness which a 'No' vote would ensure -- perhaps, in the heat of the moment, a more pressing reality to confront than the threat of a return to the economic and political pariah status from which (since the release of Nelson Mandela) South Africa had gradually been emerging. The resounding 'Yes' vote, then, suffused South Africans at home and abroad with the warm glow of moral rectitude: a 'feelgood' moment only slightly undermined by the burgeoning awareness that, in the words of one cynic, this was not unlike "Turkeys voting for Christmas".

Yet still the morning rises
as if drenched with blood.
Oh Lord, save them
from the gunfire and the jackboot.

South Africa is a singularly unpredictable political locale, but 'South Africa', the literary construct, our moral sortal function, is very set in its ways. Its register is that of high, sentimental rhetoric and the mode is tragic. We cry for the beloved, ache for its beauty, mourn its path to perdition. It has become the object of the religious imagination, a becoming in which it has enthusiastically participated. Its politicians are asked to renounce their evils, expiate their guilt and, in a barely acknowledged slip into the secular mode, to

apologise. "When the whites have turned to loving, will the blacks have turned to hating?" we ask, self-consciously aware, our hearts on our sleeves. We are forever agape at the unexpected signs of love and goodfellowship and see this phenomenon as a marshalling of somehow 'innate' forces of innocence. South Africa is written and subsequently read as a cautionary tale, told from the moral high ground, a stance replete with the warm glow of secondary gains. Some weeks back it was feared by Perth's best that South Africans may have infiltrated their ranks but, assured by their high command that at most only one had, we all breathed a collective sigh of relief that racism had failed to contaminate the West Australian Police Force. The fatuous nature of this episode seemed to escape general comment. Perhaps the relativities of the postmodernist era require the convenient instantiation of moral certainties in some place -- preferably, however, elsewhere -- in order to maintain a realism about the status of our moral convictions. Either way the terms of a morality play frame the possible answers. South Africans seek a **New** South Africa understood, at all levels of society and from most points on the political spectrum, as the task of forging a new nationalism. Images of smiling whites and blacks are deployed within this discourse of salvation to celebrate the re-birth of the body politic, cleansed of Apartheid's contamination, and now destined to rejoin the community of nations. Good Will and Love, witnessed by the overwhelming 'Yes vote', have made this future possible.

What the above tale, with its strange blend of the language of politics and the language of salvation, obscures is the vulnerability of human rights in a world that has moved into a "post-Apartheid" phase. This is so because, quite clearly, the material base and legacy of Apartheid continue to exist in the desolate townships of the Witwatersrand, for example, and the massive opulence of white suburbs like Houghton in Johannesburg. If we locate this discussion within the narrative that currently holds sway in liberal circles in South Africa, then it seems that the major task facing a post-Apartheid South Africa is one merely of increasing its efficiency. Freed from the constraints of Apartheid, the country can realise its potential (the vehicle for this being market forces), if only, so the argument runs, the distortions in the market place might be eliminated. Thus the philosophy of economic rationalism achieves its accommodation within the present conception of an all 'New' South Africa.

Economic rationalism, driven as it is by rational choice theory's central assumption of the egoistic utility optimiser, finds questions of distributive justice difficult, if not impossible, to theorise. The suggested constraints that a theory of distributive justice would invoke appear, within the discourse of economic rationalism, remarkably similar to the very market distortions their theory is pledged to eliminate. Granted, the ANC talks of redistribution but, given the dominance of economic rationalism in a narrative whose ascendancy in the West is almost unquestioned, and the way they have been situated within this narrative, such talk (of the redistribution of wealth, of nationalising mining and land assets) is forced to adopt an evermore apologetic tone. The Freedom Charter appears unable to make the transition from the realm of political rhetoric to the economic sphere without losing its confidence.

South Africa has to free itself from its active participation in the heroic idiom so neatly and, if we are correct, so insidiously scripted for it by an audience more interested in the aesthetics than the pragmatics of its slow implementation of social justice. It remains one of the most unjust societies in the world, and the danger is that unless questions of the redistribution of resources are centred in a debate about human rights the material injustices of the society could become hidden from view under reports of ever increasing gross domestic profit.

As South Africa moves into the twenty-first century it should eschew a future built around a new nationalism. In the developed countries (although this is patently not the case in the newly emerging nation-states of Eastern Europe) such nineteenth century notions are being transcended and replaced with notions of constitutionally guaranteed individual rights where the citizen is educated to an awareness and understanding of the obligations and duties such talk of 'rights' entails. A society as ethnically diverse as South Africa will always place unendurable stresses on any formulation of a new and monolithic nationalism -- whether properly or, as is more likely, ill-conceived; these divisive forces require a kind of finessing by refocussing social allegiances away from a contested nationalism towards a more

individually conceived concentration on issues of human rights. An inward-looking, nationalistically obsessed South Africa could prove disastrous to the entire Southern African region.

While the PAC [3] holds out for radical redistribution it is effectively marginalised by the dominant ANC/NP dialogue. The democratic structure of CODESA defines the smaller political parties as atavistic irrationalists with the PAC equated to the racist and extremist AWB at the other end of the political spectrum. The economic rationalists' strategy (which we perceive to be the dominant strategy of the governing National Party) of corporatisation, then privatisation of government instrumentalities, can already be seen to be working in the educational sector where more and more of the richly endowed government (state) schools are disappearing out of the public sphere via the creeping escape route of a strangely graded scale of state subsidies for schools that range from Type A (unintegrated) to the remarkably few Type D (genuinely integrated). This programme of transferring public assets to the private sphere where wealth and not need governs access may be locked in in the future development of the South African political process if the newly strengthened NP succeeds in its attempt to build in veto powers for minority groups in the proposed Upper House. These veto powers could (in all likelihood **would**) prevent the reversal of the trend towards the privatisation of public assets such as the educational sector. The consequences of such a policy would be that class structures would be left to ensure differential access to South Africa's wealth once assured by the race laws of Apartheid. Any potential asymmetry closes once it is realised that the **class** divide parallels (to all intents and purposes) the **race** divide once so assiduously and cruelly policed. A politics of race could be succeeded by a politics of efficiency (wholly acceptable to economic rationalists) and the patterns of injustice that have shaped the South African social landscape since the seventeenth century will continue: no longer under the clearly cruel constraints of a racist policy but, rather, under the apparently rational constraints of an internationally sanctioned economic policy.

Clearly the assumptions of rationality carried by these economic theories need be interrogated, but when the 'Yes' vote is celebrated as a **moral victory** instead of the **strategic choice** it so clearly was -- made in the context of the alternative but irrational 'No' vote -- such interrogation is made singularly difficult because, given the rhetorical framework of the debate, it would seem to constitute an unhappy questioning of the new moral order. The church-based liberation politics that has never really escaped the discursive limitations of its origins needs now to be replaced with a deep concern for the secular questions about human rights, justice and individual freedom. The ANC, for example, will have to resist most strenuously the pull away from a needs-based policy of human rights (espoused by the PAC) to a liberal-democratic policy realised against a capitalist base. The squalid collapse of communism does not make the execution of this programme impossible, though it clearly makes the case that much more difficult to argue for.

And the midnight moon
White and cold
over the ashen streets
reveals nothing but shadows
fleeing from one darkness
to the next.

Tuesday 17 March 1992 placed white South Africans between the Scylla of a 'No' vote and the Charybdis of the 'Yes' vote: sheer expediency drove them onto the latter shore but the dramatic configuration that inflates the action into a heroic moral one is, at best, a self-deception, but one in which the West is co-conspirator. The narrative that inscribes South Africans is in dire need of some judicious sub-editing: the seductive glow of feelgood politics evaporates in the harsher glare of the carnage on a Soweto train or in an Alexandra hostel. The rising (black) body count defies the fictionalising processes inherent in narration: this is a **felt** politics which renders the "last racist vote in South Africa", in many ways, incidental.

Tough decisions are being taken by all parties in South Africa and tougher ones yet confront them, but until the necessity for a process of demythologising is apparent to all of us who care for a transformation that is both just and fair to all, a society in which human rights are enshrined will be threatened by the kind of

exigencies -- interpreted against the quasi-religious assumptions of a 'retrieval of innocence' -- that make economic rationalism as coercive an agenda as that which forced white South Africans to vote 'Yes'.

Notes

1. "The Voices that are Dead" in A Century of South African Poetry ed. Michael Chapman (Ad Donker: Johannesburg, 1981). Stanzas from this poem are used out of sequence in this paper.
2. The acronyms in the paper refer (in order of appearance) to the following political parties/organisations:
 - Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging(AWB)
 - Conservative Party (CP)
 - National Party (NP)
 - African National Congress (ANC)
 - Pan Africanist Congress (PAC)
 - Congress for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA)
3. It also has a retrogressively racist platform with its contentious "One settler, one bullet" slogan.

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