

# South African liberal thinking on questions of nationalism reconsidered

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## *Abstract*

Liberals have often been criticised for not confronting key questions relating to South Africa's present and future. While liberals did not address the so-called National Question directly, they did consider the issues that that question concerned, but recent writing on liberalism has often misrepresented their thinking. This article seeks to illustrate a variety of liberal views about the nature of the South African "nation", to explore what liberals have, over time, thought and done in relation to nationalism and racism, and to consider some of their thinking on what a non-racial South African might look like.

**Keywords:** Liberals; Marxists; National Question; South Africa.

Liberals did not participate directly in the debates over what Marxists called "the National Question", in part because they opposed Marxism and saw communism as totalitarian and anti-freedom, in part because, empirically minded, they were sceptical of theory and dogma. Yet liberals have had their own ideas about such issues as the meaning of the South African "nation", the relationship of different people within the country, and the way in which external forces impacted on South Africa. While some Marxists have argued that what they called the National Question was primarily concerned with imperialism, and how South Africa could try to free itself from imperialism, liberals have mostly been concerned with political and constitutional issues related to individual freedom and the rule of law, rather than issues of economy and class, and have often been blind to the ways in which imperialism operated. But liberalism is a diffuse ideology, and liberals have by no means always held the same views.

Liberal thinking in South Africa has often been ambiguous, showing, in the words of a recent critical commentator, two faces. One of these, writes Steven Friedman, "reflects the view of those who dominate socially and economically,

the other points towards a freer and more equal society”.<sup>1</sup> The late Neville Alexander, whose writings are central to the South African literature on the National Question, and more recently the historian Eddy Maloka, have both asserted that, in Alexander’s words, there is “only one form of liberalism...”, one that seeks “to paper over the reality of economic exploitation and the rule of the market”.<sup>2</sup> That this is much too simple a statement will be shown here by illustrating the variety of liberal views about the nature of the South African “nation”, as well as by exploring what liberals have thought and done in relation to nationalism, racism and non-racialism.

Inevitably this will be a highly selective exploration of a complex topic. Liberal thinking was spread so widely, involving public intellectuals, the universities, the press, the churches, lawyers, and those who worked in think tanks, among others, that most generalisations about it need to be qualified in one respect or another. “At first sight the most striking thing about the Liberal tradition is its intellectual incoherence”, say two eminent commentators on that tradition.<sup>3</sup> A prominent contemporary South African liberal admits that “Liberals in South Africa have an imperfect history. They have been complicit in racism in the past and they are ill-served by pretending that racism does not exist in the present”.<sup>4</sup> Liberalism has not been as liberatory a force in South Africa as, arguably, it has been in Europe.<sup>5</sup>

Not only has there always been a wide diversity of liberal views, but it is important that such views be analysed historically, to see how they have changed over time as the context has evolved. In my view, Maloka greatly over-emphasises continuity in liberal thought and action in South Africa, from the few white liberals at the early nineteenth century Cape to the

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1 S Friedman, *Race, class and power: Harold Wolpe and the radical critique of apartheid* (Pietermaritzburg, UKZN Press 2014), p. 29. Compare his “The ambiguous legacy of liberalism. Less a theory of society, more a state of mind?”, P Vale, L Hamilton and EH Prinsloo (eds.), *Intellectual traditions in South Africa: Ideas, individuals and institutions*, (Pietermaritzburg, UKZN Press, 2014).

2 N Alexander, *An ordinary country – issues in the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 2002), p. 24. Compare his “Approaches to the National Question in South Africa, *Transformation*, 1, 1986, pp. 63-95; Eddy Maloka, *Friends of the natives. The inconvenient past of South African liberalism* (Durban, 3MS, 2014); J Mulqueeny, “Revisiting the History and Historiography of the National Question in South Africa” (Paper presented to the conference on The ANC at 100: Debating Liberation Histories and Democracy Today, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, September 2011).

3 A Bullock and M Shock (eds.), *The liberal tradition from Fox to Keynes* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1967), p. xix.

4 M Cardo, “The sinister underbelly to the ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ campaign”, *Politicsweb*, 1 April 2015 (available at [www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71619?oid=1022687&sn=Detail&pid=71619](http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71619?oid=1022687&sn=Detail&pid=71619), accessed, 5 May 2016).

5 J Pampallis, “Review of Eddy Maloka”, *Friends of the natives. The inconvenient past of South African liberalism*, Durban, 3MS, 2014, *Umsebenzi Online*, 14(9) (available at <http://www.sacp.org.za/main.php?ID=4649>, accessed, 10 May 2016).

Democratic Alliance of our own time. While all liberals in South Africa have valued individual freedom, often in relation to an oppressive and authoritarian state, they have done so in very different ways. For a long time, most liberals saw this core value through a racial prism, applying it only to some and ignoring other sectors of society. With but a few significant exceptions – the philosopher Alfred Hoernlé in the 1930s, and more recently the economist Charles Simkins, for example – South African liberals have not spent time theorising their views. It is therefore necessary to explore what they have done in relation to the National Question, as well as what they have said about it. Maloka reminds us of the “distinction between liberalism as a body of ideas with a particular vision for the society, and strategies employed by liberals to achieve their goal”.<sup>6</sup> Both need to be considered.

Some early nineteenth century liberals at the Cape – such as John Philip of the London Missionary Society – argued for territorial segregation as a way to protect black Africans from the impact of colonialism. Other liberals at the Cape defended British imperialism as the source of liberal values of non-racialism and justice, while yet others – most notably Thomas Pringle, Philip’s contemporary, abolitionist and fighter for a free press – identified with those who suffered from it.<sup>7</sup> To suggest, therefore, as Maloka does, that liberals were always on the side of the oppressor, is extremely misleading. Liberal thinking was long related to a distinction between those seen as “civilised”, which from 1853 included all who could qualify for the non-racial franchise introduced at the Cape in that year, and those blacks regarded as “uncivilised”, for whom liberal values did not apply. The context changed in the early twentieth century, after the creation of the Union in 1910. Some liberals again went along with the idea of racial segregation, though they did not support the oppressive way it was being put into practice by the white ruling elite. The political scientist Edgar Brookes, for example, was briefly a supporter of segregation in the 1920s. In the 1930s Alfred Hoernlé, then Professor of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, a self-identified liberal, saw South African society as being made up of different racial groups and argued for full territorial segregation as a way to solve what he saw as an otherwise

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6 J Pampallis, “Review of Eddy Maloka”, *Friends of the natives...*, p. 119.

7 R Vigne, *Thomas Pringle. South African pioneer, poet and abolitionist* (Cape Town, UCT Press, 2013). Compare C Saunders, “The expansion of British liberties: The South African case”, JP Greene, (ed.), *Exclusionary empire. English liberty overseas, 1600-1900* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp.269-288.

insoluble racial conflict.<sup>8</sup> Hoernlé was strongly criticised by other liberals for taking this position, especially those who were working in the Joint Councils movement<sup>9</sup> and saw themselves as playing a role as “bridge-builders” between whites and blacks in the increasingly racially divided society, seeking to bring people from different sections of a very heterogeneous society together. Most liberals of the interwar years, especially those of a more radical persuasion, were integrationists, arguing against segregation and for the creation of what they called a “common society”. That vague concept had at its core the hope for a future South Africa without formal racial distinctions, where individual liberties would be protected by a rigid constitution and a bill of rights. For historian William Macmillan the single South African economy, built on the bedrock of the mineral revolution, formed the basis for the creation of such a common society. While such liberals continued to see race as the key determinant in categorising different people in South Africa, they hoped to see the emergence of a middle class of both whites and blacks and hoped that this would stabilise the society and work against a racial conflict. But besides this, class was not a significant category of analysis for them, and they did not consider the idea of promoting working-class solidarity across the colour line.

Becoming more conservative in his old age, Macmillan would not agree to universal suffrage when that came more prominently onto the liberal agenda. In the early 1960s, he still spoke of the “nonsense” of the call for one person one vote.<sup>10</sup> But at the very time he was expressing that view, other liberals, most particularly those in the Liberal Party, which had been founded in 1953, accepted the idea of universal suffrage. But even some of those who did accept it remained wedded to the idea of a “plural” society, made up of distinct and separate racial groups.<sup>11</sup> Other liberals followed Macmillan and continued to resist the idea of universal suffrage on a common voters’ roll. In part this was because they continued to hope to win support from the white electorate, they thought would only accept a qualified, if non-racial, franchise.

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<sup>8</sup> RFA Hoernlé, *South African native policy and the liberal spirit* (Cape Town, Phelps-Stokes Fund of the University of Cape Town, 1939); P Rich, *White power and the liberal conscience* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1984); *Hope and despair: English-speaking intellectuals and South African politics* (London, Academic, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> The first Joint Council was formed in Johannesburg in 1921. The aims of the Joint Councils were, amongst others, “to promote... good relations between the European and Non-European peoples, through discussion and practical co-operation” (available at <http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/?inventory/U/collections&c=AD1433/R/7995>, accessed, 14 March 2016).

<sup>10</sup> The author (Saunders) remembers Macmillan saying this to a class at the University of Cape Town he attended as a student in 1962.

<sup>11</sup> L Kuper, *An African Bourgeoisie. Race, class and politics in South Africa* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1965); L Kuper and MG Smith, (eds.), *Pluralism in Africa* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969).

When some of the more conservative liberals issued a report on South Africa's political alternatives in 1973, Edgar Brookes, now identifying himself as what he called an "unreconstructed liberal", found it necessary to dissent from the report on the grounds that it turned "from the individual to the group" and "assumes that ... working through groups will bring us closer together".<sup>12</sup> Again, putting emphasis on the group rather than the individual was a concession some South African liberals made to what they believed to be the reality of the South African situation. Other liberals continued to emphasise individual rights. Neville Alexander is wrong to say that the "four nations" thesis – the idea that Africans, whites, coloureds and Indian formed separate racial groups and that these were in some sense proto-nations – was a "classical" liberal conception. As he correctly goes on to point out, such an idea was adopted by the ANC Youth League – who saw Africans as the main national group and the other three as national minorities – and was not a distinctive or particularly liberal idea.<sup>13</sup> It was one shared by many whites, including racist segregationists, and was also taken up by the Congress Alliance. Paragraph Two of the Freedom Charter, for instance, spoke of all "national groups" having equal rights.

For many liberals federalism was a way to tame majority power. Liberals had long been critical of the way in which South Africa had been united in 1910, with most powers accruing to the central government. They argued that a more federal system which took account of the different groups making up South African society would make it less easy for a ruling party to oppress others. Other liberals came up with complex schemes designed to protect both individual and group rights. In this regard, some looked to the ideas of foreign liberal theorists, such as those of Arend Lijphart, a political scientist based in the United States, who was then devising constitutional arrangements for societies divided by competing nationalisms or other ethnic, religious or ideological cleavages. In 1979 two prominent South African liberals, David Welsh and Frederick van Zyl Slabbert, argued for Lijphart's idea of consociationalism to be applied in the South African case as a way to check power and to ensure that individual rights were not constrained.<sup>14</sup>

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12 Spro-Cas, *South Africa's political alternatives. Report of the Political Commission of the Study Project on christianity in apartheid society* (Johannesburg, Spro-Cas, 1973), pp. 243-244.

13 T Karis and G Carter, *From protest to challenge, I* (Palo Alto, Hoover Institution, 1972), p. 32.

14 Compare D Welsh and F van Zyl Slabbert, *South Africa's political options. Strategies for sharing power* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1979); Compare A Lijphart, *Democracy in plural societies: A comparative exploration* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977); *Power-sharing in South Africa* (Berkeley, Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1985).

It was Slabbert who headed the Progressive Party commission that recommended that the party drop its resistance to universal suffrage, which it did in 1980, though within the framework of ideas of power-sharing or consociationalism, providing safeguards for minorities. Slabbert later wrote:<sup>15</sup>

The PFP [Progressive Federal Party] is not the Liberal or even a liberal party... its history is far too diverse and complicated simply to depict it as a pure liberal party. It is nevertheless committed to the creation of a constitutional democracy in South Africa and as such is the closest example of a conventional liberal political party in the current situation.

While many liberals saw their ideas and values as the polar opposite of the ideas of both Marxism and nationalism, not all liberals rejected all forms of nationalism. The compatibility of non-exclusive forms of nationalism, both Afrikaner and African, with liberalism is traced in the work of Andre du Toit and Andrew Nash, both of whom have explored liberal Afrikaner nationalism. The Stellenbosch philosopher Johan Degenaar claimed that tension between liberalism and nationalism only becomes “acute when nationalism takes an extreme form, as in ‘volk’ [nation] nationalism”.<sup>16</sup>

A non-extreme form of nationalism that differed from Afrikaner nationalism because it was not based on a common language, was that found in the thinking of those black Africans who in 1912 formed the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), later to become the African National Congress (ANC). Men such as Pixley ka Seme and John Dube, and later AB Xuma, were influenced by liberal thought when studying abroad. When in the 1940s the young radicals in the new-formed ANC Youth League championed ideas of Africanism, which sometimes took racist forms, the more liberal-minded old guard were critical of the new ideology. In the 1950s such figures as ZK Matthews and Albert Luthuli, the President-General of the ANC in that decade, remained firmly in the liberal tradition. One of Luthuli’s closest advisers, EV Mahomed, remained a member of the Liberal Party, and H Selby Msimang combined membership of the ANC and the Liberal Party. There were many liberal ideas in the Freedom Charter drawn up at the Congress of the People in 1955, which the Liberal Party boycotted because of the leading role being played by communists. Alan Paton, president of the Liberal Party

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15 J Butler, R Elphick and D Welsh, *Democratic liberalism in South Africa, 1* (Cape Town, David Philip 1987), p. 403.

16 J Degenaar, “Nationalism, liberalism, and pluralism”; A du Toit, “The Cape Afrikaners’ failed liberal moment”, J Butler, R Elphick and D Welsh, *Democratic liberalism in South Africa...*, pp. 35-63; Compare A Nash, *The dialectical tradition in South Africa* (New York, Routledge, 2009); J Pampallis, “Review of Eddy Maloka”, *Friends of the natives...*, pp. 118-119.

in the 1960s, regarded liberalism as a “third force” that stood apart from the two dominant nationalisms, Afrikaner and African, both of which he saw as illiberal in their exclusivity. In his view, liberalism had two main enemies: on the one hand the oppressive Afrikaner nationalist government then intensifying apartheid policies, on the other the threat of an exclusive African nationalism. The latter, somewhat ironically given the contradictions between Marxism and nationalism, seemed from the 1960s increasingly closely tied to the underground South African Communist Party (SACP).

Again, however, we need to notice the diversity of liberal voices, some of which remained relatively “hidden”, in the sense of being little known outside a small circle of people. In January 1957 a leading liberal, Leo Marquard, had delivered a presidential address at the University of Cape Town (UCT) to the members of what was then the leading liberal think tank, the South African Institute of Race Relations. His theme was what he called South Africa’s colonial policy, that of the ruling white minority towards the black majority. Like other liberals, Marquard accepted that South Africa had gained its sovereign status as an independent country in the British Empire/Commonwealth in 1934, but in his lecture he suggested how the country could “decolonise”, as other countries in Africa were then beginning to do, inter alia through adopting federalism.<sup>17</sup> Marquard’s argument, that the structural political and economic inequalities within a state were in some ways similar to the relationship between a metropole and a colony, may have influenced Michael Harmel, Joe Slovo and their colleagues in the SACP who in 1962 articulated the idea of “colonialism of a special type”, which included the view that “Non-white South Africa is the colony of White South Africa”.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Marquard’s argument for “decolonisation” may also have influenced HF Verwoerd, the Prime Minister, who in the late 1950s was formulating his Bantustan policy, based on ideas of separate black “nations”. For Verwoerd the idea of developing what he called Homelands was a way to extract apartheid from the criticism that it was merely white domination.<sup>19</sup>

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17 Federalist notions were in part designed to accommodate Natal’s English-speaking whites, who disliked living in an Afrikaner-dominated South Africa.

18 See for example N Alexander, *Ordinary country...*, p. 179. For Marquard’s formulation see L Marquard [writing as John Burger], *The black man’s burden* (London, Gollancz, 1943); *South Africa’s colonial policy* (Johannesburg, South African Institute of Race Relations, 1957). Among those who took up this idea was the sociologist H Wolpe, “The theory of internal colonialism: The South African case”, I Oxhaal, T Barnett and D Booth, (eds.), *Beyond the sociology of development: Economy and society in Latin America and Africa* (London, Routledge, 1975); S Friedman, *Race, class and power...*

19 H Kenney, *Architect of apartheid. HF Verwoerd an appraisal* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 1980). There were some similarities between his ideas and the way in which the USSR regarded Kazakhstan and the other central Asian Soviet Republics as separate countries.

Most liberals saw through this. Those in the Liberal Party welcomed the arrival of independence for African countries, but for them the Bantustan policy was part and parcel of apartheid. In the late 1950s Randolph Vigne and other members of the Liberal Party cultivated Namibians then in Cape Town and actively supported their campaign to free their country from South African rule. As deputy leader of the Liberal Party, Vigne took the lead in fighting the Bantustan policy in the Transkei in the early 1960s.<sup>20</sup> While the more conservative Paton increasingly admired Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who worked within Bantustan structures, he did so in large measure because of Buthelezi's resistance to the government's attempts to get him to accept nominal independence for KwaZulu.

It was only with the birth of the Liberal Party in 1953 that liberalism in South Africa found political expression in an organised form. The young Nelson Mandela had by then moved from believing in Africanism to working with the emerging Congress Alliance, and he immediately attacked the new party on two main grounds: its failure to support the demand for universal suffrage and its insistence on constitutional means of struggle. The high-sounding principles of the Liberal Party, Mandela wrote:<sup>21</sup>

... stand not for the freedom of the people but for the adoption of more subtle systems of oppression and expiation. ... [Though liberals] talk of liberty and human dignity, they are subordinate henchmen of the ruling circles. They stand for the retention of the cheap labour system and of the subordinate colonial status of the non-European masses.... In practice they acquiesce in the slavery of the people, low wages, mass unemployment, the squalid tenements in the locations and shanty-towns.

However true his critique was of the Liberal Party in its early years, it did not remain valid, for the party evolved considerably over its short fifteen-year history. Rejecting the "four nations" multiracialism of the Congress Alliance, with its emphasis on racial groups, the Liberal Party increasingly came to practice the non-racialism it proclaimed. Black Africans in the party increased in number until, in the 1960s, they formed a majority of its some 5 000 members. Some black Africans gained leadership positions: Jordan Ngubane and HJ Bhengu became vice-presidents, Elliot Mngadi the party's national treasurer.<sup>22</sup> From 1960 the party began to abandon its concern with appeasing

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20 R Vigne, *Liberals against apartheid* (London, Macmillan, 1997), pp. 165-182.

21 N Mandela, "The shifting sands of illusion", *No easy walk to freedom. Letters from underground* (London, Heinemann Educational Books, 1965), pp. 33-35.

22 R Vigne, *Liberals against apartheid...* Maloka contradicts himself, first saying the leadership of the Liberal Party was all white, then that 70 per cent of it was white. See J Pampallis, "Review of Eddy Maloka", *Friends of the natives...*, p. 134.



and trying to appeal to a very conservative and racist white electorate. It adopted universal suffrage as its policy and then took increasingly radical positions on the economy. Some members of the Liberal Party rejected the idea of protecting group minority rights; some were social democrats; some joined the African Resistance Movement and accepted the need to use violence against the apartheid state, in the interests of bringing about the end of apartheid and achieving a constitutional democracy.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, other white liberals remained paternalistic, patronising and very blinkered in their thinking. For all their concern with individual freedom, many found it difficult or impossible to get away from conceiving of the South African nation as made up of distinct racial groups. Racial thinking was deeply embedded, and such liberals failed to recognise that economic power reinforced racial divisions. Unlike liberals in, say, the United States, they argued for reducing the role of the state, and supported the idea that what they called the free market should operate with virtually no constraints. Some liberals were critical of the decision of the Liberal Party not to attend the Congress of the People in 1955, on the grounds that the Congress Alliance was dominated by communists, and others were similarly critical when in the face of new legislation in 1968 – the Prohibition of Political Interference Act, forbidding multiracial political parties – the party meekly dissolved itself. The Progressive Party, into which some liberals had moved, took the very illiberal decision that it should accept losing its black members and continued its parliamentary work, not accepting universal suffrage until much later. Helen Suzman, the only Progressive Party member in Parliament and regarded by some as “the icon of liberalism”, justified staying in Parliament by saying the black members of the party wanted this.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, she challenged the government on all aspects of apartheid, including so-called grand apartheid, with its fantasies of separate and independent black nation states.

It was at this time that Marxists devoted much attention to what they called the National Question, criticising the Bantustans as apartheid creations and not authentic nations. Neville Alexander took the lead in articulating such an analysis,<sup>25</sup> which was taken up within the African National Congress in

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23 On the African Resistance Movement, see M Gunther, “The National Committee of Liberation/African Resistance Movement”, *South African Democracy Education Trust, The road to democracy in South Africa, I* (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2004), pp.209-255.

24 J Pampallis, “Review of Eddy Maloka”, *Friends of the natives...*, pp. 122, 135.

25 N Alexander, writing as No Sizwe, *One Azania, one nation: The National Question in South Africa* (London, Zed Press, 1979).

exile. The struggle for national liberation in South Africa, wrote two of these writers, required a distinction to be drawn “between the authentic South African nation with its right to self-determination and inauthentic ‘non-historic nations’ which have been used as the building blocks of apartheid strategy”. They went on to link Verwoerdian grand apartheid to earlier attempts to create separate nations: “The Afrikaner nationality rooted in the seventeenth century settlements in the Cape; the white oppressor nation forged by Smuts and the British imperialists in 1910 as the bulwark against “native rule”; the “‘ethnic nations’ conjured up by Verwoerd as an attempt to mask the colonial character of white supremacy - all these formations stand in the path of a democratic South Africa”. And they were particularly concerned that Zulu nationalism might prove “counter-revolutionary...in the struggle against the creation of a single nationhood in South African soil”.<sup>26</sup>

Liberals were less concerned with Buthelezi and Inkatha – especially given Buthelezi’s refusal to accept the idea of independence for the KwaZulu Bantustan – and more with the attack on them from the early 1970s by Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement. Some liberals responded by calling themselves radicals, while remaining attached to liberal values.<sup>27</sup> More broadly, liberal thinking survived in the Progressive Party and its successors, the Progressive Federal Party and then, from 1989, the Democratic Party, in the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), in the churches, in the mainstream English-medium press, in the major English-medium universities and in a few think tanks. A number of leading lawyers were liberals, and grass-roots liberal activists worked in the Black Sash and other non-governmental organisations.<sup>28</sup>

*The Oxford History of South Africa* (1969, 1971), a liberal anti-apartheid project, saw the main theme of South African history as the creation of a common society, and went out of its way to play down the importance of nationalism and national distinctions, emphasising instead interracial contact and interaction. In *Capitalism and Apartheid* (1985), perhaps the single most important liberal text of the 1980s, Merle Lipton rejected the idea that racial oppression was a function of the capitalist system and that the end of

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26 J Hoffman and N Mzala, “‘Non-historic nations’ and the National Question; A South African perspective”, *Science & Society*, 54(4), 1990-1991, p. 426. They wrote: “Like the other colonially contrived bantustan groupings, even KwaZulu constitutes a ‘non- historic nation’ from the standpoint of the South African revolution”.

27 G Moss, *The new radicals. A generational memoir of the 1970s* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2014), p. 32 and onwards.

28 See the relevant chapters in the South African Democracy Education Trust, *The road to democracy in South Africa* Vol, 1-2, 4 and 6.

apartheid must be linked to the overthrow of capitalism.<sup>29</sup> By the late 1980s many in the ruling National Party had come to realise that apartheid could not work, which meant that there must inevitably be a process of transition to a more democratic South Africa; they therefore argued for group rights to be protected in a new constitutional dispensation. When it came to the negotiations for a new constitution in the early 1990s, the leading liberals involved, most prominently Colin Eglin of the Democratic Party, accepted that individual rights would be protected in the Bill of Rights and that those protections would, along with other measures, provide the necessary safeguards against majority tyranny. Liberals claimed, rightly, that they made a major contribution to the fashioning of the liberal democratic constitution that emerged from the negotiated settlement.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

What of liberalism and the National Question in the present conjuncture, when, in the arresting phrase of one critic, “the once generous struggle is reduced to the banding of robbers?”<sup>31</sup> Vusi Gumede, who heads the Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute at the University of South Africa, has recently said that the National Question, which he calls a “paramount issue” for the country, involves “the form of relations that exist between the various peoples that make up a geographical space”, and that it implies an “appropriate balance of power and influence among all people and or ethnic groups in a nation state” as well as “social and economic inclusion”.<sup>32</sup> Not spelling out what such an “appropriate” balance would be, Gumede has called for “systematic restitutionary, reconciliatory and restructuring measures and equitable sharing of resources”. Few if any liberals would dispute the need for such measures and sharing, but they would argue that such inclusion should be evolutionary rather than revolutionary.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, achieving it should not be at the cost of undermining the fundamentals of society, including

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29 Two other liberals followed Lipton in defending capitalism on the grounds that it had both created wealth and distributed it. N Bromberger and K Hughes, “Capitalism and underdevelopment in South Africa”, J Butler, R Elphick and D Welsh, *Democratic liberalism in South Africa...*, pp. 203-233.

30 C Eglin, *Crossing the borders of power* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2007).

31 B Breytenbach, H Adam and K Moodley, (ed.), *Imagined liberation. Xenophobia, citizenship and identity in South Africa, Germany and Canada* (Stellenbosch, Sun Press, 2013), p. vii.

32 V Gumede, “The National Question in South Africa” (available online at <http://www.thoughtleader.co.za/vusigumede/2015/03/19/the-national-question-in-south-africa/>, accessed, 10 May 2015).

33 As Maloka points out, historically liberals in Europe and elsewhere have sometimes been revolutionaries: J Pampallis, “Review of Eddy Maloka”, *Friends of the natives...*, p. 119.

particularly the economy, which is the source of jobs and the resources that make social spending possible.

Given their hopes for a non-racial future, many liberals worry that since the end of apartheid the issue of race has again become prominent. While some liberals have accepted that race should continue to play a role in affirmative action policies, in the interests of promoting equality and social justice, others have asserted dogmatically that race should not matter post-apartheid, and have rejected the need for black economic empowerment policies. Ignoring the salience of race in creating inequality, these liberals tend also to argue for a reduction in the role of the state in the economy, believing that this is the best way to promote economic growth and that only such growth will help alleviate inequality.<sup>34</sup> Tony Leon, who became leader of the Democratic Party, was very critical of Thabo Mbeki's "obsession" with race, and spoke of his ideas of an African Renaissance as "incoherent mumbo-jumbo".<sup>35</sup> But on the other hand, as Michael Cardo, a Democratic Alliance member of Parliament points out, "Younger liberals, in particular, are frustrated with the kind of liberalism that clings to a fanciful, feel-good notion of 'rainbow nationhood' or colour-blindness ... which serves to obscure more than it does enlighten the structural nature of many of our social problems".<sup>36</sup> Such liberals believe that non-racism should not disregard race and difference, but embrace it. It is therefore too simplistic to say, as Peter Vale has recently, that "Blind to colour and indifferent to cultural difference, and committed to maintain civil liberties and the kinds of freedoms that protect citizens from state power, liberalism's emphasis on the individual seems to blind it to the horror that continues in its economics – namely white wealth and black poverty".<sup>37</sup> On the broader issue of nation-building, most liberals applauded President Mandela's remarkable

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34 For the "muscular liberalism" of the Democratic Party's leader, Tony Leon, see especially his memoir, *On the contrary* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2009); J Pampallis, "Review of Eddy Maloka", *Friends of the natives...*, pp. 197, 207. Leon became notorious for the slogan of "fight back", which was widely seen as a call for racial minorities to fight majority rule. "There is nothing 'liberal' about 'muscular' politics", writes Pampallis: J Pampallis, "Review of Eddy Maloka", *Friends of the natives...*, p. 219.

35 J Pampallis, "Review of Eddy Maloka", *Friends of the natives...*, p. 215.

36 M Cardo, "The sinister underbelly to the 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign", *Politicsweb*, 1 April 2015 (available at [www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71619?oid=1022687&csn=Detail&pid=71619](http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71619?oid=1022687&csn=Detail&pid=71619), accessed, 5 May 2016). He continues: "It would be ludicrous to think that once apartheid ended, even twenty years after it ended, that somehow whites did not continue to enjoy certain advantages over blacks in accessing opportunities, through networks and social capital and the like. But that is no reason for liberals to be suckered into the 'white privilege' school of thought. 'White privilege' is a handy rhetorical device, employed by opponents of liberalism. It serves to legitimate the ANC's hegemonic project of 'transformation', which is really just a code-word for racial domination."

37 P Vale, "Of ships, bedraggled crews and the miscegenation of ideas", P Vale, L Hamilton and EH Prinsloo (eds.), *Intellectual traditions in South Africa...*, p. 13.

efforts to reconcile black and white, while remaining sceptical of whether, given the deep divisions in South African society, a South African nation can ever be built.<sup>38</sup> Much liberal thinking has turned instead to strategies to ensure that a constitutional democracy based on the rule of law survives.

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38 RW Johnson and D Welsh (eds.), *Ironic victory. Liberalism in post-liberation South Africa* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1998), Introduction.