
SEEKING THE ZEITGEIST: MULTICULTURALISM, CONFORMITY AND CONFLICT— OR PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE IN THE ‘NEW SOUTH AFRICA’?

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There's this thing called civilization. Its built of hopes and dreams. Its only an idea. Its not real. Its artificial. No-one ever said it was real. Its not natural. Its built by the learning process; by trial and error. It breaks easily. No-one said it couldn't fall to bits. And no-one said it would last forever.¹

Every ideology is based on some kind of idea, perhaps even a good one. But any idea that is universalized to apply to all, that suffers no doubt or internal criticism, that polarizes people, becomes demonic. Any ideology - religious, political, even psychological - that would simplify the world's complexities in order to make the individual more comfortable is demonic. Those who offer easy answers do not understand the questions.²

(In South Africa)... on the one hand are the various forms of totalitarian thought, theological and political, and on the other the easy relativism of a culture that has lost its moorings.³

Like Pascal, most people are frightened by the “silence of those empty spaces”.⁴ Empty spaces exist both within and without. Two centuries ago Immanuel Kant observed that we can never know the world outside of us or objects in themselves, the only reality lies in our personal experience of this “otherness”. Jung went a

Graham Swift, *Waterland* (1983), p. 17.

James Hollis, *Tracking the gods. The place of myth in modern life*, (1995), p. 114. A great deal of this paper is based on the work of James Hollis and owes much to the simplicity with which Hollis outlines complex psycho/philosophical concepts.

Hollis, *Tracking the gods*, p. 107.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, (1958), No. 206, p. 61.

few steps further by asserting that all human experience is essentially psychoid, that is, composed of both mental and material components. This duality is true not only of individuals but also of the societies they construct.

The human desire to impose some semblance of order on the flux and chaos of existence lends tremendous authority to society as the arbiter of our thoughts and actions. Social organization serves biological needs, but also caters for the demands of the spirit. Meaning comes to the individual through participation in the tribal experience:

As our ancestors groped toward each other in the primal night, communities arose not only for food gathering, division of labour and collective defence, ...they sought community not only out of loneliness and fear...but also for sharing, for enlargement, for mutual-ity. Who one is is in part defined by whose one is - to whom or to what communal purpose one subscribes.⁵

The question of individual identity is most often dependent on how, when and where the individual fits within the context of his or her collectivity. Thus, to be excluded from society is the worst possible punishment. No child can stand exclusion from parental approval, similarly the orthodox Jew chants the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, when someone leaves the community; the Roman Catholic Church too, excommunicates those who threaten its ideological integrity, whilst the Amish "shun" those who march to a different drummer.

THE PERILS OF THIS NEW IDEOLOGICAL IMPOSITION

It is obvious that society and human association are essential for the psychological integrity of the individual. The opposite is also true. The radical alienation and depersonalization implicit in modernism, pose a fundamental threat to the welfare and peaceful co-existence of societies:

Collectively, the loss of a center for a civilization occasions anarchy, the overthrow of the central order by rebellious factions. (Recall Yeats: "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world").⁶

In his 1936 essay "Wotan", Jung illustrated how "a one-sided rationalism and technological genius cut off from the instinctual roots of the German spirit", took the only possible course in the collective disease of fascism. The sole antidote to bigotry, Jung concluded, was not a communal imposition from above, but instead, to grant each person the right to his or her myth.⁷

The danger is no less real today. In this postmodern society without a culture of the soul, how can we find the "mythic referents that give us a sense of place?" As Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell and others have suggested, our culture has lost the road map which helps locate a person in the larger context. Without a tribal vision and spiritual viewpoint, modern individuals are cut adrift to wander without guidance, without models and without assistance.⁸

Knowing the extreme dangers implicit in societal alienation (as any freedom movement must do), it is strange that New South African politicians should posit multiculturalism as the people's panacea. This seemingly curious commitment to groupthink becomes more understandable when one considers the philosophical mainsprings of this new elite. The fall of apartheid and the Berlin Wall occurred almost simultaneously. Thus, in a very real sense, both the apartheid past and New South African future lost their ideological underpinnings at the same time - they were both shown to be indented to bankrupt dogmas.

The Marxist freedom fighters were the avatars of progress through confrontation, seeking to socially engineer a more equitable future. The primacy of revolutionary and so-called 'scientific thought' deriving from Marx's Enlightenment roots, left no room for doubt, and was vigorously exclusionist of all counter ideas. As Giovanni Levy has pointed out, those social scientists who were lured by such action and conflict-orientated models of human behaviour were largely radical secularists with little interest in either metaphysics or consensual models of behaviour.⁹

Faced with the demands of a New South Africa and an Afrikaner culture that was quiescent in the face of its lost cultural moorings,

Ibid.

James Hollis, *The middle passage* (1993), p. 23.

Giovanni Levy, "On Micro history", in Peter Burke (ed.), *New perspectives on historical writing* (1991), p. 75.

the commitment of the new government to a totalitarian multiplicity must have been easy. On another level, the anxiety of the new government was also considerable at the time, and one can surmise that it grasped hold of this new multicultural image (Simunye - we are one), in order to feel secure again.

As fundamentalists dominated by the “totalitarian temptation”, the new elite was appalled by the dilemma of a discredited and decaying Marxist ideology.¹⁰ The imposition of a new ideological support was therefore necessary. As Graham Swift has written: “Ah the idols and icons, the emblems and totems of history. How when we knock one, another rises in its place”.¹¹ Or Dostoyevsky in his *Notes from the Underground* in 1884: “Men love abstract reasoning and neat systemization so much that they think nothing of distorting the truth, closing their eyes and ears to contrary evidence to preserve their logical constructions”.¹²

THE SEARCH FOR A POST-APARTHEID PEACE — OR THE DEMAND FOR A PUNITIVE, RETRIBUTIVE AND REDISTRIBUTIVE FUTURE?

But was the New South African commitment to multiculturalism correct? Is this the policy that offers the best chance for unity? Or was peaceful coexistence in South Africa not thereby mortgaged for short-term appeasement?

Much depends upon whether the New South African elite is committed to a punitive “peace” such as that imposed at Versailles, or whether they have taken to heart the historical lesson of the allies at the end of the Second World War, when they assisted with the reinstatement of the vanquished. In his speech before the ATKV (published in this journal), Hermann Giliomee argues that the New South Africa has chosen the brutality of Versailles over a policy of compassion.

The imperious imposition of multiculturalism on all the peoples of this land is an offense against their collective values and sense of self, and is a policy fraught with great peril. The loss of old certainties amongst the Afrikaans-speaking population will create unac-

Donald H. Akenson, *God's Peoples. Covenant and land in South Africa, Israel and Ulster* (1991), p. 53.

Swift, *Waterland*, p. 17.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*. New York library edition (1961), p.36.

ceptable levels of anxiety, radical alienation and depersonalization - which, in turn, will reinvigorate the old herd instinct. This has already occurred to an extent with the AWB, and in 'brown' residential areas on the Witwatersrand.

Jung was correct when he stated that the only antidote to bigotry was to grant each culture the right to its own myth. We desperately need a new model of co-existence, one that is equitable instead of persecuting minority values, a new model that protects people and their cultures within a pluralist model of co-existence.

HETEROGLOSSIA AND THE REJECTION OF AN IMPOSED MULTICULTURALISM

The *New Contree* was conceived as a response to the collapse of ideological history in South Africa. The first volume posited a heteroglossaic approach to history, i.e., a recognition of the inter-textual fabric of different textual voices, all telling different histories, but creating one, living, ever-changing, open history. James Hollis expresses this well:

there is no one truth,... all the variants, even contradictory ones, are somehow true. Consider how liberating this is in contrast to fundamentalism, the insistence that my ego-bound complex-ridden truth is superior to yours. William James, in his epochal work toward the beginning of this century, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, expressed no discomfort at the plethora of religions in the world. Rather than see them as mutually contradictory, he saw them as variants of the myth, as it were, appealing to a variety of temperaments.¹³

Within this new methodology, history can also no longer have one meaning or truth or interpretation, because of the heteroglossia, the varied and opposing voices constituting the text of history. This vision and its recognition of 'the other' and the value of his or her contribution to the greater whole, is the opposite of that majoritarianism/multiculturalism now being imposed by the New South Africa.

The articles in this journal were assembled with a view to demonstrating why, in our opinion, a commitment to heteroglossia is essential for South African history. The reason for the inclusion of the

debate on Afrikaner cultural identity is self-evident. Norman Etherington's article was included because, in dismissing the profound effects of postmodernism, it directly challenges our belief that South African history has undergone a sea-change. As Blokkies Joubert has it in the popular song by David Kramer, "Its all been spoilt by politics, its never going to be the same." In this boundary, borderlord situation, it is not easy to discern the psychic landscape of the New South Africa. From afar it is easy to misinterpret heteroglossia as being merely one more fiction we juggle. Even in South Africa it is becoming increasingly difficult to locate the psychic reservoirs of humanity. As Al Stewart so succinctly points out:

On my wall the colours of the maps are running. From Africa they talk of changes coming. The torches flare up in the night. The hand that sets the farms alight has spread the word to those who're waiting on the border. In the village where I grew up. Nothing seems the same. But still you never see the change from day to day. And no-one notices the customs slip away.¹⁴

The *différence* here, lies in degree. People and disciplines change when their fictions are no longer sustainable - when the population will no longer tolerate the lies that they tell.

Perhaps the dishonesty that has accompanied postmodernism on a national level has already forced people in this country to move beyond this totalitarian and ideological imposition and to demand their cultural and individual rights. The search for a new model of coexistence must lead us towards a commonwealth - not a dictatorship.

A practical example of this truism was the Brenthurst Conference on the Jameson Raid, which is discussed in this journal by Alan Jeeves, one of the participants. A beautifully organised conference with published and seemingly capable delegates - it was, nevertheless, a failure in its task of advancing historical knowledge. The reason was the Rankean, top-down, great men, evil-imperialist approach of the conference. What was missing was the overall context and particularly the view of those below and their contribution to events - the sweaty, sordid flux and chaos of nature.

Amongst the delegates were those familiar with London, Cape Town and Johannesburg - the global, imperial, financial and mining epicentres. But where were the peoples and places supposedly on the periphery of this history? The Boers in their suspicious, ramshackle, and yet byzantine republic? Khama in his besieged Bechuanaland furiously fighting to preserve an iota of dignity in the face of a caustic new world? (A dilemma with which New South Africans can immediately identify). The Tswana of the Western Transvaal, smouldering under the yolk of a conquest state intent on taking both land and culture? Where was the socio-economic context with the desperate poor whites haranguing their Volksraad representatives, the migrant leaving his green hills for the hell of the mines, the poverty of rural communities composed solely of women, children and the old. If ever a demonstration was needed of the necessity of historians listening to all voices, all perspectives, all points of view - this was it. Thus, the paper by Neil Parsons on the pivotal role of Khama in delaying the Jameson Raid should provide all the justification that heteroglossia requires. The work by Gerhard Oosthuizen on the forced removals of the Baralong researches the pain and suffering of the past when the culture and lives of a people were sacrificed to the god of dogma. Is history destined to repeat itself yet again?

In our developmental voice, the effect of government prescriptiveness is discussed by both Linda Brockett, John Cowley and Tom Gouws. The extent to which governments are concerned, not merely with the pragmatics of everyday life, but also with the hopes, dreams and aspirations of people is apparent from both these papers. Just as historians should be aware of the lack of objectivity in their discipline, so governments should be made aware of the socio/spiritual dimensions of their deliberations and decisions. Such sympathy would teach governments to tread lightly when they step on the aeons of the past.

Finally, the paper by Jabu Maphalala. As a feisty, fiery historian, Professor Maphalala has much in common with Hermann Giliomee. Both of these academics have suffered much in their rejection of the *status-quo*, past and present. They remind us that polarities are critical for self-definition. Whether we accept their views or not, these men have advanced our knowledge of ourselves. In their oft disputed vision lies the *différence* between democracy and dogma and the potential for a peaceful *zeitgeist*.