

The Politics of Homecoming

Contending Fictions of Identity in Contemporary South Africa

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Introduction

home: n., a., & adv. OED 1.n. Dwelling-place; fixed residence of family or household ... 2. Native land of oneself or one's ancestors, esp. Britain (sic). 3. Place where thing is native or most common ... *come ~ to*, become fully realised by...

In April 1994, with the singular, unrepeatable event of the election, South Africa once again has come to occupy a space in the imaginary of the West which is both unique and exemplary.¹ In a world torn apart by ethno-nationalist struggles, in the absence of the stabilising influence of the Cold War, South Africa almost effortlessly moved from being a pariah state, to becoming a symbol of hope and unity, of what can be achieved in the name of democracy. However, reading this event from the standpoint of the spectator alone, will not do. For the election not only reaffirmed that which the West desired but also, and perhaps more importantly, it instituted a new imaginary, a horizon within which for the first time, a fluid, open South African identity became a possibility for all those denied it before.

Institution

The election acted as the moment of institution of a new social imaginary, signifying a beginning, an origin, as well as a completion. That is to say, the delineation of the horizon within which a newly articulated South African identity originated, also prefigures the space of its own fulfilment. What is instituted as radically new, serves as an always already given origin, marking out the space of the possible. Such is the paradox of all beginnings. However, this is not to say, in Hegelian fashion, that such beginnings are determined by developments to follow. To the contrary, the element of paradox on which I

¹ This argument is elaborated in Norval (1994b).

want to focus here emphasises the contingency and impurity of all beginnings which, while far from determining its forms of identification, cuts out a space open to contestation and subversion, at the same time as it sets limits to that identification.

In South Africa, the radical institution of a new imaginary happened before our very eyes:

The abiding image of the day that South Africa began to become one nation, all together, was in the orange, autumn sun rising over a new country teeming with extraordinary, renewed people. It rose over a country with a new flag, a new anthem, a new map, and a profound new human mood. When the people began to form those lines they became a new people, spontaneously and unintentionally. The tiny seed first glimpsed on the national peace day last year, giving life to the otherwise lifeless political slogan »non-racial«, burst into resplendent flower. Black South Africans learnt what whites already knew: how to vote. White South Africans learnt what blacks knew: how to wait. They did it together, in marvelous straggly multi-coloured queues... (Johnson, 1994, emphasis added).

The question remaining to be addressed in this respect is the following: how do we think this moment of institution? The most obvious candidate for this in the tradition of political theory is, of course, the social contract tradition which attempts to theorise the moment of inauguration and establishment of society. The paradox we encounter here is well known: in order to institute society, we already need to have in place that which can only be brought about as a result of the very act of institution. As Connolly (1991:465) argues with reference to Rousseau, »(f)or a general will to be brought into being, effect (social spirit) would have to become cause and cause (good laws) would have become effect«. As we know, Rousseau resolved this problem in an interesting fashion. He argued that the legislator being unable to employ either force or argument, »must have recourse to an authority of another order«, must claim his own contingent wisdom to be that of the Gods (Rousseau, 1968: 87). In order to establish the purity of the law, the lawgiver in fact has to resort to the impure mechanism of deception. In this sense, Rousseau not only »solves« his own problem, but sets into place a radical argument for the »ignobility of all origins«, even that of the Law, so introducing an ineliminable element of arbitrariness into political life.

This act of institution is always *retroactively* realised, constituted after the fact. Analogously, it could be argued that the real constitution of the South African nation took place not so much in the actual act of queueing, as in the retrospective viewing of that act, emphasising the moment it entered the gaze, making the actor simultaneously spectator of her own acts. And in this very

moment of elation, of birth, was enacted the contractual paradox: it foreshadowed the very thing which would make the nation possible. It established a South African *identité à venir*. It provided a vision of tolerance, of fusion, and one might say, of precarious unity, which everyone full well knows is patently absent in the present.² To put it differently, the very conditions of possibility for democracy was instituted in a context scarred by their very absence.

Empty spaces, barred subjects

While the act of institution always contains a paradox, this does not mean that the paradox is eradicated with the full institution of a democratic social order. As I have pointed out earlier, there is an ineliminable element of in the ignoble, arbitrary moment of institution which continues to mark the political space. In order to understand why this is the case, we need to look more closely at two further dimensions of this institution: that of the space itself, and of the subject of democracy. Let us start with the former.

»Democratic society could be determined as a society whose institutional structures includes, as part of its »normal«, »regular« production, the moment of dissolution of the symbolic bond, the movement of the irruption of the Real: elections«. (Žižek, 1989:147)

In his seminal work on the democratic imaginary, Lefort argues that in a democratic society the place of power is an *empty* one (1988:17). That is, democracy involves the institutionalisation of the markers of uncertainty. What is sacrificed here is precisely the possibility of a given and certain content filling, without question, the place of power. But with this sacrifice, as with all sacrifices, something crucial is gained. The empty space of power, in fact, secures in its very nature, the space of contestability. Far from being a safe and merely bourgeois phenomenon, democracy shows the radical incompleteness of all forms of identification.

The third dimension of the paradox of this institution concerns the nature of

²The extent of the intolerance characterising the South African political landscape, most recently, has been visible in the extreme violence in the PWV-region as well as kwaZulu-Natal. Other indicators can be used here as well. For example, a survey of the Western Cape region showed that 61% of Africans and 45% of Coloureds would not allow a political party they oppose to make political speeches on their home turf (Collins, 1994). Shortly before the elections, voter education programmes were reportedly being thwarted in kwaZulu-Natal by both the Inkatha Freedom Party and the African National Congress. Several incidents in the rest of the country was reported where speakers were violently prohibited from addressing political meetings. These more recent indicators should, of course, not overshadow the fact that the political history of South Africa as a whole can be described as a severely intolerant one.

the subject to complement this empty space. We can ask with Žižek, »who is the subject of democracy?« The answer? The subject of abstraction, »the empty punctuality we reach after subtracting all the fullness of particular contents« (Žižek 1991:190) As both Laclau and Žižek, following Lacan, have argued, the important point here is not simply the empty point of reference, the »all people *without regard* to...« which forms the preamble to every democratic credo (Žižek 1991:190). Rather, what is crucial is the fact that the non-substantiality of subjectivity, or to put it in Lacanian terms, the subject of a constitutive lack, the barred subject, inaugurates the need for *identification*.

However, here the further paradox, or perhaps *the* paradox of democracy emerges. For democracy, in order to be democracy at all, has to be anti-humanistic in that it has to abstract from specificity. Yet, it also has to engender acts of identification which will always threaten the very moment of abstraction itself, which will »smear« democracy with particularity (Žižek, 1991:192). This is the very space in which the recent debate between liberals and communitarians is constituted, with liberals focussing exclusively on the abstraction of the subject from all context – exemplified in the Rawlsian »veil of ignorance« – while communitarians, in what had to amount to anti-democratic gestures, tended to solidify the subject, cementing it for ever in the bonds of community. Neither of these options will do, and while it is not possible here to discuss the matter in detail, it is necessary to signal our disquiet with these »either-or« options, both of which misrecognises the complexity as well as the essential finitude, not only of the subject, but of the very space of democracy itself.

Minimal remainders

Instead of seeing this »smearing« of democracy with singularity as a disaster, it is necessary to recognise that democracy arises in the very *tension* of this empty space. Or perhaps, it could better be designated as a non-full space, a space marked forever with a radical impossibility. The questioning of forms of universality by the emerging particularisms of our time should thus not lead to a simplistic reassertion of universality as such. It is in the terrain of the tension between the emptiness of universalism, and the particularistic smearing of the democratic space, that we will be able to renegotiate not only spaces for the democratic recognition of particularity, but also for the revalorization of quasi-transcendental universalisms. We will return to the theoretical nuances of this phenomenon. However, in order not to be accused of excessive theoreticism, let us address these issues in the concrete-historico setting of the transition we are witnessing in South African politics.

Closures

It is a truism to say that changes in the political imaginary structuring South African politics are taking place against the grain of developments in world politics. It is almost *passé* to remark that since 1989, with the end of globalising ideologies, we have entered the realm of a vicious proliferation of particularistic forms of identification. In the absence of a single principle of division of international frontiers, with the present undermining of universalistic forms of thought, the new South Africa appears almost as an anachronism, out of place in the contemporary world. But precisely for this reason, South Africa now also acts as a crucial signifier in the imaginary of the West. In contrast to its earlier pariah status, it now is a site invested with the most extreme of hopes. We will explore this dimension further. However, let me first consider the role played by 1989 in the South African context, for it is in the precise manner of its articulation, that its significance is to be found. It is of course well known that the February 2, 1990 FW de Klerk speech, unbanning the ANC, SACP and other political organisations, very much took its cue from the series of events marked by 1989:

»The year 1989 will be known in history as the year of the death of Stalinist communism. The effects of these events for Europe are unpredictable, and they will also be of decisive importance for Africa... The implosion of the Marxist economic system of Eastern Europe stands as a warning against all those who want to persevere with this in Africa.« (Hansard, 2 February 1990, kol.3, my translation)

Thus, setting the scene for the reconstruction of South Africa, the creation of a »just political order in which every will have equal rights... [and] opportunity« (Hansard 2 February 1990, kol.2). It is important that the moment of the death of »Stalinism« and »Marxism«, coincides with the death of apartheid.

This, of course, does not come as a surprise. Indeed in the contemporary international political context referred to earlier, the end of grand narratives inevitably had to mark the project of apartheid. Let us forget, let us reflect for a moment on the nature of this project. Elsewhere I have characterised the *logic* of apartheid as an identitary logic, one in which the closure and purity of identity took primacy.³ The complicated vicissitudes of this project should not be allowed to obscure the centrality and specificity of its logic in the shaping of the South African political landscape. I will not dwell on the nature of apartheid here. However, it is necessary to reflect briefly on the lingering effect this discourse of closure may have on the longer term prospects for a

³ My argument concerning the logic of apartheid is elaborated in Norval (1994b).

democratic settlement in South Africa. Three areas of identity formation are crucial in this respect. They are, the struggles around Inkatha and the Zulu monarchy; the question of coloured identity, and the role of the far-right.⁴ We will focus only on the third: the grouping of forces aligned around the far right Afrikaner Volksfront and the Freedom Front under the leadership of General Constand Viljoen.⁵ The reasons for this choice are the following. Literature on these groupings is scant and largely journalistic accounts written either by sympathisers or scaremongers. Academic accounts are few and far between and tend to subscribe to simplistic views of history, locating the re-emergence of the radical right in the 1980s and 1990s as a straight-forward continuation of a certain tradition of »Afrikaner nationalism«.⁶

Very little attention has been given to the precise *imaginary* feeding into the constitution of these groupings. It has been all too easy to pigeonhole these groupings in a rather simplistic fashion as just one more manifestation of the sort of extreme racist discourse which informed segregation as well as apartheid discourses, resulting, once again in a left impotence in front of the values espoused by these forces. This evaluation may not be entirely out of place. Especially the Afrikaner Volksfront makes no effort to conceal their overt racist criteria of inclusion and exclusion contained in their conception of the »Afrikaner *volk*«.⁷ The situation with regard to the Freedom Front, however, is

⁴ The struggles between Inkatha and the ANC is well documented and analysed in the existing literature. This is not the case with reference to the question of Coloured identity and the far right. I have discussed some of the problems with regard to the former in Norval (1994c).

⁵ The Freedom Front (*Vryheidsfront*) was formed in March 1994 when General Constant Viljoen decided to break away from the Afrikaner Volksfront, and to participate in the April elections. A considerable amount of overlap in terms of membership affiliation continued to exist between the two organisations.

⁶ See, for example, the recent study by Van Rooyen (1994) on the »hard right« where he argues that »as the NP expanded its narrow ethnic origins to incorporate a broader white nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s, and an even broader territorially based South African nationalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was left for the right wing to take up the cause of Afrikaner nationalism« (1994:3). Van Rooyen's account leads him into two difficulties. The first is the tendency to assume the existence of an »Afrikaner ethnicity«, even if he tends to emphasize its non-homogeneity insofar as it is expressed in Afrikaner nationalism. Drawing on Horowitz in this respect, Van Rooyen assumes a highly questionable naturalistic account of the »psychological tendencies inherent in ethnicity«, such that ethnic conflict should be understood in terms of the collective drive by ethnic groups to obtain or maintain social status and power (1994:201). The second is that, in spite of his emphasis on disunity within Afrikaner nationalist circles, he ends up affirming a continuist view of history which holds to the idea that the right can only be explained as a continuation of that tradition. Such a simplistic affirmation of continuities is precisely what, I would argue, is questionable if we are to understand the contemporary right in South Africa today.

⁷ An Afrikaner Volksfront spokesperson, for example, suggested that the issue of membership of the *volk* may easily be decided by applying the »d/jakkals« test (Aucamp, 1994). Should a

markedly more complicated by the precise articulation and contextualisation of the demand for a *volkstaat*. Here is articulated a second time what seems, at first glance, a tragic enactment of apartheid discourse, a yearning for a territorially sovereign state where the »Afrikaner people« can be at home. However, it is important not to proceed too quickly here. We need to investigate more closely what and whom exactly is designated by the notion of the »Afrikaner volk«. In this respect, it is necessary to investigate the functioning of »1989« in the discourse of the Freedom Front (FF), and the role it plays in the distancing of their discourse from that of traditional apartheid. This distancing occurs in the discourses of most of the far right groupings organising themselves around the notion of a *volkstaat*. Across most of the spectrum of far right discourses, apartheid is not regarded as the saviour-ideology of the Afrikaner. Rather, it is seen as that which ruined their case for a territorially sovereign state. It is argued that while much has been written on »the effects of apartheid on Africans, Coloureds and Indians, on the ecology, white rhino (*sic!*) and whatever else«, no study has been done of the effects of apartheid on the Afrikanervolk (Bruwer, 1992).⁸

Apartheid, here reduced to an ideology which entrenched white privilege on a racial basis, is regarded as »the opium of the masses« in that it created a false illusion that the Afrikaner had a »land of its own« (Bruwer, 1992), blinding them to the »blackening« (*verswarting en verbruining*) of »white South Africa«. In fact, apartheid's legacy for the »Afrikaner people« is that it left them in the position of »a people without a country«, a homeless people. Moreover, by conflating the retention of political power and the uplifting of the volk, apartheid created a nation of servile civil servants, particularly vulnerable to any change in regime. It stripped the Afrikanervolk from its territorial basis and work ethic, leading to moral and territorial decay.⁹ Already from this, it is clear that the contemporary right cannot be seen as a simple continuation of the extreme, dogmatic forms of Afrikaner nationalism. However difficult to swallow politically, it must be emphasized that there is a certain distancing from apartheid which makes it untenable to conflate it with earlier forms of rightwing ideology. Simply to regard the right as a spent force, built on outdated and

person pronounce the Afrikaans word »jakkals« on its »standard« pronunciation (»jakkals«) then s/he clearly is a member of the *volk*. Should it be pronounced »djakkals« instead, such a person is excluded from membership. This racist »test« is clearly designed to exclude Coloured Afrikaners from the *volk*, and is reminiscent of the various tests employed in the early apartheid years to establish a person's »race«.

⁸ The series enumerated here reads like the one Borges allegedly took from a Chinese disctionary. Its principle of intelligibility is well-nigh unintelligible to us.

⁹ Here one already sees the »moralism« of the far right emerging. It has to be stressed that it, in this case, is also coupled with a clear anti-semitic thrust.

discredited ideological structures would be a mistake, both in theoretical and political terms, for the rearticulation effected in their discourse may have far-reaching and unforeseen resonances in a changed international context.

This brings us to the signifying force which the post-1989 world has in the discourse of the *volkstaat* ideologues. The most sophisticated version of this articulation is to be found in the analysis of the Freedom Front, also making it a »milder« version of the argument, compared for example to the position of the Afrikaner Volksfront. Distinguishing between the illegitimate *racial* basis of apartheid, and legitimate *ethnic* forms of identification in our contemporary world, it is argued by Corne Mulder – constitutional expert of the Freedom Front – that South Africa's problems are not unique.¹⁰ As in the rest of Africa, colonial boundaries created artificial entities; in the case of South Africa, the non-existent »South Africans«.¹¹ Having left the *uhuru* phase behind, Africa is now in a »democratising« phase. For Mulder, what is important to remember in this context is that emerging demands for »ethnically« based democracies cannot be separated from the increasing globalisation of the world economy. Economic interdependence is coupled everywhere with demands for territorial separatism. Here once again, the current ideologists of the right are distancing themselves from the tradition of Afrikaner separatism, as it was, for example, found in the early SABRA demands for »total apartheid«, which meant apartheid both in the political and economic spheres.¹²

Such demands for a sovereign Afrikaner territory can be pursued in two ways: via conflict or via constitutional settlement. Referring to the recently won »selfgoverning status« of Palestine, the Freedom Front holds that their struggle today, far from being anachronistic, is wholly in step with developments in our contemporary world. While Palestine acts as positive referent here (and it is interesting to note here that Palestine has replaced the role given to Israel by apartheid ideologues), the former Yugoslavia serves as the negative pole. This is especially the case for the Afrikaner Volksfront who holds that they are simply biding their time. On this reading, the theory and practice of non-racialism will fail in South Africa – witness Inkatha – and the far-right will be ready to step in at the point in which the conflict in South Africa reach Bosnian

¹⁰ Contrast this with the *ad nauseam* argument by apartheid ideologues on the uniqueness of the South African situation!

¹¹ The debate on the existence or not of »South Africans« is a long one. I have discussed this in a historical context in Norval (1994c).

¹² During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the issue of »total« versus »partial« apartheid was a key debating point in Afrikaner nationalist circles. The concern primarily was whether apartheid should be enforced only on the political terrain, or whether it also had to be brought about in the economy. Elements within SABRA (Suid-Afrikaanse Buro vir Rasse Aangeleentede) came out in favour of »total« apartheid, as the only »moral« form which apartheid could take.

proportions.¹³ In keeping with the rest of the world, South Africa is bound to travel the road to inevitable disintegration into ethnic territories.

In contrast to the Afrikaner Volksfront, the Freedom Front is, for the moment, intent on pursuing the constitutional path to the achievement of its goals.¹⁴ In this respect it is important to note that they are already working on what is called the »internationalisation of the Afrikaner question«, and have embarked upon a programme of establishing contacts with senior members of the United Nations (Boutros-Boutros Ghali), of the Commonwealth, and the Organisation for African unity in order to create the climate in which the 54th independent state in Africa may be created via constitutional means. Shortly before the election, General Constand Viljoen negotiated a deal to the effect that the issue of self-determination be written into the constitution. The 34th (34.1) constitutional principle entails that the *right of the South African people as a whole to self-determination, shall not be construed as precluding, within the framework of said right, constitutional provision for a notion of the right to self-determination by any community sharing a common cultural and language heritage, whether in a territorial entity within the Republic or in any other recognised way.*

This concession is described by the Freedom Front as »wrenching open a door for the continuation of ethnic politics in Sout Africa« (Vryheidsfront, »Beginsel 34 en die Volkstaatraad«, 1994). Article 34 further states that self-determination may be established should there be substantial support from within the particular community for such a form of self-determination.¹⁵

This, of course, immediately raises the vexed question as to who the members of such an »Afrikaner volk« may be? While members of the Afrikaner

¹³ The Afrikaner Volksfront seem to hold an apocalyptic belief in the eventual failure of the discourse of non-racialism. In this sense, their »strategy« is simply to bide their time, and to continue to foster alliances with forces which may, under such circumstances, act as allies in the search for territorial autonomy on »ethnic« grounds (Aucamp, 1994).

¹⁴ It is a well-known fact that the Freedom Front can muster considerable military and paramilitary force behind them. These forces, in contrast to those of the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) who were responsible for the battle for Boputhatswana, are highly trained and disciplined. For the moment, however, they remain loyal to General Constand Viljoen and the strategy of constitutional negotiation.

¹⁵ The question of how this support is to be tested is a vexed one. During the election it was suggested that the share of the regional vote gained by the Freedom Front would act as a fair indicator of their support. Regionally this vote ranged from 6% in the Freestate and Northern Cape to 0,5% in Natal. However, the more serious issue concerns the determination of those eligible to participate in the decision for/against a *volkstaat* since a considerable proportion of »Afrikaners« would under no circumstances associate themselves with the »Afrikaner volkstaat« and the Freedom Front.

Volksfront (and presumably also other far right organisations affiliated to them) are quite clear about the need for a racial component to this identity, the Freedom Front is less forthcoming on this point. They insist on the fact that the Vryheidsfront is a »non-racial« organisation (simply not taking »race« as a criterion of qualification) and that it therefore is quite at home in contemporary South Africa (Mulder 1994). However, when pushed on the issue, they argue that the »volk« will have to decide the issue of membership, leaving the door open to racial politics.¹⁶ This suspicion is further reinforced by the emphasis in their discourse on »nonartificial«, that is »organic«, forms of ethnicity and community (Mulder 1994), as well as in their open denial of full citizenship rights to »others« who may find themselves within the boundaries of such a *volkstaat*.¹⁷

Situated then in the double context of the failure of apartheid and the emergence of ethno-nationalism in our contemporary world, the far right continues the tradition of identity politics found in its most extreme form in apartheid. It remains to be seen whether their strategy of distancing themselves from apartheid will succeed. For our purposes, however, it is important to stress the ever-present dimension of closure and exclusivity articulated in this discourse. A discourse in which identity can be seen to pretend to be fully at home with itself, coinciding with itself, externalising all difference into otherness which, quite literally, has to be externalized beyond the borders of the *volkstaat*.

Tensional openings

Exactly how out of step this discourse is with the instituted myth now animating the discourse of a new South African identity becomes clear when it is contrasted to the discourse of non-racialism. Non-racialism, of course, has an

¹⁶ Here, of course, it is clear that the real issue concerns the position of Afrikaans-speaking Coloureds. The Freedom Front, in line with its distancing of itself from the racialism of apartheid, have great difficulty in dealing with this question. They seem to want to have it both ways: an ethnic »Afrikaner« community which nevertheless does not include Coloureds. Thus, the strategy of not making pronouncements on their stand on the »race« -issue, leaving it to the »members« of the *volk* to decide. It is, moreover, interesting to note that »democracy« does not feature prominently in their discourse, if at all. However, legitimacy as to the »membership« of the group is to be bestowed by »democratic« decision-making procedures – as if that would make the result any more palatable!

¹⁷ Further problems arise from the very idea of a *volkstaat*, should one take seriously their principles as stated in their »Core Manifesto«. Whilst maintaining that the *volkstaat* should exist within a broader non-racial South Africa, no concessions are to be made as to the inalienable and »fundamental right of the Afrikanervolk... to self-determination«, including the right »to govern themselves in their own state«. This immediately raises the issue of the extent of the limitation of the rights of »others« /»non-volk residents« in such a state.

illustrious and venerable history in South Africa, informing generations struggling against apartheid, and is perhaps captured best in Mandela's oft-quoted words spoken during his 1964 trial:

»I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all people live together in harmony and with equal opportunities.« (1990: 217)

It is a theme which has continued to structure and inform the voice of the African National Congress, becoming more and more infused with a discourse on national reconciliation during the 1990s and which reached its most eloquent expression in the Presidential inaugural address of the 10 May 1994:

»Out of the experience of an extraordinary human disaster that has lasted too, too long, must be born a society of which all humanity will be proud... The time for the healing of wounds has come... We have, at last, achieved our political emancipation. We pledge to liberate all our people from the continuing bondage of poverty, deprivation, suffering, gender and other discrimination... We enter into a covenant that we shall build the society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts... – a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world... Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will ever again experience the oppression of one by another...« (Mandela, inauguration speech, 10 May 1994, reproduced in The Star, 11 May 1994)

Or as a more irreverent commentator put it: »Miracle-man Mandela« is now president of all South Africans: »the bald-headed and the bearded, housewife and servant, capitalist and unemployed, archbishop and squatter... white and black... (Breytenbach, 1994, my translation). However one puts it, in Mandela's words is contained a vision which is constitutive of the new imaginary which will shape the identities of generations to come, a vision of a »rainbow nation«, one nation constituted of many cultures. While this may hold up a positive vision of a new »nationhood« or South African identity, much depends on exactly how the relation of identification is understood and is given concrete expression.¹⁸

As I have argued elsewhere, if it is simply a matter of a recognition of the plurality of the South African population, it is possible that the discourse of non-racialism may reproduce identity logics.¹⁹ On this reading, the bringing

¹⁸ Much depends here on the concrete expression given to non-racialism and the extent to which it will, of necessity, be limited with respect to the application of »affirmative action« programmes. For a fuller discussion, see Norval (1994a and 1994c).

¹⁹ This possibility has been discussed in greater depth in Norval (1993a).

together of the African, white, coloured and Indian groups, presumes the existence of differential and homogenous communities. While the need for a discourse on unity clearly is urgent in the current South African context, the question at stake here is exactly how that may be thought. If non-racialism is understood on the model of a unification of pre-existing homogenous communities, then several problems may arise in terms of the institution of a democratic form. The most important of these would be precisely the tendency to treat differential communities as internally homogenous, thus obliterating more complex forms of identification which may arise. In its turn, this may lead to difficulties in constructing a South African identity, for if positive identification is attributed to the level of the group, it is difficult to see how an »overarching« identity will be construed, an identity which will of necessity make competing claims to identification.

Quite the reverse may of course also take place. The fact that so much emphasis is placed on »reconciliation« and »nationbuilding« may very well lead to stifling discourses on the »unity« of the nation. However, it is my contention that the tension inherent in the discourse of non-racialism with its simultaneous recognition and subversion of a certain category of »race« will make this very unlikely. This brings me to another possible reading of the discourse of non-racialism, namely one which has as a project the articulation of a terrain of a tension. This can be understood most clearly if one focusses on the problematisation and weakening of discourses of »racism« inherent in *non*-racialism. In positing it as a question, thus not attempting to suppress the problematics of race – as has been the case so often in »progressive« politics – it subverts all naturalising discourses on race. In addition, the form of identification which is to be characteristic of South African identity, does not function at the level of a positive specification of a set of elements. Rather, it tends to emphasise the negative. Put differently, »South African« identity is given precisely in the problematisation of the racial as an ordering principle.

Here I would like to focus for a moment on the question of a negatively constituted identity. This would entail that no positively specified set of elements in principle can exhaust the content of an identity. In fact, one may put it even stronger and argue that such a form of identification recognises the fact that an identity can only be formed in the process of differentiating itself from something else. The essence of an identity is thus not given in positive characteristics, but in and through the moment of exclusion, in what it externalises as other. In the case of non-racialism, the role of the other is taken by naturalising discourses on race, of which apartheid is the exemplary case. Non-racialism thus articulates itself in this field of denial of the other; it recognises the absence of a natural community of identity, and consequently

the need to construct a community as a project.²⁰ This project animates an identity never quite at home with itself.

Inherent in this discourse is thus the possibility of coming to terms with the contingency and fluidity of forms of identification, of taking the non-closure of identity seriously. This, of course, takes us directly back to our earlier remarks on the form of the subject appropriate to the democratic form. Following Žižek, I have argued that the subject of democracy has to be a non-substantial subject. However, before proceeding any further, a number of further specifications, not made by Žižek, have to be added. The problem of remaining at the level of addressing the question of a democratic subjectivity at the level of the »empty subject«, is the following. The lack inherent in all identities inaugurates the *general* need for identification. But, and this cannot be over-emphasised, there is *nothing* in the form of lack as such, which in and of itself will lead to a »democratic« form of identification. To put it differently, nothing can be read off from the subject of lack.

What then is one to make of my remarks concerning the discourse of non-racialism and its »negative«, non-substantial form? Here the notion of non-racialism which has been articulated in the South African context has to be fleshed out in greater detail. Two remarks in terms of its relation to a discourse on democracy are particularly pertinent here. The first is that this signifier acted as a nodal point in the discourses of resistance, »stitching« together many other signifiers, of which the demand for democracy, was one of the most central ones. The discourse of non-racialism thus acted as a signifier designating a whole series of demands. But secondly, and more to the point here, is the fact that the discourse of non-racialism, though it is a negatively formulated discourse, is nevertheless »smeared« with a certain particularity. That is to say, it is not simply a discourse emptied of all concreteness. It articulates itself precisely in a *context*. It is marked by this context. It cannot be absolutely abstracted from this context. And it is this »stain«, the fact of its non-total emptiness that allows in the final instance for its articulation to a democratic project. While holding off essentialist and identitarian conceptions of identity with its emphasis on the negatory character of non-racialism, it nevertheless contains a certain contextual particularity which gives a democratic content to forms of identification. It opens and delineates a certain space of identification, and the combination of these two elements – the holding open of a space of identification in principle on the one hand, and the provi-

²⁰ This may amount to an overestimation of the extent to which the African National Congress in fact views this community. Some would argue that it rests on a »given« and »common humanity« basis.

sional filling of that space on the other – is what characterises the democratic space, what makes of identity always to an extent an *identité à venir*. That is, the realisation of the impossibility of ever fully occupying the space of power.

Spectral desires

At this point it is necessary to return to the wider context in which this imaginary has been instituted. The events sparked off by the unbanning of the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party and other proscribed organisations in February 1990, also played an important role in the imaginary of the West in the post-1989 context. South Africa has become a signifier of hope in an international political landscape which increasingly is torn apart by ethno-nationalist struggles. Against such violent and aggressive particularisms, the formation of a new South Africa, a country for »all its people's« stand as a reminder of the power of the universalism or »anti-humanist humanism« of discourses of democracy. In this sense, the new South Africa acts out what is lacking in the »post-historical« West itself: a sense of optimism, engagement and hope. This investment by the spectating West, however, is not without its difficulties, for it could involve a refusal to come to terms with some of the problems which may be created by an unabashed universalism in the South African context.²¹ Moreover, the colonial legacy has to make one somewhat suspicious of the »good intentions« of the other.

This problem can be discussed, metaphorically, through the imminent re-turn to South Africa of the collection of artworks »*contre/against apartheid*«. ²² This collection of works took the form of a traveling exhibition to be presented as a *gift* to the first democratically elected government of South Africa.

»But it is also that God who, in the action of his anger ... annuls the gift of tongues, or at least embroils it, sows confusion among his sons, and poison the present.« (Gift-gift) (Derrida 1991:246)

As is well known in the wake of Derrida's writings on the subject, the structure of the gift is a dual one: indicating both a giving without demand and the possibility of a poison (Derrida 1985:246). What is at stake here then are the various dimensions and implications of this gift to the new South Africa: the gift as recognition of the accomplishments of generations struggling for a democratic settlement in the country which has become the signifier of oppression in the international world; the gift coming home, to its original place; the

²¹ See Norval (1993b).

²² This moving exhibition came to »academic« public knowledge with the publication in *Critical Inquiry* of Derrida's piece originally written for the catalogue accompanying the exhibition.

effects of this homecoming, of the coming to rest of a moving, fluid exhibition; the gift poisoning the present...

We can only touch upon some of these dimensions. For our present purposes, it is perhaps the most important to concentrate upon what is given in the gift of the »*contre/against apartheid*« exhibition. To do this, one has to clarify what this exhibition signified in the first place. It had to serve as a reminder in the world at large of the presence of the heinous crime of apartheid. Lest we forget.²³ In addition, it also had to serve as a signifier of hope. The exhibition would travel the cities of the world until such time as it could return home to take its rightful place in a democratic South Africa. That time is now. But, a question remains. This question concerns the homecoming of the exhibition. What could it possibly mean for an exhibition to come home to a place where it never was at home, to a place which never was its native land, to take up its birthright, its residency in a dwellingplace foreign to it? Moreover, could an exhibition, born to dwell restlessly, come home, come to rest? Would that signify its »full realization«?

Different possibilities are opened up here. One would certainly be to argue that this exhibition, insofar as it signifies an abhorrence with the thing itself, with racism as such, and insofar as it therefore carries a significance far wider than the historically existent state of apartheid, should never come to rest. Not in South Africa. Not anywhere. Lest we forget. It should continue to circulate in the capitals of the world. Especially now, when we are faced with the full horrors of an explosion of ethno-nationalisms and fundamentalisms in a post-cold war world.

Another possibility would be to argue that it *should* come to South Africa, for South Africa now is the place where it belongs. But to repeat the questions raised earlier: how can something whose very nature was conceived as being in movement, come to belong anywhere? Would it not be better to leave it as a signifier of racism in general? Again, various possible modes of thinking »belonging« are possible. The most common-sensical and most dangerous (poisonous) would be simply to argue that since apartheid has come to an end, has been superseded once and for all, that the rightful place of the exhibition is inside the geographical boundaries of the new South Africa. Such a rendering of »belonging« would, to my mind, be completely out of touch and against the ethos of the exhibition; it would force it to rest, force it into a definitive mould. Moreover, such a definition, a location, a placement would signify politically that it is possible to end completely, to create an absolute and unequivocal

²³ I treated the complicated question of the role of the memory of apartheid today in Norval (1994a).

break with the past. It is precisely that which has to be problematised, for such a rendering would simply reinforce identity logics once again.

Deferred homecomings

What then are the alternatives? Another way of conceiving of the exhibition would be neither to deny its legitimate place in South Africa, nor to confine it to that geographical and signitive space, but combining its specific and universal value, its necessary content and that which escapes all content. Indeed, one could think it along the lines of a never-ending movement, or space of identification proper to the democratic space and its articulation in the discourse of non-racialism. That is, the exhibition »*contre/against apartheid*« could be argued to have the character of the negative attributed to non-racialism earlier. In that case, a break with apartheid will not be able to function as an absolute one, not yet, in any case. Apartheid, for the time being, will remain its other. It will keep open the democratic space. Its homecoming will always be a radically delayed one. A deferred homecoming. A coming home which never quite reaches home. The tension characteristic of the democratic space will be replicated there. In conclusion: if it could find its home, once and for all, if the gap between identity and identification could be closed, »society would have found its final form and democratic interaction would be impossible. It is because the gap cannot be filled that society can be constructed as that political management of its own impossibility that we call democracy« (Laclau 1994:12).

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