

Chapter 2:

An Approach to Viable Futures

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The identification of human suffering requires, therefore, a great investment in oppositional representation and imagination [...] to think emancipation and the struggle for emancipation is both an act of social transgressions and an act of epistemological transgression (Bounventura de Sousa Santos 1995: 516 & xii).

This most apt quotation from Boanventura de Sousa Santos, which inspired the thinking behind the book initiative, struck me as intriguingly disturbing. I was struck by my reaction to this quotation, remembering that the expression “investment in oppositional representation and imagination” could have signified, not too long ago, an unproblematic positioning of myself in that kind of investment. This kind of investment had immediate targets, easily identified, whose location was out there, external to myself. Transgressions, whether social or epistemological, were willed violations against an illegitimate order, and were accorded immediate validity and legitimacy. That was the context of struggle where the lines of conflict were clear, with a limited range of doubt.

Now I find that reading such a statement sets up an uncomfortable ambiguity. Suddenly, I experience the erstwhile target out there as something intimately inside of me. Opposed positionalities, which in the past were elements of an external drama, I now experience as located inside of me. This, you will admit, constitutes a terrain of immense confusion. But it is a confusion, I suspect, that all who have agreed to participate in this book initiative, experienced to varying degrees. But it is a confusion, I submit, we need to embrace.

This confusion may have something to do with the fact that the new ascendant order could easily perceive itself in the first instance as a colossal, heroic nation-wide unit made up of identical and undifferentiated experiences. The defining measure of such identity would be broad agreement on the necessity of an historic outcome: in our case the achievement of a

democratic vision. The unifying effect of an achieved goal could impose illusory notions not of common purpose (because common purpose is in place), but of common *understandings* of how that overarching democratic purpose could be achieved. Insufficiently interrogated role ascription in terms of the respective duties of the elected and the electors could easily substitute for processes of clarification.

If I were to use this personal experience as a metaphor for a larger social process, I would say that April 1994 brought about an almost complete displacement of one oppositional pole, in a dialectical relationship, by its challenger opposite. The problem is that when the new order took over we did not fully appreciate just to what extent the structural elements, not its content, of an external drama that we both witnessed and participated in could now take place in an internalised, uncontested national space where we ourselves had a full capacity to generate new oppositional poles.

So the shock of Bouventura de Sousa Santos's quotation is that it forced me to confess that I increasingly experience the need to transgress, but feel anguished by the thought that my transgressions, committed in the belief that they represent a process of democratic self-actualisation, could be mistaken for the outmoded oppositions of old. This new world of my own, the space that is South Africa, one that I'm so committed to, and which has given me a historic sense of belonging such as I've never experienced before, is not immune to the transgressions of the kind Boaventura de Sousa Santos invokes, and that, even more, I am capable of being, not only the author of such transgressions, but also of claiming entitlement to such authorship.

But perhaps the worst part of the dilemma is the suspicion that the process of mistaking a creative transgression for what it is not could itself be a product of outmoded oppositions still embedded in the way new political authority perceives the drama. This means there will be times when the battle is not between the new and the new, but between the new and lingering forms of the old that have become embedded not only in others, but also in myself. Furthermore, continuing contestations between the embedded old and the ascendant new, have the very real potential to compromise and threaten the necessary and legitimate

contestation between the new and the new. This they can do by forcing opposition to take on the character of the old.

If such a serious perceptual condition could occur both ways, it suggests that first, the reality of new and contesting positionalities be accepted, and following that, the reality of mutual vulnerabilities be recognised, accepted and declared. No one, not even in government, can claim unblemished certitude. This acceptance of mutual vulnerability is crucial, because it allows for other things to follow. For a start, it could clear the public space for more honesty. Declared doubts are always empowering. They create grounds for new opportunities and solutions. They breed critical self-confidence. I want to illustrate the crucial issues involved with two examples.

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We are learning that the desirable policy of Black Empowerment contains pitfalls whose magnitude was not sufficiently anticipated. Black people in business and government, experiencing enormous financial and political power respectively, can be severely compromised by uninterrogated, received and unsustainable structures of authority and reward incentives. The convergence of old material needs, inherited rewards, and political legitimacy can weaken individual moral resolve, which can transform a competent and proven struggle stalwart into a common corrupt official.

To what extent can an inherited system and its structures of operation, which have the capacity to engender and spread moral anguish, be perceived to be so difficult to dislodge that the only way out is to rationalise ourselves out of resultant dilemmas by granting moral legitimacy to this situation in the same way that theft from the rich was given a political justification? The capacity of an enduring inherited system to undermine a new order may lead the new order to invent and invest in measures that incrementally undermine its own legitimacy. It is a process of deligitimisation that can begin within a ruling party and then spread to the rest of society.

Comrades in government, driven by the understandable pressure “to deliver”, may expect compliance from comrades located elsewhere in the structure of governance, not necessarily because the policies and measures to implement them make sense, and sufficient energies have been spend to secure by-in, but because the new officials assume loyalties of old to kick in. In doing so, they may fail to recognise the shifting grounds of relationships, which are structural, role defined, and not personal. Activists who could spot a bureaucrat a thousand miles away are unable to recognise bureaucrats in themselves, not because of a conceptual inability to do so, but because of the pressure “to deliver” and its tendency to suck an officer into tunnel vision.

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The second issue involves the relationship between political power and social enablement. I will put it this way: a new democratic government is in danger, in the medium to long term, which does not embrace multiple positionalities within itself. Such multiplicity may pose difficulties in the management of opinions, but almost always ensures higher order decision-making. Each position in a field of multiple positionalities deserves to be understood before it is discarded. The mechanisms of creating such an understanding are crucial.

It might be argued, for example, that the African National Congress (ANC) has always entertained difference. True. The ‘broad church’ metaphor has been used to describe this character of the ANC. The metaphor also resonates in the expression, “the ANC family.” But the metaphor describes an important field of affective unities that worked in the form of ever widening circles of inclusion, crucial in the act of resistance. Increasingly, the affective, as a principle for ensuring broad unity, may need to give way to the professional. The ‘broad church’ on its own cannot deliver. The need for internal coherence is no longer for the purposes of preventing infiltration by apartheid state agents, but to professionalise action. The reaction to these two “threats” can never be the same.

I define the professional as a mechanism for achieving praxis in a legalised and regulated environment. The crucial thing is that the laws and regulations referred to will have been the

product of a particular political vision. They may have their origins in voluntary and visionary association, but evolve towards the requirements of compliance and enforcement as contributory to achieving the broad vision. The professionalisation of decision-making demands more variety of opinion, including counter opinion, as a principle to ensure the highest integrity of a decision. Not every instance of strong dissent should be viewed as a political challenge. Political loyalty and strong dissent on issues are not necessarily in opposition. The latter, deployed in a context of strong decision-making, may actually affirm the former. There is a need to err on the side of stretching the boundaries of tolerance.

In a new democracy that still seeks to consolidate the sense of public comfort with the workings of democratic governance, public humiliations of dissenting individuals are not a creative way of resolving internal differences. They suggest a reflex substitution of discipline for understanding. Rather than ensure organisational integrity, they may be seen as early hints of organisational decay. Because they ascribe disloyalty to dissent too soon, rather than consolidate a sense of internal legitimacy, they suggest insecurity and intolerance. These negative outcomes are not intended, they arise automatically from problematic choices.

By “decay” I am referring not due to old age or some creeping sense of irrelevance. I’m referring to possible threats to the new democracy’s ability to achieve self-actualisation. Some choices can be formidable obstacles to democratic self-actualisation.

I understand that in a policy environment supported by law and regulation, as indicated above, there may be an understandable desire to press for compliance and enforcement. But compliance and enforcement do not always, on their own, yield the required results. A government in power will need to create a safe space in the public domain where its own internal contestations can, from time to time, be played out without the fear or threat of being compromised politically. They can then withdraw into the formal sphere of power play and turn understandings into decisions without risking massive fracture. This space can be an interface between public policy players and an array of civic society players of the kind represented in this volume.

Such a safe space need not become a formal structure like NEDLAC, for example. Formal structures soon lead to expectations of binding outcomes. Non-binding outcomes represent a coalescence of understandings that can be more durable than signed declarations because they activate the integrity of moral commitment. The safe space can be through multiple forms of cross-sectoral engagements, public debates, inside seminars, safe public spaces legitimise the creativity inherent in differences of opinion. This approach would enable a government in power to manage the creative tension between the “broad church” and central authority by extending circles of inclusion within a professionalised ethos, as I have defined it.

Of course, part of the problem is dealing with the notion of “opposition.” The logic I have been pursuing strongly suggests that we should anticipate the arrival of a moment when there is no longer a single, dominant political force as is currently the case. The measure of current political maturity will be in how we create conditions that anticipate that moment rather than ones that seek to prevent it. This is the formidable challenge of a popular post-apartheid government. Can it conceptually anticipate a future when it is no longer overwhelmingly in control, and resist the temptation to prevent such an eventuality? Successfully resisting such an option would enable its vision and its ultimate legacy to our country, to manifest itself in different articulations of itself, which, among them, contend for social influence.

The aim of this conceptual approach is to enable the current government to manage its own anxieties, and make choices with some confidence. It is a way of focussing and reflecting on current strategies, testing them for long-term aptness and durability. I have been concerned in my brief remarks to understand some of the springs of certain emergent forms of discomfort in our transition that need attention before they fester into incurable sores. The subject is a complex one. But articulating the concerns is absolutely important in its own right. The thing is to let the concerns to critically play themselves out in the public domain.

Reference

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