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Making Sense of Revolution Lost

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Our colleague, media scholar James Curran, he of the book, *Power Without Responsibility*, inquired in 1994 about early post-apartheid changes in South Africa. After hearing a litany of complaints he simply retorted: “Democracy is merely the most efficient way of managing corruption. Nothing more, nothing less”. This comment revealed a flaw in Western thinking about enforcing democracy across the world – namely, in places where people vote ethnically or racially, democracy actually creates institutionalized corruption. And so our unrealistic hopes, our idealistic expectations that somehow we in South Africa would create a perfect society have all but vanished. Now ageing ex-United Democratic Front (UDF) activists huddle in dark corners talking about the “failed state”, what could have been, what once was when we had actively contributed to a UDF-led partial democracy – if only in the sphere of resistance. This was an indeterminate time in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the UDF had created liberated urban spaces, when leaders earned respect and support by hard constituency work, and when street committees ensured civil safety. This was a time when the alternative presses were democratic, participatory, and when they acted as local or sectoral fulcrums of democracy (see Tomaselli and Louw 1991). The notion of ‘accountability’ was the supreme discipline for UDF-supporting anti-apartheid collectives (and sometimes a threat also).

This was a time when popular leaders and alternative press editors like Trevor Manuel, later a Minister of Finance, had worked hard to earn consent of the governed, mobilised through community newspapers like *Grassroots* in the Western Cape to create the local fulcrums of democracy and an emergent public sphere. This was a time when we understood how media and cultural mobilisation helped us to identify, develop, and create a national project. This was a time when the foundations of media freedom and party-political media policies were laid, only to be later squandered, and lost in the state’s adoption of a whole slew of media management and secrecy bills, many of them far more draconian than anything that had been enacted during apartheid.

Everyone wanted to be witness to a post-apartheid “miracle”, and in the 1990s a number of activists wrote about the hard work through which it was achieved (see, e.g., Taylor 1996). Debates on media policy were intensive (see Louw 1993; Mpfu et al 1996; Jabulani 1991). But

just ten years later, the miracle had gone sour. One of the reasons is that for many years too many people looked the other way and/or became silent as the ruling African National Congress (ANC) slipped into poor and often, corrupt, nepotistic and brutal governance.

Why was silence the predominant response? This is the question that this article addresses.

This paper seeks to identify competing discourses and patterns of behaviour within South Africa's print media in its general reporting on the transition to power by the new African National Congress (ANC)-led government following the first democratic general election held in April 1994. A range of sources are used including media stories and websites. Stories (drawn from the full spectrum of media sources) are used to identify broad patterns of behaviour. But in addition, all political organizations now put up on their websites full speeches, policy documents and media releases. These proved during the course of our research to offer a gold mine of information about discourse formation and the competition between the various discourses that characterize contemporary South Africa.

Another important source of information is You Tube where a range of political players and media now regularly post material. You Tube also transmits expressions of popular culture including political songs by Julius Malema, Jacob Zuma, Steve Hofmeyr and Bok van Blerk – who represent different ideological positions. The Internet has, of course, also become an important space for the circulation of political memes, jokes and attacks on opponents. These can be extraordinarily revealing about the mood of different sectors of society. When taken as a whole they tell us much about the political struggles taking place. Another important source of insights was the use of journalistic vox pops – i.e., simply asking people about their views. But when using vox pops it is necessarily important to speak to a wide range of people so as to ensure one reaches a full demographic spread of regions, class, age, race, ethnicity and educational level. All of these methods of information retrieval were applied to piece together a phenomenological feel for the discursive shifts that characterize an ever-changing South African social and political milieu.

The Miracle and Improvising the Nation

The early 1990s witnessed an extraordinary event as all parties to then formation of the future state engaged in extensive negotiations via CODESSA, the Convention for a Democratic South Africa. Policy, politics, visions and missions were debated, published and circulated. The key issues were how to negotiate the competing Afrikaner and black nationalisms, how to bring the civil war to a close, and how to incorporate everyone and all groups into a still to be formed unified nation – geographically, politically and administratively. The apartheid homelands were to be re-incorporated into this unification, which proved difficult because of resistance from apartheid made nationalisms – for example, long after whites had given up on apartheid, Zulu and Tswana nationalist sought on to maintain the system. In Benedict Anderson's (1983) terms, the 'nation' had yet to be 'imagined', and Alexander Johnston's (2014) question was, 'how could nation be 'improvised'. CODESSA provided both sites in that a new nation was imagined and codified in a constitution, while an initially neo-liberal state was improvised to manage the transition under President Nelson Mandela.

It was during Thabo Mbeki presidency (1998-2004) that the nation was re-imagined via a recovery of a racial path dependency that elevated black African nationalism over non-racialism, and which in attempting to redress economic disparities actually exacerbated them (Moeletsi Mbeki 2009). The improvised nation that was imagined in 1990s was re-articulated after 2000 into race-based demographic labour and economic planning model, though much more benign than was apartheid.

The trans-class, trans-race, trans-cultural and trans-linguistic UDF alliance of the 1980s mutated by 2000 into the ANC's Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policy that sought to transfer wealth from whites to an emergent black bourgeoisie whose membership of the ruling ANC qualified them for rapid class mobility. Black wealth, as Moeletsi Mbeki (1999) observes, was not to be created by black entrepreneurs, but was to be legislated. This took two specific forms: a) transfer of 51% shareholding to politically connected black business people (the amaBEE); b) deployment of ANC cadres to the massive parastatal companies as CEOs, board members and top appointments, irrespective of their qualifications, experience and ability to manage these multi-billion dollar state-owned firms in transport, electricity, telephony, broadcasting etc. While the situation is much more complex than this, this is the background to the points made below.

How 'the miracle' was lost

In hindsight, the media may have been part of the problem that best the newly forming state from 1994. President Thabo Mbeki's consolidation of the ANC's hegemony was paralleled by media that traded on the miracle, which appeared to have protected capitalism and seen off socialism. Just as the SA Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) had been allegedly 'His Master's Voice' under the National Party, so the Corporation returned to this role under Mbeki, and consolidated under Zuma who ousted Mbeki as President. But where previously the SABC had promoted apartheid ideology, under Mbeki it promoted black nationalist ideology. The SABC even compiled an editorial blacklist of persons with views unacceptable to Mbeki (Louw & Milton, 2012: 290). This list included black considered hostile to the new elite

When the ANC came to power in April 1994 both the English and Afrikaans press fell in behind Mandela. Mandela became a 'media darling' – someone the media eulogized rather than scrutinized. Editors initially adopted the attitude that South Africa's political transformation was very fragile; they thus conferred an inexperienced ANC government a chance to stabilize a political system that could easily disintegrate. As a consequence, the press largely abandoned its watchdog role in favour of a curious form of sunshine journalism.

'Give them a chance' journalism meant that few, initially reported on government mismanagement, corruption, patronage and service delivery failures, or on the ANC failure to deliver on their election promises. This 'give them a chance' journalism became a habit and characterised the press' coverage of the ANC for well over a decade. Now, ironically, many of the highly positioned politicians then praised by the press as democrats are now leading the charge against media freedom. The resultant sunshine journalism was given a boost by Mbeki's policy shift to the Growth, Empowerment and Redistribution (GEAR) economic intervention, because this shift facilitated the forging of links between ANC crony capitalists and the white dominated business sector. This translated into liberal press approval of ANC 'moderation'.

Mbeki thus found himself in an enviable position – he did not face much watchdog scrutiny from the press except for his bizarre stance on HIV/AIDS (Tomaselli 2011), while at the same time he set about controlling the most viewed (public) broadcaster in the country. Ironically, what journalistic scrutiny there was came from media organizations that were broadly aligned with the ANC – namely the (social democrat) *Mail & Guardian*, the free-to-air e.tv and a number of black consciousness columnists writing for the corporate, but now union-owned press (Tomaselli

1997). The latter, operating somewhat as an internal opposition, became the most consistent media-voice asking critical questions of ANC governance, with e.tv probing governance from a broadly left-wing advocacy perspective.

The end of 'give them a chance' journalism

In 2004 Mbeki and his ANC-government looked securely ensconced within what had become a one party dominant democracy (Giliomee & Simkins, 1999; Johnston 2014). However, after 2005 the ANC experienced five years of ongoing deterioration in its media image which began with media reporting of the Schabir Shaik corruption/fraud trial, not to mention the press's sustained criticism on HIV policy. By 2010 media coverage of the ANC was so negative that Zuma's government realised that something needed to be done to prevent a full scale exposure of state mismanagement and corruption. The ANC's response was to introduce the Protection of State Information Bill into Parliament in March 2010.

By 2008 neither the English nor the Afrikaans Press, whether white or black-owned, were showing any tolerance towards errors made by the ANC-government. So whereas between 1994 and 2004 the ANC-government faced minimal scrutiny because the press gave the ANC a chance to stabilize a fragile system; after 2008 both the ANC (and its leadership) faced intense press scrutiny. This shift to press scrutiny and watchdog journalism occurred in two stages.

After 2005, the Afrikaans press abandoned sunshine journalism following an ANC announcement that Pretoria was to be renamed Tshwane. This unleashed a wave of Afrikaner resentment and hostility towards the ANC-government best exemplified by the De la Rey phenomenon. De la Rey was a Boer War general (1899-1901) whose mythical anti-imperialist image was ironically leveraged by a number of dissident Afrikaner musicians to remind the current government about the dangers of racial discrimination and cultural marginalisation. As one Afrikaans newspaper editor, Tim Du Plessis (2007) noted, a "gear shift" towards being more vocal and assertive occurred. For the Zuma-government the key fallout from the Pretoria/De la Rey phenomenon was the change it triggered in the Afrikaans press – effectively after 2005 it switched to watchdog journalism. Because the Afrikaans press is read by what is effectively a marginal but financially powerful group, this press shift did not generate a crisis for the Zuma government. In 2008, however, the introduction of electricity rationing resulted in the English-liberal press also

abandoning the ‘give them a chance’ genre of journalism. This was much more serious for the ANC because English is South Africa’s dominant media language, and the language of the polity.

Once the English-liberal press also adopted a watchdog ‘attack’ mode of journalism the government found itself facing unprecedented levels of journalistic scrutiny. But the real catastrophe for Zuma was that this switch back towards watchdog journalism coincided with the fractious struggles taking place inside what is known as the tripartite alliance comprising the ANC, SA Communist Party and Congress of SA Trade Unions. This led to waves of leaked stories to both the English and Afrikaans presses from horrendously ill-disciplined cadres in the alliance. Try as he might, Zuma proved unable to curtail the struggles or the leaking. One reason these fractious struggles became so problematic was because the ANC’s style of governance was based upon a model of ‘cadre deployment’.

In effect, Mbeki had developed a style of governance grounded in patronage – wherein ANC members were ‘deployed’ to all state and economic positions as a strategy to: (i) ensure that ANC-aligned blacks took control of South Africa; (ii) to ‘reward’ loyal party members and (iii) to co-opt (and tame) any members of the tripartite-coalition showing unhappiness with policy-directions. As a consequence, ANC political appointees had become widely dispersed throughout the entire state infrastructure (central, provincial and municipal governments); and in hundreds of massive state owned enterprises (parastatals), many of them deemed to be of strategic national importance (SA Broadcasting Corporation; Electricity supply, Eskom; SA Airways and railways etc.). The problem for Zuma was that as the ANC and its partners uncompromisingly disputed each other in public, so all these deployed cadres from the different patronage-networks and fractions leaked stories about each other (often involving corruption) to the media. As a consequence, the Zuma government looked increasingly dysfunctional as “bad news” flooded out of the alliance.

By 2010 media coverage of the ANC was so consistently negative that Zuma’s government decided to stop the leaking. Protection of State Information Bill was geared to dramatically curtail the ability of South African journalists to expose governance problems.

The silences that harmed South Africa

There are a range of reasons that issues can be taken off the agenda for public debate – including fear, politeness, self-censorship, political correctness and full censorship. Post-apartheid South Africa may not yet have experienced full censorship, but it certainly experienced a curtailed debate under Mbeki’s tenure because too many issues became unmentionable (except in private).

Some of the issues that fell off the agenda during the first decade of ANC rule are discussed below.

Perhaps most importantly was the emergence of a new elite – an elite born of an ANC-run system of state-driven patronage. This elite goes by many names, including the Gucci comrades; the patriotic black bourgeoisie; and the amaBEE (Black Economic Empowerment). The latter is accused of lacking self-reliance and of creating a sense of entitlement, dependency and laziness (Maponya 11 in *Sunday Times Business Times*, December 9, 2012). Moletsi Mbeki (2009), Thabo’s brother, is much harsher, arguing that that BEE – which requires that companies be 51% black-owned has created a small, self-serving *rentier* class of high earners who became billionaires literally overnight. In this guise, the new elite ‘consumes’ capital on a vast scale while the traditionally ‘white’ economic sector continues to produce it. This new amaBEE class and its crass materialism is visible in all South African cities and has generated a sense of cynicism and anger about this elite amongst the non-elite (both black and white).

The problem for South Africa is that this new elite has proven to be inept because one of the unintended consequence of the ANC’s ‘transformation’ policies (of affirmative action, black empowerment and cadre deployment) has been widespread organisational inefficiency and corruption across the entire state sector at every level of government: national, provincial and municipal. As former director general in the Presidency, Frank Chikane, concluded about the post-1994 transformation programme, the ANC retrenched experienced public servants and replaced them with unqualified people. Chikane noted how this had “led to the collapse of the public service” (anon, 2012). The result has been:

- a service-delivery crisis across the country
- the government that fails to deliver on its election promises
- the emergence of a corrupt black elite which has become increasingly unresponsive to the grassroots community, and

- the breakdown of police and judicial services which had left all South Africans vulnerable to rampant crime,

So why was there silence as this elite was brought into being?

In the first few years of ANC rule it occurred because of the Mandela effect – Mandela as ‘media darling’ was above media scrutiny and this rubbed off onto the wider ANC machine. Then, when the ANC embraced neo-liberalism (by adopting GEAR), one could almost hear the sigh of relief from both the English and Afrikaans presses which historically had represented these two different ethnic fractions of capital. The dropping of the RDP (Reconstruction and Development Policy) in 1997 and its replacement with GEAR was a highly significant ANC policy-change, signalling a shift from neo-socialism to neo-liberalism. Naturally, once the ANC adopted GEAR they were viewed as ‘moderates’ and this translated into a new version of the ‘media darling’ effect. The Brenthurst group of businessmen were, of course delighted with GEAR – because it was a vindication of all the resources the white South African business sector had invested in the Urban Foundation since the 1970s – a reformist project to create a pro-capitalist black middle class that could become the new (post-apartheid) ruling group (Louw, 2004: 69). For the old white elite, creating a new ‘moderate’ black elite was precisely what they had intended and so they supported the ANC’s transformation policies as the quickest way to stabilize South Africa.

When the transformation process delivered a black nationalist triumphalism and race populism they turned the other cheek, and when transformation delivered an inexperienced and inefficient elite they looked the other way, assuming that it would get better in due course. But it did not get better. Eventually, after a decade, patience with this elite ran out. Yet this only occurred when the now not-so-new elite began to claw at each other’s throats in factional disputes – disputes that exacerbated the already visible outcomes of poor governance seen in the shape of crime, corruption, gangs, warlords, gated communities, private security, xenophobia (generated by a flood of illegal migrants), the emigration of skilled professionals, and a falling currency.

But there was also another set of reasons that the ANC was not challenged for so many years. This was because the ANC emerged from the anti-apartheid struggle with two great assets – firstly, a competent spin-machine and secondly, huge amounts of goodwill. The ANC used its spin-machine plus the goodwill of liberals, social democrats, the global and South African business elite, and the global media to successfully disseminate a plethora of positive publicity.

ANC spin – obfuscation and deflecting attention

For their first decade in power the ANC evidenced much skill in hiding the inadequacies of their governance by generating ‘noise’ that ‘distracted’ journalists, academics and commentators alike, and which successfully ‘deflected attention’ away from the problems of the transformation model they were rolling out.

The noise generated by the ANC took five forms.

Firstly, during the 1990s the ANC produced beautifully written policies, codes and laws. Often these were produced with the aid of the OECD’s (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) policy transfer industry – an industry that dispatched reconstruction missions to places like Southern Africa and Eastern Europe to teach the native in such places how to behave in accordance with liberal-democratic values. As a result of codifying such well written policies, codes and laws, post-apartheid South Africa became the poster-child of OECD academics, journalists and governments for over a decade. The problem is good policies, codes and laws become mere window-dressing if inept bureaucracies and poor governance prevent these from actually being implemented.

Secondly, the ANC hid behind the discourses of "democracy", "majoritarianism" and "transformation". These terms became useful rhetorical devices that were deployed as forms of neo-religious incantation. Like motherhood, they became inviolable – after all, how could any reasonable person disagree with such ideals. The trouble is, these discourses in the hands of ANC spin doctors effectively became anti-democratic because they shut down debate – they were used to silence anyone who wanted to draw attention to the actual realities of implementing ‘majoritarian-democracy’ and ‘ANC transformation’. Alternative voices could simply be dismissed as ‘unreasonable’ and so a strange kind of uni-dimensionality took hold of South African politics.

Third (and related to the above), critics of the ANC’s policies were accused of, ‘resisting transformation’ or being ‘counter-revolutionary’, and if they happened to be non-black were accused of being ‘racist’. Playing the race card constituted the kiss of death for those targeted, and rendered the vast majority of the non-black population effectively voiceless and disempowered. In essence, the ANC used language as an anti-democratic weapon at the very time that the world was proclaiming the miracle of South Africa’s transformation to “democracy”.

The ANC proved to be very adept at playing these rhetorical games. The impact of deploying these rhetorical weapons was highly damaging to the public sphere and contributed greatly to the silencing of opposition, which in turn helped to create precisely the conditions required for the emergence of an inept and corrupt ruling elite.

Fourth, the ANC learned to play the Mandela card. The world's media had turned Mandela into a "saint" (see Tomaselli and Shepperson 2009). While President he was literally positioned above and beyond politics – an untouchable whose government could not be scrutinised. The problem is, a strong element of this lack of journalistic scrutiny continued beyond Mandela's presidency – so that the 'Party of Mandela' and its policies seemed to somehow remain 'beyond question' for a long time after his retirement.

Fifth, the ANC successfully used various versions of the "victimhood discourse" to explain away the failures of its policies. The three most widely used "victimhood discourses" were to blame apartheid, to blame colonialism, or to blame white racism. The ANC became very skilled at mobilizing these three discourses which were, of course, all intermeshed with the view of the world generated by black nationalism. It was a world view that offered excuses for poor governance. Consequently, the ANC did not take ownership of their own failings or the failings of their constituencies. The repairing of structural failure was thus not on the agenda.

Because the "victimhood discourse" effectively blamed whites (i.e. "the advantaged" or "the previously advantaged") for everything that was wrong in South Africa it served to silence whites from drawing attention to ANC failures because to do so made the white person concerned into a double victimizer of 'black-as-victims' ("the disadvantaged" or "the previously disadvantaged") of a 'shameful past'. This proved to be very helpful for a government that was failing to deliver because it simultaneously (i) blamed whites; (ii) said whites should feel guilty; (iii) labelled whites who did not adopt the 'guilty script' as 'racists'; (iv) cowered whites into silence; (v) excused all manner of poor behaviour from "the previously disadvantaged"; (vi) provided an inbuilt excuse for the construction of a state-run patronage system (affirmative action and black empowerment); and (vii) put the logic of the black nationalist 'victimhood discourse' beyond discussion. One of the silences this produced was around the question of black nationalism. Black nationalism became effectively unchallengeable so that nobody, for example felt free to ask the question why black nationalism is acceptable but Afrikaner nationalism is deemed to have been illegitimate?

And so, majoritarianism was borne. Democracy was no longer about debating policies, the protection of minorities within broader ideological confluences; the media was no longer about the integrity of the public sphere, and the nature of patronage did not change from one government to the next – except, of course, that the state houses built in Soweto in the 1950s on a garden city template – have been augmented with new houses built after 1994 that barely last for three months before falling apart, on estates that are soulless and planning bereft.

Apartheid racial classification continues. Where the UDF truly was a non-racial organisation, the ANC is obsessed with race, multiple shades of black and ‘foreigners, Africans from the rest of Africa. Xenophobia, demonisation and exclusion are the experiences of the later two categories. Equity legislation, for example, requires that Cape Coloureds move to other parts of the country where they are demographically ‘under-represented’ if they want jobs. Coloureds in Durban are told that Cape Coloureds will get preferential treatment for jobs in Durban (where coloureds are supposedly under-represented.) The indigenous San Bushman resent being called ‘coloureds’. Indian South Africans are discriminated against in Durban because they are ‘over-represented’ in this province. Official forms exclude the rest of the world: only ‘Africans, Whites, Coloureds and Indians’ exist, in descending order of population size. Such forms refuse to accept that an ‘African’ might speak French, Swahili or Arabic as a home language. The only languages that can be ticked on official forms are the 11 official ones.

Thus has SA parochialised itself all over again. Different period, same issues. New government same classifications. The result is what Franz Fanon (1962: 122) calls “false decolonisation”, and what John Saul (2012: 593) terms “*Liberation Lite*”.

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