

100 years

ANC's History and John Saul's Empty Chalice

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As we mark the centenary of the ANC there are, as we might expect, idealised versions of its history being trotted out. These tend to present the ANC's hundred years as a righteous procession from early beginnings, through persecution and heroic resistance, to inevitable triumph. Across twelve presidents, the ANC marches forward with God and History on its side.

This clearly isn't John Saul's view of the organisation. He feels the ANC has let him and his cohort down personally ('those of us who supported, for many long years, through the global anti-apartheid movement ...' etc.). Unfortunately, rather than being an effective antidote to the dangers of centenary hagiography, Saul's dismissal of the current relevance of the ANC is, in many ways, just a sophisticated flip-side of the crude pro-ANC versions of its history and present relevance. Both the uncritical eulogies and Saul turn the ANC into a monolithic entity, an essence (either wholly good or wholly bad - or at least gone completely rotten). This organisational fetishism removes internal complexity, contradiction and struggle.

True, Saul does allow for some complexity by reminding us (correctly) that the struggle always had many more organisational protagonists than the ANC. But the complexity is presented as essentially outside of the ANC. Saul mentions the ICU, the Unity Movement, the PAC and AZAPO, the Black Consciousness Movement, and later the unions and UDF (before they were 'swallowed' by the ANC). What, I inevitably wondered as I read for the first time Saul's second paragraph, happened to other organisations he might have mentioned, like (yes, you've guessed) 90 years of Communist Party struggle in SA? The answer to that question comes many paragraphs later: 'The SACP was already well within the ANC's tent of power ... [and] soon COSATU felt compelled to yoke itself as a junior partner to the political juggernaut that the ANC had become.' In short, for the purposes of Saul's argument, these formations can now simply be waved off into irrelevance.

The only heterodoxy that Saul allows exists outside a supposedly monolithic ANC. This is not essentially different from the most dyed-in-the-wool, Jesuitical ANC dogmatist (if such exists) who would insist that anyone who does not give one hundred per cent unblinking assent to every sentence emanating from Luthuli House is beyond the pale.

Of course the ANC has always been, and remains, a contested, uneven but real - and therefore imperfect - political force. For most of its early decades, the ANC was led by mission-school educated progressive professionals - teachers, journalists, lawyers, religious ministers - who were Westernising modernisers. They argued the case of the 'civilized', those who had been unjustly excluded from citizenship rights by the Act of Union on the grounds of race. Theirs was essentially a struggle for inclusion. But, with all of their inevitable historical and class limitations, from the beginning they introduced the seeds of three potentially radical positions. First, through their journalism, speeches, and sermons they recorded and critiqued the deepening racial oppression of South Africa's majority - the Land Act, pass laws, the colour bar. Second, they critiqued narrow tribalism, and launched an organisation (the ANC) to forge in struggle a new African identity. In so doing they were advancing (implicitly) a post-modernist understanding of identity - not something fixed biologically at birth, but rather a complex process shaped by social interaction and active

organisation. This effectively post-modernist understanding also lies at the heart of what remains (in contest, of course) the ANC's longstanding and (given SA's history) remarkable espousal of non-racialism.

Then there is a third, paradoxical legacy bestowed on any contemporary South African left-wing project by ten decades of ANC activism. The Christian liberalism that informed the founders of the ANC was in effect the appropriation of a discourse of universal human rights in a semi-colonial context. It was a context that was bound to expose the limits of liberalism itself and force an increasing radicalisation of any rights-based discourse. That radicalisation can be traced through the 1955 Freedom Charter down to the fundamentally progressive South African Constitution and Bill of Rights of 1996.

To appreciate the value of this legacy for the present, it is important to recall the generally poor record in government of both communist parties and former national liberation movements through much of the 20th century. There are many reasons why formerly heroic fighting formations, once in power, often declined into bureaucratism, stagnation and corrosive corruption ... if not worse. The unending aggressive destabilisation of popular advances by imperialism was obviously the major factor. But internal weaknesses, including the neglect, suspension or deliberate distortion of key constitutional safeguards for popular democracy, were surely another important factor. It is one of many ironies of our contemporary South African reality that, in part as a result of mistakes and ambiguities from the side of the ANC, this legacy is now being claimed (and dumbed down) by anti-majoritarian neoliberals. The idea that the South African Constitution is essentially 'liberal' is gravely mistaken; even the most moderately inclined of clauses in the Bill of Rights, the so-called property clause, expressly allows for expropriation on terms other than market-value. One of the tasks of the left in our current reality is to actively espouse the Constitution and advance it for what it is - a clarion call for ongoing radical transformation.

Since becoming a ruling party, the ANC has by its own admission been beset with many of the familiar challenges of incumbency - careerism, factionalism and corruption. What is to be done? Here I begin to agree, in part, with Saul. We need the vigilance, the checking-and-balancing of a re-invigorated, broad-based popular movement. But where I disagree with Saul is his insistence that it should be in opposition to and exclusively outside of the ANC. Genuine popular protagonism cannot be quarantined within the formal structures of any political formation, and the role of a radical political formation is not to 'own' the working class, or popular forces, but to provide as much unifying and transformational leadership as possible to what are often disparate local actions and grievances.

Cases in point, mentioned by Saul citing Peter Alexander, are the thousands of 'local protests amounting to a rebellion of the poor'. Directed typically, as Alexander puts it, against 'uncaring, self-serving and corrupt leaders of the municipalities', they are 'widespread and intense, reaching insurrectionary proportions in some cases'. There is one important correction to this otherwise valid characterisation of these protests - none have reached 'insurrectionary proportions'. Among the reasons for this is the same factor that ensured that even at the height of popular militant action through the 1970s and 80s, the wave upon wave of uprisings were only ever quasi-insurrectionary in character. Then, as now, the South African working class and urban poor, largely confined to peripheral dormitory townships, are not in relatively easy marching distance of a Winter Palace. (I don't have current statistics for St Petersburg, but the average working class commute in today's Moscow is 7 km, for instance; compare this to Tshwane's 25 km!).

Persisting apartheid-style, dormitory townships at distance from work, amenities, resources and other loci of power continue to ensure the reproduction of a displaced and disadvantaged working class. The 'township service delivery protests' (and each one of those four words tells a symptomatic story) are essentially inwardly turned - demanding 'delivery' into the township rather than the

radical transformation of urban space itself. They end up being fights over the scraps. Backyard dwellers compete against those in informal settlements for a place on the housing list. One taxi association fights another over a route and a rank. Local spaza shop owners mobilise against non-South African traders. The civic organisation attacks the ANC branch, or one faction of the local ANC is pitted against another, disputing over a list process and the right to hand out tenders and jobs. Many local councillors, often the prime targets of protest, may well be “uncaring, self-serving and corrupt”, as Saul and Alexander would have it.

But many did not start out that way – they find themselves caught in an under-resourced situation (the big budgetary allocations go elsewhere), dealing with a bursting pressure-cooker reality of overcrowded townships. All of the research suggests, interestingly, that ‘service delivery protests’ tend to occur not in the most destitute townships, but in those in which there has been some ‘delivery’, but which is, of course, never ‘enough’.

There has been a political failure to mobilise legitimate popular aspirations into a politics that is not so much about delivery into a township as the democratic transformation of, for instance, the totality urban space itself. While corruption needs to be roundly condemned, the over-emphasis on subjective factors results in a moralising discourse that fails to recognise the structural realities that require radical transformation through both popular agency and the determined use of state power.

I agree with Saul that ‘liberation must be about more than racial and national assertion’. I agree that it must, amongst other things, be about ‘employment strategies, redistribution, education, health, water and electricity supply, and of a more internally focused and need-driven industrial strategy – that exemplify some real attempt to overcome the great inequalities that no mere tinkering with such things as “basic income grants” can paper over’.

To imagine that these challenges can be met by conjuring up some nebulous new ‘movement’ is far-fetched. To imagine that all that is wrong in the current South African reality is subjective failure on the part of the ANC is equally misplaced. There are no guarantees in history, but Saul’s dogmatic certainty that the ANC is a lost cause is consistent with his positioning on the ANC over the past decade-and-a-half. It is a positioning infused with the bitterness of a romanticism that feels betrayed. It calls to mind Slavoj Žižek’s biting comment on certain scholars: ‘They allow themselves to pursue their well-paid academic careers in the West, while using an idealized Other (like Cuba, Nicaragua, Tito’s Yugoslavia [or Mandela’s ANC?]) as the stuff of their ideological fantasy: they dream through the Other, and [this is the kick in the tail] rage against it if it in any way disturbs their complacency.’

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