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A South African Liberalism for the 21st Century

South African politics is moving slowly and painfully beyond the Apartheid transition. What role will liberal ideas and ideals play in our post-transition politics?

In the first part of this article I trace some elements of liberalism's past: globally, in Africa, and in South Africa. The past informs but does not determine the future.

In the second part, I set out three critical challenges for liberalism in that future: an identity challenge, a prosperity challenge and the challenge of digital citizenship.

Part one: Liberalism and the past

Liberalism in a global context

From the onset of the industrial revolution, through to the close of the 20th century, we have witnessed a contest between three clusters of political ideologies: liberalism, socialism and capitalism.

Liberalism is in fact the oldest of these 'modernizing' road maps. It has its roots in the *anciens régimes* of Europe's feudal and monarchic societies of pre-industrial times. In this context Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant, amongst others, fell in love with the idea of liberty. Each, in different ways, saw liberty as the natural and desired condition of humanity. Each also saw the individual as the central building block of social reality, moral philosophy and political order.

This discovery (and re-discovery) of liberty can be expressed in the question: "when is society justified in restricting the freedom of its individual members?" Freedom here is seen essentially as freedom from social coercion.

However, individuals share their time and space with others. Politics is necessarily the debate about how free citizens decide to organise their lives together. So, as industrial society and representative government developed, a *freedom from* became rather a *freedom to*: vote, be educated, have access to healthcare and work. This form of positive freedom is clearly the form of freedom entrenched in South Africa's new Constitution of 1996.

As market economies emerged in feudal and monarchic societies, so freedom gained a new context: the ownership and control of economic resources. This then was the start of the debate between socialist and capitalist political and economic orders.

For some liberals, freedom and private property, if not synonymous, were certainly the joint conditions of a good, and free, society. The demise of state socialist economies, commencing in China in 1979, suggests that there is at least some truth

in this relationship. As Hayek has argued "There can be no freedom of press if the instruments of printing are under government control, no freedom of assembly if the needed rooms are controlled, no freedom of movement if the means of transport are a government monopoly."[1]

However, as both economies and polities became more complex, it has become clear that the relationship between political freedom and the institutions of private property is contestable and, indeed, contested. So, for example, the politics of healthcare are organised in a fundamentally different way in two of the oldest liberal democracies in the world, Britain and the United States of America.

A second tension in the global evolution of liberal thought is evident in the debate between individualism and communitarianism. The Renaissance French philosopher René Descartes expressed himself in the words "I think, therefore I am". Much of the conceptual grammar of liberalism is about the role, rights and experiences of individuals. Yet individuals live in societies, and must be subject to some form of collective will. We live in a world of the 'we' as well as the 'I'.

This tension between a political 'we' and a political and economic 'I' is clearly evident in advanced Western societies, as they struggle to respond to economic crises and the politics of downward social progress.

Liberalism in Africa

The political realities of Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries are neatly framed by the arrival and departure of European colonialism. This process created colonies and vassal states defined by conquest, with both boundaries and concepts of political authority shaped by distinctly non-African impulses.

It also, however, saw the continuation, sometimes in democratic form, of 'big man' politics, with political parties inextricably tied to the person and personality of their leader.

Most of the second half of the 20th century has been devoted to *liberation politics* in the sense of ending colonial rule. In Africa's 54 countries, most of the last five or six decades have been dominated by what can perhaps best be described as the politics of incumbency. The liberation movements that were defined by colonial conflict have converted themselves into one-party-dominant political establishments. In too many cases this rule by liberation movements has been replaced by militarily installed dictatorships.

Though the cold war saw Africa divided into Soviet and American client states, there were relatively few truly ideological states on the continent at this time, with the surviving colonies (Portuguese in particular), Rhodesia and South Africa being the exceptions.

The last decade of the 20th and the first decade of the 21st century, though, saw an encouraging spread of democratic transitions across the continent. It also, however, saw the continuation, sometimes in democratic form, of 'big man' politics, with political parties inextricably tied to the person and personality of their leader.

These last two decades have also seen gains in African personal freedom, a renaissance (and more) in public media and improvement in many areas of economic life.

Though a number of countries have witnessed the peaceful transfer of political power after vigorously contested elections, it is too early to conclude that the institution of multi-party politics and competitive elections is now well established. Too often, losing candidates and parties cry foul.

It is also too early to celebrate the emergence of a politics that is a true contest of ideas about how countries should be run. Political allegiance is still too often tied to personality or group identity of an ethnic, linguistic, regional or religious nature.

All of the above have posed real problems for the establishment of liberal politics on the African continent, at least over the last two centuries.

One reason for these problems is liberalism's close association with (at least British) imperialism. This association made it unattractive for the colonised. It is surely one of history's great missed opportunities that the British Empire did not apply its own experience of incremental democracy, and of the progressive enfranchisement of the British people from 1832 through to after the First World War, to all of its colonies. If India, Ghana and Nigeria (not to mention South Africa and Rhodesia in regard to their total populations) had followed the road to self-rule and dominion status, as did Canada, Australia and New Zealand, what a different legacy the British Empire would have left! There would have been a much more natural place for liberal ideas in an empire that had universalised the enfranchisement of its people based on Kantian ethics. But instead, the political evolution of most African colonies into nation states more closely resembles that of Italy, Germany and indeed the Balkan states. These too are countries without a strong liberal political tradition.

Firstly, the period of colonial settlement came much earlier than elsewhere in the continent, with the first settler/colonists arriving shortly after English settlers established themselves in America.

A second major impediment to liberal ideas in Africa was the centrality of group identities and the tensions produced both by colonial control, as well as the multi-ethnic, multi-religious character of most colonial territories. We shall return to the problems of liberal values and group interests when we consider challenges to liberalism in South Africa.

A final impediment to liberalism in Africa has been the power of 'big man' politics – the politics of personality rather than interests or values. In this regard the African continent is in no way unique. Indeed politics in the United States seems more often a contest between personalities than a competition between contested ideas of a good society.

Liberalism in South Africa

If colonialism is the leitmotif of Africa's last two centuries, then South Africa has indeed experienced colonialism of a special type.

Firstly, the period of colonial settlement came much earlier than elsewhere in the continent, with the first settlers/colonists arriving shortly after English settlers established themselves in America.

Secondly, South Africa's settler colonialism was bifurcated, with settlers from Dutch and British origins experiencing a different history in their new abode – gaining control of different parts of South Africa, and ultimately engaging in bitter armed conflict, in part with each other, in part with other South Africans, and in part with the continuing colonial power.

Thirdly, a large colonial settler population stayed on in South Africa after the official departure of the imperial powers, and is a continuing part of the democratic South Africa, securing the only footprint for a Dutch derived language anywhere in the once very extensive Dutch empire.

Fourthly, this very settler nature of South African colonialism meant that de-colonisation was a lengthy and complex process with its own 'two stage' character. The first, de-colonisation of the state of South Africa from its former colonial power, occurred with the achievement of Republic status in 1961, and the breaking of all lines of authority with Britain. However, the achievement of a country where all citizens had equal rights only occurred in 1994.

Many locate liberalism's South African etymology only in the English language and those for whom this language was a mother tongue. This, however, misrepresents the past. Firstly, there are important indigenous traditions of humanism, which posit the individual as of critical worth and value in both social and political order. Secondly, South Africa and South Africans have long been connected to an evolving world order in many and complex ways.

The Christian religion was a major source of globalizing South African experience. In the late 19th century, Black South African religious and other leaders crossed the Atlantic Ocean to study in the United States. J L Dube, first president of the African National Congress, studied at Oberlin College in the US. Missionaries from American and European Christian Churches brought both education and theology to Southern Africa, much of which was deeply shaped by liberal ideas. The impact of both Christianity and American liberalism on another important ANC leader, Albert Luthuli, is well described in a recent biography.[2]

A number of very prominent politicians and religious Afrikaner leaders would have described themselves as liberals. These would include J H Hofmeyr, Hoernle, Jan Steytler, Beyers Naude and Bruckner de Villiers, amongst many others. And then of course, there were the English!

Two giants of the early Twentieth Century, Jan Smuts and Mahatma Ghandi, received their legal training in England, and certainly would have had more than a passing exposure to the current of liberal thought that has shaped and re shaped English Common Law.

President Kruger, the most successful leader of the independent Afrikaner Republics that preceded a united South Africa, had to draw his civil service from Holland, and specifically from Leiden University. In importing both judges and civil servants, he imported Dutch social liberalism.

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Notwithstanding these diverse liberal roots, the forces of group Nationalism proved much stronger. The failure of liberalism in each of the three critical race or language defined 'tribes' of the incipient South Africa is easy to understand.

For Black South Africans the noble sentiments about freedom, equality and the rule of law encountered in both a missionary tradition and also in American educational institutions, look empty, if not ridiculous, when confronted by the crass racism of both settler and colonial governments: of land theft, the denial of political rights and, eventually, even the stripping of citizenship.

Afrikaners were at the receiving end of a brutal colonial war of conquest in what they recall as *'Die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog'*. This equally crass attempt by British overlords to gain control of by far the richest goldfields in the world involved an

abortive coup d'état, as well as the first use of concentration camps to detain and harm civilian populations. And the English colonial authorities exercised their rather liberal tradition, profoundly distorted by racism.

There were nevertheless moments when a liberal deal seemed tantalizingly possible. One such moment was in the organizing of the Congress of the People in 1955. This national convention was conceived in what a later political scientist would have described as consociational terms, with each South African race group being asked to bring a delegation, and to operate, at least ostensibly, on co-equal terms with the other three delegations. The newly formed South African Liberal Party and the much older South African Institute of Race Relations were asked to co-host the convention and to take a lead in shaping both the white delegation and eventual charter. Perhaps there were good reasons for declining this invitation. From the perspective of the 21st century it certainly looks like a tragically missed opportunity.[3]

Secondly, the resistance to white racism has always included in its leadership prominent white individuals. As Albert Luthuli, then President of the ANC, noted about the Treason Trial of the late 1950s and early 1960s:

> "What would have been the plight of the accused without our Bishop Reeves, Alan Paton, Dr Hellman, Canon Collins, Bob Hepple, Christian Action, Archbishop de Blank and Archbishop Hurley …?"[4]

This deep non-racism was to be a lasting characteristic of resistance to white rule in almost all its manifestations.

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On 31 May 1961, as the Afrikaner Nationalist government declared the country to be a Republic outside the British Commonwealth, the African National Congress called for a three day stayaway. The political demand articulated by the volunteer-in-chief, Nelson Mandela, was that a national convention be called in which white and black could chart a common future. This was before the first bombs of Umkhonto we Sizwe were exploded, and at a time in which the ANC (although banned) was still committed to peaceful change. Imagine if CODESA had happened then!

Part two: Three challenges for a 21st century South African liberal agenda

Notwithstanding these missed opportunities, liberal ideas have played an important role in shaping South Africa. Decades ago the liberal member of parliament, Helen Suzman, observed that eventually white South Africans would have to choose between the impossible ideal of a white nation and much more compelling reality of a prosperous but multi-racial economy. In 1993 they did, with 70% supporting the negotiated change process started by de Klerk and Mandela in 1990. Both South Africa's 'new' interim constitution and the more 'final' version adopted in 1996 bear the hallmarks of a liberal democratic order. In the most recent municipal elections the major opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), achieved 24% of the vote and established itself as a serious electoral threat to the dominant African National Congress. This fundamentally liberal political organisation runs South Africa's second largest city, Cape Town, and also governs the second richest province, the Western Cape.

However, if the influence of liberal ideas is to grow yet more powerful in shaping South African futures, at least three challenges need to be addressed.

Challenge One: beyond the politics of identity

As Steven Friedman has argued many times,[5] South African politics since the democratic transition has been largely the politics of identity. Put bluntly, black South Africans have voted overwhelmingly for the African National Congress, whilst other ethnic groups (constituting ethnic minorities) have voted either for the Democratic Alliance or smaller, ethnically defined political parties such as the Inkatha Freedom Party, the Freedom Front Plus, or the Minority Front. In general each of these political organisations represent a form of ethnic, race or language nationalism.

As Friedman observed, "why should this surprise us, given South Africa's history of ethnic mobilization and competition for both political power and economic resources?" The tension between ideas about individual freedom and racial, ethnic and language group interests is long standing in South Africa (and indeed elsewhere).

For the purpose of the 21st century challenges facing South African liberalism, two elements of this rich debate are most relevant; one arises from nationalism and the other from liberalism.

One of the most insightful discussions of this tension is that contained in N P van Wyk Louw's *Liberale Nasionalisme*, first published in 1958[6], which was in fact the result of an exchange of letters between van Wyk Louw and an English-speaking South African student at Oxford University. Sadly, van Wyk Louw publishes only his letters, and the 'liberal' voice is therefore present only indirectly.

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Difference and equality

The great risk posed by nationalism is the frequency with which love of one's own turns into denigration and then domination of others. And, of course, not just in a cultural sense. Most often the nationalist reserves the best of everything in material terms for his own group. As van Wyk Louw potently observes:

> "Ons veg vir die behoud van ons kultuur" klink soveel edeler as "Ons veg om stoflike voordele vir ons groep" of "Ons veg om stoflike voordele vir 'n klein klompie rykes binne ons groep."[7]

Van Wyk Louw dismisses this kind of nationalism that diminishes both the economic interests and 'worth' of other groups as chauvinism rather than nationalism. This seems to me to resolve the dilemma through a semantic trick.

Yet nations have emerged from the accommodation, indeed integration, of tribes or sub-groups. This requires an element of shared identity that transcends the narrower identities of these sub-groups. It also requires a dynamic interplay of economic interests and political and social values, with different coalitions of interests combining and competing over time.

An influential liberalism in post transition South Africa must demonstrate that it is possible to positively value one's own group without negatively de-valuing all other groups. What does this mean in terms of language policy? Do the values in

the preamble to our constitution and underlying the Constitution's Bill of Rights constitute an umbrella identity that can contain group diversity in a context of fundamental equality?

Individuals or groups?

The second concern derives from liberalism itself, rather than nationalism. It is whether group identities can be either ignored or overcome.

Liberalism contends that individuals are the foundation, the constitutive element, of humanity, not groups. Van Wyk Louw quotes Plato with approval; "Die gemeenskap is die individu, met groot letters geskryf."[8]

It finds an even more common echo around many elite (though pigmentation deprived) dinner tables in our country, where good men and women ask "when can we finish with all this race stuff and just be South Africans?" Through the rest of his correspondence in *Liberale Nasionalisme*, van Wyk Louw argues very persuasively: "Never!"

Van Wyk Louw argues that all individuals have a sense of group identity; of language, culture, kinship, and heritage. These sources of individual identity are least conscious (though never absent) where the group identity is best established, least challenged, indeed where it is hegemonic. 'Englishness' during and immediately after the British Empire is a good example of such a strong but implicit group identity. There is no need to fight for your group identity when its power and prestige are ubiquitous and taken for granted.

Group identity is about issues derived from and determined by race-based experience. However, such experience is bound into economic, cultural, religious and especially class interests.

Where liberalism denies group identities and group enmities it loses the capacity to shape political discourse and political outcomes. It condemns its ideas about political, economic and social order to the sidelines of popular mobilisation.

A further manifestation of the failure of liberal thought to understand group identity is a form of magical thinking that still prevails in our country. This 'logic' holds that only when the DA has a black leader will they attract black votes. This deeply misunderstands the group identity of black South Africans, as well as the collective character of a political movement such as the DA, which derives from so much more than the pigmentation of its national leader. Indeed, to replace an effective white DA leader with a black leader *solely for the reason of race* would run the risk of losing white and other minority DA voters without attracting new black voters in any significant numbers.

Group identity is about issues derived from and determined by race-based experience. However, such experience is bound into economic, cultural, religious and especially class interests. Such 'rich' identities cannot be exchanged through the mere change of a Joseph-like pigmentation coat.

What is true of race-linked group identities is as true of gender-based identity and experience, as many organisations are discovering when simple numerical gender balance does not lead to organisational change.

Does the above condemn us to live in a world where group identities of race, ethnicity and gender assume an unbreakable caste-type quality? Not at all; Ivor Chipkin[9] and others have been studying some very large new urban settlements in the West Rand

region of Johannesburg. In one 'cluster housing' settlement with some 1,200 units they have found a society that is roughly 50% black and 50% white, predominantly young and mostly first time homeowners. Race plays an important part in the group identities of both black and white residents. However, these 'race' identities are complex in new ways. Here, race interacts with economic class as well as with new forms of evangelical religion, to produce new groups with new identities. These new identities are giving rise to new patterns of political affiliation (and disaffiliation).

Culture (including group culture) matters. And culture (including group culture) changes. The more we can move away from perceiving 'race', 'ethnicity', 'language' and 'gender' as immutable forces of nature, and see them rather as labels for particular patterns of experience, the more we will be able to shape an ethnically, linguistically and gender diverse, yet *shared* social experience.

For example the idea of a developmental society is both more realistic and more capable of being achieved than the generally undemocratic concept of a developmental state.

I am sure that a growing majority of South Africans see themselves as individuals, value their individual freedoms, but also value their 'group' identities, and are seeking ways to exercise both. Societal leaders willing to articulate ways to do this will be the real architects of our post-apartheid social reality.

Challenge Two: a liberalism that takes economic interests and social cohesion seriously

Prosperity

"Are you better off than you were four years ago? Is there more or less unemployment... than there was four years ago?" asked Ronald Reagan, concluding his TV debate with incumbent President Jimmy Carter in 1980, one week before the Presidential election. Reagan beat Carter by a landslide.

That politics is about the material interests of citizens and voters seems abundantly obvious. That voters look to government to address their material interests seems equally obvious. Reagan understood this well. Yet for much of the 20th century, liberalism appeared to stand on the sidelines in the argument about which economic system, socialism or capitalism, produced social prosperity. Liberalism without a 'prosperity agenda' is politically impotent.

The ANC campaign slogan of 1994, 'A better life for all', stands solidly in the Ronald Reagan tradition. But clearly this promise has been a great disappointment for millions of South Africans. Does the DA offer a compelling and credible alternative road to both individual and group prosperity?

I suspect that most South African voters know that governments are either unlikely or unable to provide jobs, houses, good schools and clinics for all. A much more realistic election slogan for the ANC 2004 campaign was 'A peoples' contract to create jobs and fight poverty'.

Politics, including liberal politics, must take the material interests of citizens and voters seriously. They should not make promises they cannot deliver on, as these promises will return to haunt them at the next election cycle. Liberal ideas should be centrally involved with prosperity promises that are real and can be delivered. For example the idea of a developmental *society* is both more realistic and more capable of being achieved than the generally undemocratic concept of a developmental *state*.

Social cohesion

If a vibrant liberalism in the 21st century needs a prosperity agenda, it equally needs an agenda for social cohesion.

Arthur Koestler in his majestic *Darkness at Noon*, first published in 1940, argued that Communism had abolished the first person singular: no more 'I'. In 1987 Margaret Thatcher said: "There is no such thing as society: there are individual men and women, and there are families."[10] In a sense Thatcher dismissed the 'we' of social reality.

Yet contemporary events in Europe in particular suggest that societies sharing space and time require robust 'I's and effective 'We's.

Social cohesion is an essential characteristic of a good society, for both negative and positive reasons.

In the positive sense, an absence of social cohesion prevents citizens from mobilizing to do things for themselves and their communities. The failure of the ANC lead campaign to persuade township residents to pay rates and service charges is evidence of this.

In a negative sense a failure of social cohesion can lead to the very failure of peaceful co-existence itself. Winston Churchill was a strong advocate of European integration. He saw this as the most effective way of ending several centuries of European wars. This great peace project could falter on a failure of social cohesion within individual European states, as government after government is voted out of office. Economic adversity, unfairly shared, is dissolving the glue of the European project: a project in the making since 1956.

This 'negative' failure is also evident in the 2008 South African outbreak of xenophobic violence. Anger at continuing poverty, poor delivery of public services, and corruption, especially in local government, gave expression to violence against Bangladeshi and Somali spaza store owners.

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21st century liberalism must have an agenda that enables societies to cohere: it must pay careful attention to the symbols of national unity, and to the icons of fairness and solidarity.

Challenge three: liberalism and active and digital citizenship

New forms of energy and economic organisation transformed agrarian societies and created the industrial age. Today new forms of sharing information and knowledge are creating a new social architecture. Digital information, increasingly accessible on mobile phones, deeply reshapes the way in which individuals constitute their social reality and share space and time with others.

These are instruments of great power that can mobilise people around issues and events faster and more effectively than any other form of media or mobilisation. *Twitter* generally beats all other forms of electronic media on breaking news by at least twenty minutes. It also makes its user both a producer and consumer of information.

However, as with all new technologies, the power of digital media is both creative and destructive. As social media connects people in new ways, so it disconnects people from older institutions. As cable television has undermined the power of the older television networks, so the internet undermines the power of newspapers, magazines and books, or at least transforms them into a new digital character, delivered in new ways, both in space and time.

Twitter and *Facebook* played a crucial role in mobilising hundreds of thousands of Egyptians to occupy Tahrir Square in Cairo, ending the decades-long rule of a dictator. However, when millions of Egyptians turned out to vote for a new parliament, older forms of political affiliation won the day.

Can this new, digital kind of active citizenship, evident in Occupy Wall Street and other digital social and political campaigns, be accommodated in the old institutions of representative government and the vehicles of political mobilisation called political parties?

Is the digital citizen more effective at the protest 'event' than in the sustained exercise of political power?

Politics has always involved both interests and gestures. Bread and circuses have always been present in one form or another, whether it be 9/11 or the Falklands War. What will constitute the political icons of the digital age?

I do not claim to fully understand how either arguments or mobilising icons will operate in this new digital age. I do know, however, that this age will deeply reshape the way political interests and sentiments are defined, described, shared and mobilized.

The disruptive impact of a new individualism is evident beyond social media. The nuclear family, a foundation of modern social organisation in all parts of the globe, is increasingly failing to provide social stability and economic resilience. A major disconnect between financial capitalism and the so-called real economy produced the Great Recession of 2008, whose consequences continue. Many national political institutions have been unable to respond effectively to either social or economic challenges. This is well evidenced by the failure of US Congress to agree a budget deficit reduction plan, and the replacement of democratically elected governments with technocratic administrations in both Italy and Greece.

Homo sapiens face an increasing range of choices as to who we are and how we live. From place, to national identity, to intimate social partnerships, choice is replacing tradition and habit. All, and especially those who value freedom as the defining human quality, must celebrate this spring-cleaning. But there is the danger of a period of disorder and anomie. Is there a Napoleon lurking in the wings?

From the very start of the human story, the same tough choices have been present. There needs to be a balance between individual freedom and a resilient social order, and between individual accountability and collective well-being. Those who subscribe to liberal solutions to these challenges will need to find new ways of reconstructing social institutions to better fit our new, digital, choice-centred citizens.

South Africa in the 21st century offers a fertile territory for liberal ideas and ideals. If these ideas are to do a better job in shaping our country's journey, they will need to meet the challenges of identity, of prosperity and of the new, digital citizen.

NOTES
1 F A Hayek, New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Idea, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, page 149
2 Albert Luthuli: Bound by faith; Scott Couper, University of KwaZulu Natal Press 2010.
3 David Everatt, The Origins of Non-racialism, Wits University Press, 2009, Johannesburg, see the chapter on the Congress of the People, pages 169 to1943
4 Quoted in Albert Luthuli: Bound by faith, Scott Couper, op cit, page 105.
5 For instance Friedman in Election Synposis, Volume 1, edition 2 www.cps.org.za/cps%20pdf/election-synopsis_2.pdf
6 Liberale Nasionalisme, contained in Versamelde Prosa 1 NP van wyk Louw, Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1986, pages 411 to 529.
7 Van wyk Louw, op cit, page 424.
8 van wyk Louw, op cit, page 426.
9 Research | History Workshop | Social Sciences | Humanities ...www.wits.ac.za/academic/humanities/socialsciences/.../research.htm
10 In fact the full article makes for fascinating reading and is less polemical than the quote seen in isolation. See http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689