

Racial and Populist Nationalism in South Africa: the Global Nexus



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With division, often on ethnic, national or racial grounds, often at the centre of nationalist and populist movements their global influence demands careful analysis. Professor Milton Shain looks at the way in which these currents migrate with ease across national borders and the impact this has on South African political discourse and life. Professor Shain looks at the historical impact of these trends on the South African political landscape before offering warnings given current trends in our present day politics.

Introduction

Political commentators often frame events with past occurrences in mind. In epidemiological fashion, taking their cues from earlier trends, they identify patterns and reflect on mutations. For example, the Arab spring was compared to the 1848 revolutions in Europe - a turning point when, in the memorable phrase of GM Trevelyan, 'modern history failed to turn'. Similarly the Bavarian Soviet Republic of 1919 was linked to its St Petersburg predecessor, and the domino-like collapses of Communist regimes in Europe in 1989 were inextricably connected. Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' is - at least in part - a paean to such framing. More recently Brexit and 'Trumpism' have been lumped together as harbingers of populist radical nationalism fuelled by inequality, alienation, resentment, and the hatred of elites.¹ It is this that propels the hard authoritarian right under Victor Orban in Hungary, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Xi Jinping in China, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. Human rights are rapidly eroding, freedom is increasingly restricted, and transparency is threatened. An anti-liberal, populist, nationalist counter-revolutionary wind is blowing. Can we anticipate it reaching our shores? Or, to put it another way, is it reasonable to frame South Africa's political trajectory within contemporary global trends.

South Africa

We do know that historically South Africa has not been immune to ideas emanating from beyond our borders. American nativism in the 1920s, for example, had analogues in 'segregationist' discourse, while 'Garveyism' - a revitalising movement for Blacks led by the Jamaican Marcus Garvey - influenced domestic struggles. Nazism too had reverberations in South Africa, with radical right 'Shirtist' movements peddling global anti-Jewish fantasies and flirting with notions of 'Aryanism' and 'Nordicism'. The reach of European fascist ideology and the formative influence of Mussolini and Hitler on Afrikaner nationalism were also manifest in the *Ossewabrandwag* and *Nuwe Orde*. At that time it was the Jew who was targeted,

commonly branded as alien, unassimilable, subversive and mendacious. The grossly antisemitic 'Hoggenheimer' cartoon caricature represented Jewish monopoly capital, identified as a threat to Afrikaner advancement. Similar processes operated in other countries where exclusivist nationalism ran in tandem with religion. Such was the case in France and Poland in the interwar years and especially in Canada, where fascist groups such as Adrien Arcand's *Parti National Social Chretien* were at the forefront of scapegoating Jews. Besides highlighting the allegedly negative role of Jews in society, these extremists sought to redefine the nature of French Canada and the Jew was a useful means of bolstering a Francophone identity rooted in confession and notions of race.²

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Clearly intellectual and political currents migrate with relative ease, especially since populations have moved en masse and communications have improved. It is impossible for a country to isolate itself. Consider today's situation where South Africa is tied to the so-called Washington consensus with little room for manoeuvrability. Ratings agencies are monitored and their assessments taken seriously at the highest level. Even the "Fallists" involved in recent campus turmoil aped the discourse of American campuses. In an internet age where geographical distance is of no consequence and all have access to events far removed, the speed with which ideas travel is unprecedented. Relative deprivation is visible for all to see on smart phones and the lessons of violence are immediate and easily assimilable.

The surge of illiberal populism across the globe was tied in particular to the financial crisis of 2008. For its casualties, distinctions between left and right mattered less than the cleavage between elites and 'the people'. Jeremy Corbyn, Bernie Sanders, Jean Luc Mélenchon, Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders did their best to exploit this mood. Donald Trump is an exemplar. Basing his politics on identity and exclusion, he has defined the so-called 'real America' which he repeatedly tells his followers will be 'great again' under his leadership. Trump understands the white working class and its hatred of Washington and its experts. Like all populists he claims that he alone represents the people, and defines his political opponents as enemies.³ Similar trends are observable in South Africa. President Jacob Zuma has become increasingly shrill, sharing in the rhetoric of the avowedly populist EFF under Julius Malema. Both Zuma and Malema punt a racial nationalism that employs identity politics and seeks scapegoats. Zuma chastises the 'clever Blacks' (just as Trump attacks the bicoastal liberal elites) while Malema holds a sword of Damocles over Whites.

The appeal of populism and racial nationalism finds fertile ground in a society with glaring racial inequality and massive poverty. Yet comparative studies show that populism is rooted not simply in anger and resentment, nor is gender or class necessarily a dividing line. Emotions also enter the debate. Sometimes those who support populism have rational reasons for doing so. They need to be confronted with facts and shown that populist promises are built on sand. The shortcomings of their arguments need to be illustrated. As the CEO Initiative (a business lobby) recently warned: 'Populist policies that focus on short-term solutions with no regard for the liabilities that we bestow on future generations will only result in the economy slipping further away from providing opportunities that benefit all who live in the country'.⁴ Very seldom does one hear a leader in South Africa extrapolate on the long haul to wealth creation. Instead redistribution is presented as a simple choice.



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African Nationalism

More disturbing than the turn to populism (although not unrelated) is a burgeoning Africanism - sometimes referred to as a racial national project. Racial nationalism builds on the politics of exclusion. To this end, in an attempt to cement cracks among the majority (insiders) and paper over class divisions, it scapegoats minorities. In South Africa the Indian, Coloured and White minorities are increasingly targeted by a desperate regime. Racial nationalism is seductive. It strikes the right chord - witness our planned withdrawal from the International Criminal Court - and resonates with our history by revealing apartheid's legacies. But racial nationalism and its mythical qualities threatens to undermine the 'Rainbow Nation' - a fragile construction built on a humane and generous forgiveness and reconciliation. Racial nationalism defines insiders and excludes outsiders. *Völkisch* nationalism in Germany was paradigmatic, built upon nineteenth century integral nationalism that culminated in fascism, a heightened nationalism combined with racism and populism.

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Given our demography and the legacy of our past, the turn to racial nationalism is perhaps inevitable: the African National Congress always had strands within it that challenged what was termed 'multi-racialism'. However White and Indian intellectuals 'managed to pin the "non-racial" slogan onto this donkey,' in the

words of RW Johnson – but real commitment to ‘multi-racialism’, he writes, has never been more than ‘skin deep’.⁵ It was, however, sufficiently deep (thanks in part to the Freedom Charter) to construct the ‘Rainbow Nation’ in 1994. But this social contract gradually unravelled under the Thabo Mbeki administration when a shift in language and a hint of racial exclusivism began to characterise the later years.

Only recently a group in KwaZulu-Natal calling itself the Mazibuye African Forum has called for the ‘liberation of KwaZulu-Natal from Indians’. Among other things the group is advocating that some ‘Indian-owned land’ be distributed to Africans and that Indians lose their BEE status.

Subtly – and sometimes not so subtly – an intimidatory discourse defined who was in or who was out. We saw this vividly in anti-Indian and anti-Coloured rhetoric, in xenophobic action and violence against foreigners and, more latterly, in a discourse that targets Whites. As early as 2002 the well-known playwright and composer, Mbongeni Ngema, released an anti-Indian song, *AmaiNiya*, in which he called for ‘strong and brave men to confront Indians’ who were accused of oppressing and dispossessing the Black population. Five years later, Fikile Mbalula,

then ANC Youth League president, contended that transformation had turned the University of KwaZulu-Natal ‘into nothing but Bombay’ at the expense of Africans. In 2010, when he was leader of the ANC Youth League, Julius Malema made references to ‘*amakula*’ (a derogatory term for Indians) when addressing a meeting and, one year later, Mzwanele Jimmy Manyi, at that time head of the South Africa’s Government Communication and Information Services and the President of the Black Management Forum, suggested that there were too many Indians in KwaZulu-Natal,⁶ contending that many of them had bought their way to the top. He also cast aspersions on Coloureds, arguing that there was an ‘over-concentration’ of them in the Western Cape. Trevor Manuel correctly likened his ideas to those of HF Verwoerd.⁷ Only recently a group in KwaZulu-Natal calling itself the Mazibuye African Forum has called for the ‘liberation of KwaZulu-Natal from Indians’. Among other things the group is advocating that some ‘Indian-owned land’ be distributed to Africans and that Indians lose their BEE status.⁸

This sort of language is inflammatory. Let us be absolutely clear about this. Similar allegations were levelled at Jews in Weimar Germany (who constituted less than one per cent of the total German population) and one knows where that led. Even if Whites, Coloureds and Indians are relatively better off than the Black majority in South Africa, the on-going focus on these minorities is concerning. While such rhetoric clearly serves the interests of racial nationalists, its consequences should not be underestimated. So long as labels are used and racial terminology exploited, the dream of a ‘Rainbow Nation’ will be deferred if not destroyed. Ideas have consequences: as Heinrich Heine put it ‘Thought precedes action as thunder precedes lightning’. It is explosive to define Whites as colonialists and racist; of not atoning for the sins of the past; of having stolen land from Blacks; of having derived their wealth through exploiting Blacks; of owning and dominating the country; of thieving and being alien, and as responsible for unemployment, inequality and poverty. Rian Malan identified these characterisations as central to the demise of the ‘Rainbow Nation’. If you do not consider such language sinister, warns Malan, ‘replace the term Whites with “Jews” and see what they call to mind’.⁹

Conclusion

The binding rubric at present is ‘white monopoly capital’- allegedly drawn up in the boardrooms of Bell Pottinger, an international reputation management agency. No one will deny that Whites have benefited hugely from colonialism, segregation and apartheid and that greater equality, less poverty and a more inclusive economy is a necessity. We should also interrogate neo-liberal economic premises; but to forge national unity around the mantra of ‘white monopoly capital’ is lazy thinking and especially dangerous in a fragile society with deep fault lines. It draws on the worst of populism, bringing to mind Trump and the European far right. Calling on one’s supporters to ‘remain vigilant of certain sections of our population who were the beneficiaries of the old order and are bent on either reversing this achievement or at best stall the progress’ - as the ANC did on Freedom Day this year - is disturbing to say the least. ‘Ours is to confront those elements intent on undermining the popular electoral mandate in order to reverse the gains of our hard-won democracy’, continued the ANC statement.¹⁰

Advice of this kind should come with a cautionary warning: to define a section of the population in these terms can have disastrous consequences. Too many lives have been lost over the centuries to ignore the lessons of inter-ethnic conflict. South Africa is not immune; it never has been.

NOTES

- 1 This too has a parallel in the past. The American right, wrote Daniel Bell in the early 1960s, feel dispossessed. The America they had once known had been taken away from them, but they remained convinced it could be recovered. Cosmopolitan elites and intellectuals, they claimed, had corroded American culture, while treasonous plots operated at the very centre of power. See, ‘The Dispossessed’, in Daniel Bell (ed), *The Radical Right*, New York, 1963.
- 2 See Irving Abella, ‘Antisemitism in Canada in the Interwar Years’ in Moses Rischin (ed), *The Jews of North America*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1987, p.244 and Pierre Anctil, ‘Interlude of Hostility: Judeo-Christian Relations in Quebec in the Interwar Period, 1919-39’ in Alan Davies (ed), *Antisemitism in Canada. History and Interpretation*, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, 1992, p.153.
- 3 See Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.
- 4 See <http://www.fin24.com/Economy/ceos-warn-against-populist-rhetoric-as-moodys-downgrades-sa-20170610>.
- 5 RW Johnson, ‘Our Racial Discontents’, <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/opinion/our-racial-discontents>
- 6 Today Manyi is ironically a defender of the Gupta family.
- 7 See ‘Trevor Manuel’s open letter to Jimmy Manyi’, <http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/trevor-manuels-open-letter-to-jimmy-manyi-1034606>.
- 8 See Brij Maharaj, ‘Anti-Indian statements are racism of the worst order’: 15 November, 2015. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2015-11-15-anti-indian-statements-are-racism-of-the-worst-order/#:~:q=WRQe1BsdDcs>.
- 9 <http://www.news24.com/Columnists/GuestColumn/rian-malan-to-sisonke-msimang-yes-i-am-paranoid-20170515>
- 10 ANC Statement on Freedom Day, 27 April, 2017. <http://www.anc.org.za/content/anc-statement-freedom-day-1>.