

# The challenge to the Normative by New Norms



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South Africa was the site of an immense struggle for a new normative dispensation – echoing what had been fought for throughout Africa and, indeed, throughout Asia and other locations in the 20th century – and that was the liberality of norms to do with racial equality, with access to international institutions based on the equality of states, and with equal access for all citizens and all states to national and international justice.

All over the world in the 21st century, those norms are being challenged – not on the basis that there should be no norms, but that the bodies of thought underlying a hitherto hegemonic normative regime need to be re-examined from their foundations, and that those who formulated that normative regime in the first place might be hoist on their own and on a reformulated petard. From the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall demonstrations of the intellectual youth of South Africa, with their echoes in the decolonisation-of-thought movement spreading across the Western universities; to the alternative models of governance and government that have made China a superpower; to the insurrectionary challenge of Islam via its militant and militarised Jihadist wings, based on intellectual doctrine that is against liberal doctrine – all is under challenge and it seems that the liberal centre cannot hold. To these contestations come more self-serving protestations of African states against the International Criminal Court, suggesting a 'counter-norm' of impunity; and, indeed, the self-serving Trumpian American refusals to follow international due processes or observe international refugee law – refuting the Christian norm of mercy.

In this short essay, I wish to problematise certain aspects of what I have noted above. I wish firstly to beg the questions: 'Towards what do we decolonise? Is there an antecedent body of norms which should be revitalised? Do they have to be recreated, or even created – and on what basis does this creation proceed?' Secondly, I wish to raise the underlying but overarching question to do with 'non-state actors' involved in fundamental challenges to norms, and that is 'Why can't they have a state?' Is it a question of preserving a Westphalian order as much as a question of norms within a new (or very old, or perhaps recreated) sort of state? Finally, even China has a system that is constitutionalised; 'To what extent can norms be constitutionalised?'

## South Africa

Starting with the last question: The South African Constitution is the most normative constitution on earth with its range of equalities. Whether it has successfully made government more answerable or more transparent than elsewhere is another question. The South African government cannot be made more transparent without a major jump in electronic capacity. When contrasted with Estonia, the world's most transparent government – rendered so by clear electronic publication of every debate and decision – South Africa lags behind appallingly. It demonstrates huge incapacities in the electronic systems of its public administration and with many senior members of government, so it is rumoured, not fully able to use a computer.

Having said that, debate that appears on electronic platforms can be reduced to soundbites. I make this point now as I return to it later in the case of ISIS and militarised Jihad, and the point is a simple one: Debate is not a soundbite that is amplified and extended beyond its logical reach; the soundbite is a condensation of a complex debate involving logics and argued norms. In the case of South Africa, a profound dissatisfaction with the fruits of majority rule cannot lead to the creation of something new by extrapolating from a soundbite. The work of scholars like Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni,<sup>1</sup> nuanced more moderately but still forcefully by scholars like Adam Habib,<sup>2</sup> show that the argument is forming for a new intellectual departure, and with it a normative one. But the rendition of their work into a mere 'decolonisation' without an interrogation of what norms, governments, and economies looked like in a pre-colonial age – *that was not globally enmeshed and technologically complex in the production, accumulation and circulation of capital and learning; and how they could be made so* – is a challenge to problematise anything that is reductionist. What is sought is in fact a complex post-colonialism – although that term too has often become a mere soundbite. My point is that the search for new thought, new norms, and new anchors for society is urgent but not simple, and certainly not simplistic.

I am reminded of New Zealand, a country that took my refugee family in during World War II. At the time, the indigenous Maori people had only begun to emerge from an epoch of great loss of morale after failing to win their liberation war against land-hungry white settlers. The Maori cultural renaissance and political resurgence of the late 1960s and 1970s began, curiously enough, with an objection to the All Blacks playing rugby against an apartheid Springbok team. This led to a critique of apartheid as a national system based on selective and vindictive norms, and leading to much debate as to which Maori norms could be suitable, even if refurbished, for modern times. Times in which students were also challenging governments in the streets of Paris and Prague in the name of justice. Andrew Sharp's book *Justice and the Maori*<sup>3</sup> established a set of noble norms that were not primitive or unable to be problematised – a norm is not a divine command, unlike a soundbite injunction, but is capable of being immersed in debate. The whole text of communal kindness that resulted, and which saw, for example, the haka redefined as not just a challenge but a mark of respect, is not unlike the emergence of Ubuntu in South Africa – except that Ubuntu really has remained a background norm that has not been amplified in student protests and has certainly not been informative of government policies. In New Zealand, the practice of solidarity has become something writ large, as was seen in the response to the March massacres at the mosques in Christchurch. Then, everyone was at pains to express sentiments in both Maori and broken Arabic – but Xhosa was better spoken in *Black Panther* than in many of the polite suburbs of Johannesburg.<sup>4</sup>

The worrying thing about the decolonial project in South Africa is that it shares with the very government it protests against a key attribute – a sense of black majority rule, but extrapolated into a sense of blackness, extrapolated further into a sense of pan-African blackness, extrapolated still further into a universal black solidarity and oneness. But, from the days of apartheid onwards, South Africa has been continentally notorious for assuming that all of Africa must look like South Africa. The ignorance of

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the continent is profound. It is a continent of 55 African Union-recognised states. It contains 2000 languages. Its key marker is one of difference and plurality. It is black only in contradistinction to being white. Is this enough upon which to build a new normative structure that is meaningful to all black people? Even Thabo Mbeki, with all his essays on Caribbean poetry and praise for Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Decolonising the Mind*,<sup>5</sup> was startled when out-manoeuvred by Tony Blair at the 2003 Commonwealth summit in Abuja convened to discuss Zimbabwe. Mbeki thought he could count upon the support of all African member states. In the end he could not and Blair, for good measure, captured the black Caribbean states.<sup>6</sup>

The Chinese response to having been denigrated was to become better and, essentially, to crush the West with technology, industry, economic growth and movement, and global outreach. The Chinese remain Marxists in name, but do not base their sense of autochthony on a Marxist credo or on not being white. What empowers China is simply success.

The legacy of apartheid is an entire generation of leadership anxious to be seen as as good as the white man on the white man's terms, but without seeking to surpass the white man in technology. It is as if time stopped still at liberation and no new development of electricity, computer networks and electronic industry was needed. And, insofar as the credo of blackness was amplified by the doctrine of redistribution – a Marxist norm as opposed to an economic strategy – the developing ideology is to do with the sequestration and distribution of capital, and not its generation, circulation and strategic investment. The comparison has to be

with China after what it calls its 'century of humiliation' at imperial hands.<sup>7</sup> The Chinese response to having been denigrated was to become better and, essentially, to crush the West with technology, industry, economic growth and movement, and global outreach. The Chinese remain Marxists in name, but do not base their sense of autochthony on a Marxist credo or on not being white. What empowers China is simply success.

## China

Much has been made of whether the Chinese wish to export their political system. In fact, the system is based both on a norm and, precisely, economic success. The norm is *guanxi* – the most approximate translation being 'reciprocation'.<sup>8</sup> Whereas democracy is a horizontal system of equalities, *guanxi* is a system of vertical hierarchies that emulate Heaven and Earth. Thus the emperor is above the subject, the husband above the wife, the older brother above the younger siblings, etc. However, the dynamic that lubricates the system is that, while respect is owed upwards, benefaction *must* flow downwards – otherwise the system becomes dysfunctional – just as equalities become dysfunctional if there are unequal votes in what is meant to be a democracy.

The Confucian overlordism of the Chinese Communist Party is functional only because of prosperity. Without prosperity and its sharing up and down the chain of relationships, the system starts to grind towards a standstill. The system is thus dependent on the discharge of a norm. That norm demands constant economic growth. Growth demands constant innovation and, in the modern world, technological command. It becomes the most competitively based norm in the world. In this sense, President Trump is tactically correct to challenge the Chinese economy through means of trade wars – except that China has now amassed such reserves that it can, if push comes to shove, lubricate its system for quite some years to come. The Chinese messaging to its citizens is precisely one of providing and maintaining prosperity and, for now, it is a more powerful messaging than that to do with democracy.

Messaging has to be telic – purposeful. It can't forever be just about maintaining something. That thing must keep going forward. The promise of the message is

something better, something even better. Here, however, there can be a loop involved. It can mean going backwards to a text that is projected into an adjusted modernity by modern means. In its most sinister but sophisticated form, this has been the achievement of ISIS.

## ISIS

What I have tried to do in my latest work,<sup>9</sup> building on the general observations of Gray<sup>10</sup> and Devji,<sup>11</sup> is to construct a detailed picture of the infrastructure of the ISIS messaging. Gray and Devji, among others, observed that, far from a medieval project, ISIS had captured modernity from 'moderate' Muslims. Its Caliphate was a 'pure' land, achieved atrociously to be sure, but also by the most modern of means. By that I mean not only in terms of military prowess and economic transactions, and not only in terms of electronic and broadcast messaging, but in terms of a vision of a state with all modern benefits as well as norms of righteousness – depicted in the first instance as righteous because others were unrighteous, but then in sophisticated disquisitions of the reasonings of learned men on the scriptures.

Given that the early ambition of ISIS was to establish a Caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq, I wonder what the world would have looked like if it had survived and then tried to function like a normal state in terms of trade and travel links. But, because its model was a direct attack upon the Westphalian state system, achieved after decades of religious war in Europe, the secular Westphalian system could not have accommodated an out-and-out religious state.

I unpacked how media command allowed a theology to be propounded – the facile Facebook posts being only an entry point that led, step by step, to an internet universe of clickthroughs, worm holes, and the encryptions of the dark web. At each stage, the polish of media production of the highest order was married to a further stage of theological discourse that led from dissatisfaction with the world order, to a revival of older virtues, to a conversion that was firstly personal, then communal, and finally heroic to the point of deontological. Each stage was blessed with norms and justifications that bore the patina of actual justice. The more I studied it, the more I understood how significantly the West had under-estimated it, and how significantly moderate Islam had under-estimated its radical and Jihadist counterpart.

When UK Prime Minister Theresa May vowed to wipe ISIS off the internet, she had no idea about how the internet actually works. Nothing can be completely wiped from it, and variations cannot be prevented from reappearing. It is not only South African politicians who do not understand the electronic communications age. But I was at pains to ensure that my book was not just a geek's guide to electronic darkness. The theological discourse is led step by step towards an expansiveness – and to conclusions with which I thoroughly disagree – but it is learned and when it is not, it appears learned. Its methodology is one of learning or apparent learning. Someone not previously and deeply versed in Islamic thought would be beguiled and then convinced. Vast production studios of the sort owned by ISIS before its geographical defeat ensured that the methodology of ideas was shaped and disseminated by the methodology of the most modern media.

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conducted with it – just as they were with white-ruled Rhodesia, apartheid South Africa and warlord militias controlling oil fields in Libya today. Norms, finally, are not in themselves retarding agents against wickedness.

### Concluding remarks

So, in a world with, at the least, agitated norms, challenged norms, a resistance against hegemonic norms – not always because of the norms themselves but because of the nature of hegemony – what does this mean for a project we might loosely call ‘international morality’?

The old Realist sages of the discipline of International Relations would say there never was an international morality. Everything was a policy, product or perpetuation of power on behalf of national interests. In moments of conflict, negotiations would involve a bartering of interests. Normative International Relations arose from continental critical theory and vouchsafed itself by claims to speaking the truth as well as speaking morally. One universal truth meant one universal morality. In the face of global developments, critical theory is the least able to answer the calls for dialogue and negotiation – because it means a bartering of aspects of what one side or the other calls moral, calls normative. The accusation that this becomes a cultural relativism merely perpetuates the sense that a morality is finally a hegemonic project. It was white against black. apartheid had its own ‘norms’ too. It was democracy against Communism. It was China against the satirical image of being Chinese – even though that image had its own moments of beauty in a stereotyping of Chinoiserie. Dialogue between and across moralities at least relieves the debate of hegemony and the more moralities in the frame, the less the debate will be binary, crudely dyadic.

When, finally, norms are debated in terms of their unique foundational values there may be a step towards a normative equivalence, a normative balance, a normative equilibrium. Maybe, as a staging post, a normative equality? In the very messy world of the 21st century, this might not be a bad staging point for something better.

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#### NOTE

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- 2 Habib, A. *Rebels and Rage: Reflecting on #FeesMustFall* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2019)
- 3 Sharp, A. *Justice and the Maori: Maori Claims in New Zealand Political Argument in the 1980s* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1990)
- 4 Not that the film otherwise had anything in fact to do with Africa, see Stephen Chan, *Black Panthers don't speak Xhosa* (4 April 2018).
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- 7 Mitter, R. *A Bitter Revolution: China's Struggle with the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)
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- 11 Devji, F. *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (London: Hurst 2017)