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Topic:

WHO IS NON-RACIAL SOUTH
AFRICAN: MANYI, MANUEL AND THE
BATTLE FOR THE SOUTH AFRICAN
DREAM...

Speaker:

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The aim of these dialogues is to create a space for open and informed dialogue and debate around key local and global political, social and economic issues facing South Africa.

**Harold Wolpe Lecture
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**Who is a non-racial South African?
Manyi, Manuel...and the battle for the South African dream**

In a recent newspaper article Trevor Manuel took on Jimmy Manyi's remarks on race. Trevor Manuel correctly concentrated on exposing the insidious and racist nature of Jimmy Manyi's labour market machinations. The public commentary that has followed has amplified the debate. However, in itself Manuel's critique does not give us an appreciation of what is at stake at this moment in South Africa. Putting it sharply, non-racial nation building is in crisis in South Africa. The Manuel-Manyi issue is merely one of many symptoms of this crisis.

The other symptom is how we are failing to talk about race in a way that addresses the racist inequities we have inherited from apartheid and further exacerbated by seventeen years of ANC neoliberal rule. There is a lack of political leadership coming to the fore to lead this conversation in South Africa. Instead, race talk is used in a banal, simplistic and undemocratic way. Critiquing Zuma, the failings of the government, the shortcomings of the ANC or even voting for a party other than the ANC is reduced to being racist.

Those who think we can rescue nation building by being colour blind also exacerbate the nation building crisis. South Africa is far from being post-racial. Believing that legal prohibitions of racism and discrimination resolve the race dimension of nation building is naïve to say the least. Individualising social change, championing an abstract and formal legal equality and punting an individualised opportunity structure will not transform South Africa. Instead such an approach reproduces racial bias because of its assumption that individuals can rise above generations of racialised dispossession, systemic exclusion and exploitation without state intervention. Essentially, without state intervention, the possibility of massive redistribution and transformation is a fiction.

Rather than the above two approaches—non-racism as shown through support for the ANC and naïve, ahistorical colour-blindness—I want to suggest that we look back to the *Freedom Charter* for a richer account of non-racialism. The *Freedom Charter* proclaimed a non-racial South Africa as realisable through a social construction of race equality. Moreover, such a nation-building project has to go to the roots of systemic racism constructed by decades of segregation and apartheid. Through its declaratory statements the *Freedom Charter* is explicit that political and economic power are necessary to confront the nature of racial oppression endured in South Africa. The *Freedom Charter* is a people's dream of a society in which a race awareness is informed by a historical understanding of institutionalised racism and a constant striving to challenge reverse racism. In its essence it is about making racism socially unacceptable. Such a radical understanding of non-racialism is being lost in South Africa.

The demise of such a radical understanding of non-racialism is happening because of the degeneration of the ANC's non-racial nationalism. Such a degeneration can only be appreciated by understanding the contradictions and limits of the key props that organise the ANC's non-racial nationalism: (i) national liberation ideology; (ii) the Mandela icon; (iii) the state and (iv) the ANC as a political party. It is this degeneration that is also narrowing the non-racial political base of the ANC.

The formation of a non-racial nationalism and its contribution to nation formation has happened through the struggle against apartheid capitalism. Crucial in this regard were key moments in the development of national liberation ideology and contributions within National Democratic Revolution theory. Looking back there are two lines of thinking about non-racial nationalism: a people centred non-racial nationalism versus the ANC's version of non-racial nationalism. The former is grounded in the *Freedom Charter* in which there is a conscious social construction of racial equality as expressed through the notion that, 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it, Black and White'. The ANC's non-racial nationalism is about a qualified non-racial nationalism. This exists beyond the *Freedom Charter* through various elaborations within its *Strategy and Tactics* documents. In such documents there is an explicit articulation of different 'degrees of oppression' amongst the oppressed. This formulation is empirically correct, given that Africans in particular were the most oppressed under apartheid. However, translated into the post-apartheid context this formulation sets up a hierarchy of liberation and talks about liberation for 'blacks in general but Africans in particular'. The ideological and political effect of this has been to tie other race groups to the African majority in an instrumental way. This is expressed in a shift away from the solidaristic concept of 'black' which came to the fore in the 1980s to unify Africans, Coloureds and Indians but which has been subsequently displaced with a representation of non-Africans (Coloureds and Indians) as 'minorities'.

Are Coloureds, Indians and Whites, who have embraced a people-centred non-racialism, now merely strangers in their own country that have to be tolerated? The Ngema song 'AmaNdiya' produced in 2002 is one of many racist assertions that have formed the grammar for a new grassroots racism, which has been documented as alive and well, despite his apology. In this context an ANC non-racialism seems increasingly like a pseudo universalism, which is not about a genuine emancipatory humanism and a consistent striving against reverse racism. Instead, the ANC's non-racial nationalism is easily put aside for a more explicit African nationalism today, despite having a few non-African faces in the leadership of the ANC and in the ANC cabinet. The inflections of this African nationalism are expressed through the rise of traditionalism, ethnic cleavages and increasing uncertainty with an emergent authoritarian populism in ANC ranks and even xenophobia. Rising greed, accompanied by widening inequality provides the sub-soil for African nationalism to be articulated in extremely dangerous and divisive ways. The more explicit African nationalist ANC of today evokes as necessary a struggle to defend in an uncompromising way a radical people centred non-racial nationalism in South African society.

Nelson Mandela is correctly characterised as being part of the generation of 'great deeds'. He brought a morality into South African politics which has not been surpassed and which is a challenge to all of us in the present. Moreover, the symbolic value of Mandela the icon was crucial to give expression to the practice of a people centred non-racial nationalism. He unambiguously showed that reverse racism either biological, socially constructed or implicit in human behaviour had no place in a new South Africa and the national imaginary. Our South African identity was anchored in a collective humanism. This symbolic value of the Mandela icon provided the basis for forgiveness and reconciliation with white South Africa.

Sadly, this did not work. Most of white South Africa appropriated Mandela 'rainbowism' and reconciliation to mean the past can be left behind and there was license to be colour blind about the present and the future. Paying taxes and promoting corporate social responsibility was understood as sufficient to deal with our inherited racial inequities. Moreover, Mandela emboldened this opportunistic and false consciousness by ensuring neoliberal economic policy was placed on the national agenda and implemented in a colour blind way. While liberalisation placated the fears of a nationally bounded white monopoly capital that wanted to globalise, the jobs of African, Coloured and Indian women workers were decimated in South Africa's clothing and footwear industries, for example. The effects of neoliberal policies have not been colour blind. Many of the remaining jobs in South Africa's clothing industry still remain tenuous particularly for Coloured women workers in the Western Cape. Generally white capital has been at the vanguard of a job shedding growth path inducing a crisis of social reproduction amongst mainly the black (African, Coloured and Indian) working class. The Mandela moment did not lead to South Africa's 'economic CODESA'. White monopoly capital was not drawn into a national consensus in which its own sacrifices and contributions to nation building were clarified to address our inherited racial inequities, from which white capital benefited. Instead, capital merely demanded economic management on its terms and this was conceded. This has not worked for South Africa's nation building project.

The post-apartheid state is central to nation building and our South African identity. The state has an important educative function to actively promote a people centred non-racial identity. The Mbeki moment took us the furthest with its advocacy of an African identity that was all embracing and non-essentialist. However, at the same time and in practice Mbeki effectively Africanised the state. The demographic profile of the South African state is essentially African. This is an important achievement and must be celebrated. However, this state has two important short-comings in relation to promoting a people centred approach to non-racial nationalism. First, the current state has not developed a public discourse that enables talk about racial inequities in a way that unifies and gives a common purpose to nation building. Instead race talk in policy is fixated on elite formation through BEE, affirmative action and procurement. While this has an appeal to aspirant elites, it does not speak to the race inequities endured by the black working class and particularly working class women.

Why is the state not foregrounding the obscene post-apartheid wage gap that reveals how high white (and some black) executive pay is in comparison to black working class

wages? Should not the labour department report on this regularly in parliament and in the media? Should not the labour department report on the racial identity of who is losing their jobs, who is less likely to obtain a job, which farm workers and labour tenants are being evicted and who is more casually employed? Why can't the Treasury report on the racial profile of loans given by South Africa's banks and which black working class communities banks are red-lining? Why can't the DTI report on the investment impact of companies in terms of our racial inequities? Moreover, why can't the state report on the public goods it is supplying like healthcare, housing and education and how this is changing racially skewed patterns? Africans and Coloureds are the most poor in income terms in post-apartheid South Africa and we need to talk about this as the basis to find radical people centred non-racial solutions. Without a social scientific approach to measuring and studying race inequities as part of a state led public discourse we are drifting away from a people centred non-racial South Africa.

A second nation building shortcoming of the current state relates to its failings. Despite the normative commitment of the ANC to a 'democratic developmental state' the actual practice of the state is far from being developmental. One of the essential preconditions for a developmental state is a meritocratic, rule centred and technically capacitated state. Comparative experiences teach us that such a state is staffed by the best in the country. Currently, education, health care and most local governments, for example, don't seem to be working. While the failures are complex, for some this is the basis of racist critique. However, for many (non-Africans and Africans) who want to contribute to the state as part of making a difference to the country and nation building it is not clear how they can contribute. Many do not have and do not want to be part of the patronage links to the ANC political apparatus. Moreover many cannot relate to and do not want to be part of the 'deployment culture' of the ANC. Instead they would prefer to be embraced by the state as professionals, who want to contribute to the professional ethos of the state. The narrowing of space for such a non-racial effort to address the failings of the state is also undermining post-apartheid nation building.

Finally, and ironically the ANC itself has become a threat to South Africa's nation building. Its ideologues have found it increasingly difficult to speak the language of the National Democratic Revolution with a genuineness as it has increasingly become enmeshed in managing a neoliberal capitalism and class formation. Its dominance in the political system has taken it away from a politics of hegemonic consent and hence it does not seek to strengthen its legitimacy through moral authority, intellectual leadership and a sense of common purpose grounded in the common sense of everyday life. This was there once upon a time in the early days of South Africa's transition and even during the struggle against apartheid. Currently the ANC uses its electoral machine and sleek marketing campaigns to reproduce its electoral majority, while its elite leadership is increasingly detached from the pulse of a shifting and complex society. Moreover, its internal divisions span a wide axis and are fuelled by careerist impulses and various ideological cleavages from 'communist versus nationalist', 'right versus left', 'traditional versus modern' amongst others. In this context an organisation wracked by internal conflict and lacking in internal coherence easily breaks the 'unbreakable thread of non-racialism'. This was most evident with the factional rise of Jacob Zuma. Moreover, with

Julius Malema and Floyd Shivambhu openly racist and sexist towards non-African journalists, one wonders what non-racialism really means in the ANC today. Hence the question: are the future leaders of the ANC up to the task of non-racial nation building?

In many ways the ANC's non-racial nationalism is unravelling and it is increasingly difficult for ordinary South Africans to call themselves non-racial within the ANC's conception of nation building. This has very serious consequences for South Africa and the search for a unifying South African identity that is emancipatory. One possible way forward is to reclaim a radical people centred non-racial nationalism. This entails four crucial tasks in the present. First, a radical people centred non-racialism has to be understood as belonging to the people. The *Freedom Charter* as a document and its non-racial legacy belongs to the people. It does not belong to any single political organisation and has to be claimed as such. Moreover, and crucial is the necessity of claiming a people's history of struggle against racial oppression. The demise of apartheid was a complex process and entailed a role for various social forces. To reduce the end of apartheid to heroic acts by the ANC is to mythologise history and erase a role for the agency of the people. Forced removals like in District Six were not done because those that lived in District Six were members of the ANC. It was a harm done as part of a racist project. At the same time, the resistance that ensued, both formal and informal, visible and invisible, tells the story of a people's history of struggle against racial injustice. Central to this narrative is the unresolved question of the identity of 'coloured people'. For many the term 'coloured' is derogatory and instead the category 'Brown' is preferable. This question can only be dealt with by reclaiming a people's history of struggle, for present and future generations, from below.

Second, a new politics of citizenship and rights has to be struggled for. Such a struggle has to take us beyond abstract citizenship and towards an empowered notion of citizenship grounded in the values of the constitution. Such a conception of citizenship should advance the substantive nature of civil, political and socio-economic rights, for all who live in South Africa, and guided by a class perspective, inflected with race. In other words we need to construct a rights-based political discourse and practice that shapes the public policy agenda in a manner that addresses race-class inequities through social scientific understandings. This has to be part of furthering rights and class based transformation for those at the bottom of society: the black working class (African, Coloured and Indian).

Third, we have to openly challenge and call for the end of provinces. Besides the parasitic nature and fiscal waste associated with provinces, this political construct was the product of a political compromise with the racist National Party and allows for regionalised racist and ethnic identities to undermine a unified South African identity. Such a challenge to provincial government must be linked to deepening democracy where it counts the most, that is, through strengthening local government through representative, associative and participatory forms of democracy. Abandoning provinces should not be used to further centralise power at the national level.

Fourth, civil society has to become a re-invigorated terrain to defend and advance a radical people centred non-racial nationalism. In this regard we need to bring back through a reclamation of a people's history of struggle, conversations about racial oppression both in South Africa and beyond and how struggles against racial injustice have been waged. We also have to bring into popular conversations understandings of what is racism, how it works and how we should actively combat it. We assume in South Africa that we understand racism or some of us are just beyond it but yet the racist ghost of apartheid still haunts all of us. The conversation that played out in the media between Manuel and Manyi is a spectacular example of the ANC's failings with regard to non-racial nation building. While Manyi was racist, Manuel held up a version of ANC non-racialism that is not working. South Africa needs a grassroots nation building activism so we can secure the South African dream; a people's dream!

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