

The politics of ethnic identity: comparing South Africa

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Abstract

South Africa represents a microcosm of major global conflicts. This laboratory of polyethnic group relations may well teach the rest of the world a lesson of multiracial coexistence and a bridging of extreme class distinctions through pragmatic development policies. Above all, a 'negotiated revolution' now promises peaceful nation-building in a divided society, previously riddled with political violence. The remarkable democratic transformation has led to a substantial decline of politically-motivated killings so far, although criminal violence has risen. The democratic transition rests partially on the skilful management of racial and ethnic perceptions. Non-racialism as the core ideology of the new state elicits different expectations and meanings among various segments, differentially privileged and indoctrinated by more than four decades of apartheid. A general theoretical and comparative interpretation of ethnicity sheds light on the legitimacy of competing claims and assesses their prospects and character in light of experiences elsewhere.

Support for Mandela's non-racial reconciliation remains as soft as the electorate's rejection of the Africanist-nationalist Pan African Congress could be temporary. As the ANC government is likely to disappoint some high expectations of its constituency and has itself joined the gravy train through extraordinary high salaries for the new officials on the public payroll, the temptation simmers to use populist racial rhetoric. However, as long as government shortcomings are shielded by Mandela's charisma and high approval rate among all population groups, racial antagonisms will be dampened by the desire to succeed economically in an inextricably interdependent consumer society.

Keywords

Non-racialism; South Africa; apartheid; nationalism; ethnicity; secession.

When the African National Congress [ANC] assumed political power, the most frequently employed analogy compared Mandela's ascendancy with the unravelling of the communist block five years earlier. Just as the opening up of the Berlin Wall hailed a historic break, so

the collapse of apartheid meant the final liberation of a continent from colonial rule.

The intriguing analogy is misleading. It clouds at least three significant differences. Firstly, the demise of communist Eastern Europe occurred as a complete surprise to almost all the experts. Virtually nobody had anticipated the Iron Curtain to crumble so swiftly in the autumn of 1989. In contrast, the long predicted revolutionary downfall of apartheid culminated in a gradual dismantling of racial domination, carefully planned, and the negotiated succession skilfully orchestrated.

Secondly, as a consequence of the isolation of Stalinist autocrats from the socio-economic reality of their societies almost all hard-line rulers were swept aside and replaced by reformers of different kinds, at least in Eastern Europe. In South Africa, on the other hand, a mandatory five-year coalition government between former enemies succeeded minority one-party rule. Several National Party cabinet ministers and virtually the entire civil service, military and policy machinery continue in their positions. Unlike in Eastern Europe, where a new economic system implied new management styles and uncertain privatized survival for the population, in South Africa business as usual carries on throughout the political change with much more economic continuity and administrative security. Russian society is shattered by change; the life chances of the South African majority are at least expected to be improved by their representatives in power. Moscow is oppressed by crime. Johannesburg, too, is unsettled by thieves and muggers, but while the police were treated with contempt in the townships, authority and state institutions have acquired a new legitimacy. In Russia, an all-powerful state faded into near powerlessness; in South Africa, an apartheid coercion gave way to a more creditable and, therefore, also more effective state control.

Thirdly, whereas the political upheavals in Eastern Europe led to the disintegration of multi-ethnic states such as the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia with ethnic strife within and among many of the new sovereign units, democratization in the apartheid state unified and strengthened the new polity. Several nominally independent homelands were reincorporated. White and black secessionist forces were marginalized for the time being. It is of little surprise therefore that the world watched the final stages of the South African drama with bated breath. When hundreds of thousands of mutilated corpses in Rwanda vicariously entertained a smug global media audience, a simultaneous South African success story balanced the stereotypes about African violent tribalism. Unlike old style ethnonationalism in Eastern Europe, South Africa labours under the additional difficulty of its racial legacy. The race question appears at the same time as a class conflict between an affluent white establishment and an impoverished black proletariat. Colonial underdevelopment and a

sophisticated Western capitalism became intertwined in a system of legal racial inequality that far exceeded the uneven development of nationalities and regions in the former Soviet Union. Moreover, European modernity and African traditionalism not only co-exist side by side as in other divided societies, but depend on each other in South Africa. Will this unique ethnoracial relationship and simultaneous class compromise succeed or fail?

The author of a popular *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations* (Ellis Cashmore, 3rd ed., 1994, p. XIII) calls the issue of race 'perhaps the subject of our time'. In a review of the South African debate on ethnicity, a liberal scholar concludes: 'In contemporary social science, it [ethnicity] is probably the greatest enigma of our time' (Bekker 1993, p. 1).

Africanists and Black Consciousness advocates dismiss non-racialism as a liberal illusion and a strategic error. Afrikaner nationalists distrust the non-racial promise and strive for a *volksstaat*. Zulu traditionalists also favour ethnic revival and heritage maintenance in a federal state, if not secession. On the other hand, the apartheid-inventing NP now claims to be more non-racial than the ANC, while Mandela's majority party encounters only limited success in courting voters among the 25 per cent non-African minorities, including 'coloureds' and South Africans of Indian origin. One scholar (Louw 1994) argues controversially that by the end of 1993 'the ANC had effectively moved from non-racialism into a black nationalism, while the NP had shifted from Afrikaner nationalism to a form of non-racialism'.

The first democratic election in April 1994 has been hailed by most observers as a colour-blind triumph of racial reconciliation. However, leading South African social scientists, such as Lawrence Schlemmer or Hermann Giliomee, have characterized the voting more as a 'racial census'. Johnson (1994, p. 6) likewise notes 'how racially polarized the election is and how signally unsuccessful black and white multiracialism has been in the election'. Despite the lack of exit polls, various opinion surveys before the event and an analysis of the election campaign provide valuable indicators for an assessment of non-racialism.¹

The ideology of *non-racialism* rejects an ethnic nation in favour of a civic nation, based on equal individual rights, regardless of origin, and equal recognition of all cultural traditions in the public sphere. The civic nation is based on consent rather than descent. Citizenship in ethnic nationalism on the other hand is based on blood and ancestry. Laws of return, as in Israel or Germany, guarantee instant citizenship to members of an imagined ethnic family, even though the returnees are mostly *de facto* cultural strangers. At the same time, people who were born in the country and speak the language fluently (as does the second generation of Germany's six million 'guestworkers') are treated as legal foreigners, although they are culturally far more assimilated

than the ethnic aliens from Eastern Europe who are welcomed as lost family offspring.

These two conflicting notions of what constitutes a nation also afflicts the South African debate. For right-wing Afrikaners, birth into the *volk* or racial similarity supersedes subjective identification with the state. Race remains the ultimate test of membership. In other words, as long as a true Afrikaner has to be white, and a coloured Afrikaner is rejected, a racial definition of the *volk* delegitimizes further the already problematic ethnic nation. It is obvious that after having fought against apartheid's artificial racial distinctions, the ANC cannot entertain racial nationalism as a legitimate marker for self-determination. Hence, more sophisticated *volksstaat* advocates now propagate cultural or ethnically-based criteria for group membership in line with trends elsewhere in the world. However, being dispersed throughout the country without a territory with an ethnic majority, Afrikaner nationalists literally live in an ethnic diaspora without a homeland to fall back on. This distinguishes Afrikaner nationalists from Zulu secessionists for whom the potential restoration of a shrunken Zulu kingdom remains a less remote option than the dream about a Boer republic.

Indeed, compared with the global renaissance of ethnicity and nationalism, the new official emphasis on inclusiveness, racial reconciliation and even colour-blindness contradicts trends elsewhere. The ideological vacuum in the former Soviet empire has been increasingly filled with nationalism; Quebec separatism, the 'racialization' of the US, the anti-Maastricht and anti-foreigner sentiments in Western Europe confirm similar indicators in Western liberal democracies, as well as the dozens of ethnic or 'tribal' conflicts in Third World states, globalizing notwithstanding.

In Africa, hundreds of ethnic groups and nationalities are squeezed into some fifty oppressive states against their will. Hence the legitimacy of these artificial entities is increasingly questioned. Frequent repressive efforts at nation-building in Africa have been described as 'nation-killing' (van den Berghe 1990). South Africa, on the other hand, has set itself on a course of racial and national reconciliation, a civic nation without nationalism, based on equal rights for every citizen. Should this project of a non-racial genuine democracy succeed, it could serve as a model for the rest of the continent. As ethnic differences overlap with racial perceptions in the apartheid land, the endeavour is fraught with additional obstacles of socialization into deep-seated racial ideologies.

South Africa therefore provides a case-study of whether and when political struggles become ethnicized, or vice versa when various cultural traditions become racialized and mobilized for political ends. At the same time, the tenacity of racial ideologies is tested when racism becomes dysfunctional in an interdependent economy. The white dera-

cialization in the face of increasing costs (sanctions, industrial action, illegitimacy) suggests a remarkable rational choice in favour of a redefinition of a former racial identity. At the same time the new inclusive group boundaries of the Afrikaner National Party do not imply abandoning ethnic identity. In its self-perception, the NP negotiated itself *into* power, not *out* of power. Both sides claim victory in the negotiations: the ANC for having achieved power through the ballot box; the NP for having locked the ANC into a Western democracy and secured the survival of the capitalist order (See Adam and Moodley 1993).

The enormity of the emotional adaptation required for Afrikaners socialized within ethnonationalist ideals becomes clear when one considers Giliomee and Schlemmer's (1989a, p. 118) earlier observation:

Ultimately, (Afrikaner nationalism) goes beyond culture, and involves a close emotional attachment with the State, national institutions such as Parliament and the army, and national symbols and values. Much of the talk about a peaceful transition of power in South Africa misses the fundamental point: that the Afrikaners and the larger white nation consider their sovereignty as precious. It is not something to be bartered away.

Yet barter away they did, and the unlikely transition took place. The majority of Afrikaners accepted the new national symbols and institutions without difficulties. They did so because their representatives were also guaranteed a fair place in the new order. Above all, they were part of the bartering process and could claim to have initiated it for their own survival.

The two unresolved disputes concern promised negotiations with the Afrikaner right-wing about a *volksstaat* and similar provisions for self-determination or greater federalism for Inkatha-aligned Zulu traditionalists. Their respective parties received 2.2 per cent (424,555) and 10.5 per cent (2,058,294) of the popular vote. Since these demands are directly connected to an understanding of ethnicity in the process of nation-building, a general theoretical and comparative interpretation not only sheds light on the legitimacy of competing claims but assesses their prospects and character in the light of experiences elsewhere.

The basis of conflict

Ethnicity manifests itself in different settings with a different historical role. Scholars usually treat the phenomenon according to prevailing political concerns of the day. In liberal English-speaking South Africa, the relative absence of debate, teaching and research on the issue is most striking. Even the fruitless controversy elsewhere between those

who consider ethnicity a primordial or sociobiological feature versus those who reject reified and essentialist explanations has not really taken place in South Africa. The shadow of apartheid hangs over the phenomenon and has coloured its pariah status in South African academia.

Donald Horowitz (1991, p. 1) has caricatured the intellectual confusion about the nature of the South African strife:

There is a conflict in South Africa that has something to do with race. That is about as far as agreement runs among many of the participants and interpreters of the conflict. Beyond that, there is disagreement over the extent to which the conflict is really *about* race, as opposed to being about oppression merely in the guise of race, or about nationalism among groups demarcated by race, or about contending claims to the same land.

Judging by who lost his/her life, the conflict seems to have little to do with race at all. Tragically, more than 95 per cent of the 14,000 killings in South African political violence since 1990 have occurred among blacks, mainly in strife between Inkatha-supporting Zulu traditionalists and ANC supporters of the same ethnic background in Natal and around the predominantly Zulu migrant hostels on the Reef. Therefore, it is questionable when Giliomee and Schlemmer (1989a, pp. 118–21) propose that the conflict in modern South African society is ‘essentially . . . between two communities, predominantly Afrikaner and African respectively’, although one could argue that Inkatha supporters were sometimes instigated by, and at one stage in an alliance with, Afrikaners. The complex and manifold reasons for the ongoing political violence that hardly affected the white community cannot be considered here.

When apartheid ideologues became more sophisticated in the 1970s, they replaced crude racial categories with ethnicity. What was once a Department of Native, then ‘Bantu’, then ‘African Affairs’ was suddenly relabelled ‘Plural Affairs’. Ethnicity as a more legitimate and saleable surrogate for race ensured, in Bekker’s (1993, p. 26) correct judgement, that ‘the subject became a virtual taboo’. Progressive analysts simply denied ethnicity or race as a possible subjective reality for large sections of race or ethnically-conscious parts of the population. It took the form of asserting that South Africa is a special or unique case. What happened elsewhere on this score did not apply to the apartheid land, because the state manipulation of ethnicity was so obvious at the ideological level and so pervasive in the allocation of all social and economic roles.

Hegemonic left-liberal conceptualizations treated ethnicity as non-existent beyond administrative inventions. They stressed class as the

crucial category to explain modern South Africa, a segregationist system designed to facilitate capitalist exploitation by reducing the social costs of labour. If apartheid was a clash of class interests, tribal or ethnic concerns were reduced to mere epiphenomena, or superfluous baggage from the past. Ethnic false consciousness amounts to a classic ideology, that a reductionist approach would never recognize as having a dynamic force of its own. South African ethnicity seemed to go the way of modernizing industrial economies the world over, certain parochial specificities notwithstanding.

Yet, ethnicity takes its specific flavour and coloration from the history of each group. As no one group history is the same, the mythologies that constitute ethnicity can differ markedly. Successful ethnic mobilizers are finely tuned into these ingrained collective perceptions. They reinforce existing folk wisdoms as well as manufacture new meanings for a constantly changing reality. Ethnic agitators fail if they try to invent new villains or solutions at will. They succeed when they articulate broadly existing sentiments on which they build. As mouthpieces of their following, they exploit needs rather than lead. They feed on existing predispositions and real anxieties. Therefore, the notion that ethnicity constitutes a mere invention, contrived, conjured and manufactured by manipulating élites must be supplemented by the focus on the 'popular truth' that ethnic mobilizers air. They built on what Habermas has called 'pre-cultural understandings' in each society.

These group-specific frustrations that underlie the quest for belonging make it difficult to pin down ethnicity as an intrinsic cause. The search for community is merely expressed in ethnic identification. As no two collectivities are alike and historical experiences differ widely, a sociological analysis can only point to broad collective practices and historical circumstances that make one group more receptive to ethnocentrism compared to others who opt for a more individualistic world vision. The research on the authoritarian character, for example, has isolated downward mobility combined with authoritarian socialization practices as the structural conditions in which ethnocentrism thrives.

In summary, what distinguishes ethnicity from other historically shaped social characteristics is its manipulatability. Ethnic identity waxes and wanes not only in response to group members' own perceived needs, both instrumental and symbolic, but also in response to imposed identities by outsiders. Whether a group is stigmatized or accepted, marginalized, 'invisibilized', discriminated against or treated equally, celebrated or debunked by the hegemonic mainstream – it affects its self-perception differently. In short, the extreme fluidity of ethnicity stands out: no general theory of an essentialist ethnicity can be contemplated when multiple and hybrid identities intersect with

constantly changing social conditions. The contingency of ethnicity constitutes its main feature.

Ethnoracialism

Many authors have pointed to the Janus face of ethnoracialism. Racial classifications and ethnocentric identities function both to exclude as well as to articulate belongingness. Race and ethnicity discourses serve instrumental as well as symbolic ends. Ethnicity expresses identity needs as well as claims to entitlements. Ethnicity can be 'the essential building block of all racisms', as the British scholar Floya Anthias (1992) has argued. Yet exclusion and cultural superiority (ethnocentrism) is not ethnicity's sole ingredient. To consider ethnicity only as a divisive obstacle to nation-building remains one-sided. Ethnicity must also be thought of 'as a bearer of culture' (Ake 1993), as the expression of the historically evolved specific memories by which the members of a collectivity interpret and give meaning to their worlds. Ake (1993) has rightly warned a South African audience against the trap of only regarding 'ethnicity as a problem or a constraint on democracy'. He insists that 'every aspect of social transformation has to come to terms with ethnicity'. Indeed, how can the problems caused by ethnicity for nation-building be addressed when its very existence is being denied? The exhortation to 'unthink' ethnicity (Taylor and Orkin 1993) provides an easy escape for the analyst's difficulty in coming to terms with a stubborn reality.

Denouncing ethnic categories as reactionary also ignores the fact that ethnic identity frequently shields the individual from a hostile environment. Ethnicity as a source of self-respect against the denigration by the dominant group furnishes the psychological strength to resist and not to adopt the victor's definition of reality. The remarkable success of Indian South Africans in insulating themselves from the degradations of apartheid is owed to this cultural narcissism.

If the tenacity by which some Africans cling to certain cultural symbols and a fabricated past seems surprising, one must consider the implications of lacking a sense of self and being lost in a cultural wilderness. More and more people are finding this intolerable and are fighting determinedly not only to assert their cultural identity but also to claim self-determination for it (Ake 1993, p. 13).

Self-conscious ethnic groups in increasingly multicultural states may or may not be a source of conflict. The mere existence of different ethnic groups does not justify the popular conclusion that all plural or polyethnic societies are conflict-ridden. It is useful to distinguish between vertical and horizontal pluralism or what Horowitz (1985,

pp. 21–22) called ‘ranked and unranked ethnicity’. In the latter case ethnic collectivities coexist side by side with equal recognition. This is the goal of multiculturalism in Canada and Australia that aims to abolish an entrenched cultural hierarchy of charter groups by symbolically elevating later immigrant ethnicity to the same level. In reality, however, vertical pluralism with ethnic subordination is much more likely. The ‘separate but equal’ ideology in plural societies merely obfuscates the inequality in the allocation of resources and life chances in what amounts none the less to a ranked ethnic stratification. Unranked ethnicity refers more accurately to multination states where the different groups mostly live in their own area with their own complete institutions in what anthropologists have also labelled ‘structural pluralism’. In M. G. Smith’s famous phrase, equal versus ‘differential incorporation’ distinguishes the two situations. With the spread of norms of equality and values of achievement measured by competitive performance (Horowitz 1985, p. 5), a conflictual relationship between ethnic collectivities can be expected when one group is differentially valued, let alone actually dominated. It is group inequality that engenders ethnically perceived conflict. The German scholar Theo Hanf (1989, p. 101) has emphasized that ‘[S]ocial inequality is a powerful revitalizer of communal solidarity’.

Group inequality is not confined to material or political injustices. An economic or political determinism often overlooks the far more emotion-laden status inequalities. The work of Liah Greenfeld (1992; 1993) has especially pointed to the notion of *dignity* as the essence of nationalism. ‘The remarkable quality of national identity which distinguishes it from other identities – and also its essential quality – is that it guarantees status with dignity to every member of whatever is defined as a polity or society’ (Greenfeld 1993, p. 49). Other analysts have stressed the wounded identity or an unbearable sense of shame for the nation’s backwardness, or defeat (even in a soccer game) as a powerful incentive for nationalist fervour. Indeed, without the humiliating treaty of Versailles, Hitler would not have been able to elicit the feelings of resentment and revenge in so many of the German population. Contemporary Arab nationalism, too, feeds on the imagined humiliation by a cunning West. It is the symbolic claim for status that makes ethnonationalist conflicts as intractable as they are. Material claims of groups for economic equality can be settled more easily by bargaining. Where conflicting values clamour for equal recognition (for example, on abortion, divorce, sexual orientation and issues of religious doctrine) liberal compromise cannot be expected among true believers. They utter absolute moral claims, in moral language, tied to their identity as principled moral beings.

Sociopsychological factors of hurt and denial of status and traditional rights rather than irreconcilable conflicting interests almost scuttled

free and fair elections and the peaceful transition in South Africa. The white right-wing secessionists and Zulu traditionalists felt left out of the negotiations. Being labelled 'spoilers' who had 'missed the train', after they walked out of negotiations, they were accommodated through a constitutional amendment on self-determination at the last minute. 'Can you imagine,' the Zulu king implored de Klerk in the process, 'the hurt that you, as Head of State have inflicted on us Zulus, Mr. President, in allowing us to be humiliated in this way, by people who have never conquered us in any war?' King Goodwill was reacting to an earlier decision by the NP and the ANC to engage in bilateral negotiations whose outcome would not be allowed to be undermined by multilateral negotiations.

Ethnonationalism

In the unresolved South African discussion on federalism crystallizes the general question (as in the case of Quebec) to what extent ethnonationalist demands should be recognized, even if they potentially lead to secession? If the nationalist claim is mainly based on race (Africans) or on force and patronage (Zulus) what would be legitimated through self-determination in semi-feudal conditions? The American philosopher Allen Buchanan (1991) has argued that a moral right to secede should be recognized constitutionally with clearly defined procedures, such as a referendum and equal treatment of minorities. Even if distinct communities exercise self-determination within the confines of a Bill of Rights, there clearly exists a limit to the number of viable sovereign mobilized ethnicities. As globalization of capital and the accelerated international migration alters the character of most states, the conditions for viable national self-determination must be shifting as well. Tilly (1993) who poses these questions succinctly adds the logical search for alternatives: 'By what means other than establishing one independent state per mobilized nation might we guarantee cultural viability, civic connectedness, protection of minorities, and other desiderata commonly portrayed as benefits of national self-determination?' For the time being, South Africans have responded with a temporary liberal constitution, but mainly rely on an interdependent economy and an interspersed population to keep a tenuous divided state from fragmenting. The South African nation has yet to be born.

While one normally cannot escape one's ethnic heritage, particularly when singled out on the basis of skin colour, ethnic identity easily coexists with other types of consciousness. In fact, individuals in modern societies regularly adopt multiple identities, according to circumstances. They oscillate, so to speak, from one to the other, depending on the context. Since linguistic or religious ethnicity is normally an inherited, ascribed characteristic, it merely serves as a backdrop to

multiple roles and their respective self-perceptions, not as an exclusive identity. In other words, you can be simultaneously an Afrikaner, a South African, a Pan-Africanist, and even a cosmopolitan internationalist. A dangerous ethnic nationalism exists when nationalists want to make their nation home only to their own, when exclusive zeal does not tolerate being only yourself and when the individual choice of identity is subjected to the dictates of the group.

This ethnic nation differs from what Ignatieff (1993, p. 189) has popularized recently as the 'civic nation', or what Sternberger and Habermas called 'constitutional patriotism'. In this latter construction all citizens belong, regardless of colour or creed. Such a multi-ethnic polity based on citizenship is a nation without nationalism. In the US version of multi-ethnicity, state and church are strictly separated, inspired by the paranoia that the religious wars of Europe would otherwise repeat themselves in the New World. To mould patriotic Americans out of diverse immigrants demanded the ideology of a melting pot where the culture of origin was supposed to be left behind and is not recognized officially but remains very much alive informally. The US does not ethnicize its public realm but relegates cultural concerns to the private sphere. The public culture in schools, courts and all institutions of the state remains 'secular', while respectful of the ethnic diversity in the private realm. In the Canadian and Australian version of an immigrant society, diverse cultures are officially recognized and celebrated in the state policy of multiculturalism. The policy of recognition and financial subsidies for diverse ethnic groups originates from the desire of ruling parties to cater to a substantial ethnic vote as well as to forge a new image of tolerance, anti-racism and globally acceptable standards in contrast to the narrow perceptions of Anglo conformity in colonial fragments under the tutelage of the British crown. Canada and Australia now peddle multiculturalism almost as an export commodity, which nicely complements their economic role as cosmopolitan trading partners in a global economy. In all these versions of multi-ethnicity, citizens owe their loyalty to their state, to the constitution and to the laws of the land, not to common origin, blood or ancestry.

Multiculturalism, once under attack by the left as state co-optation and false preservation of a museum's culture of song and dance, is now heavily criticized by the political right for undermining national values and further fragmenting an already weak nation-state (see, for example, Bissonath 1994). Indeed, multiculturalism has freed ethnic outsiders from the assimilationist conformity pressure so dominant in Europe. There exists only a very vague and ill-defined national identity to assimilate into in Canada. A nationally well-known Canadian writer, Bruce Fawcett, was asked, 'What makes you proud to be a Canadian?'

His answer: 'The thing that makes me proudest of being a Canadian is that I don't have to be proud of being a Canadian'.

Future ethnic identification

Further relevant questions arise specifically for South Africa. As the state-imposed racial classifications disappear, will voluntary identification with ethnic background increase? How much will the continuing class stratification and residential segregation that largely overlaps with racial categories, perpetuate the old apartheid order, regardless of racial statutes? How can this material legacy of apartheid be addressed effectively without falling into the trap of reverse racial discrimination? What do such necessary efforts mean for policies of affirmative action that will have to be applied differently, that is, without quotas as the redress policy targets a disadvantaged majority that depends on the economic resources and the human capital of a jittery white minority?

It has been argued that the global resurgence of nationalism and tribalism has been triggered by a worldwide cultural homogenization. As production and trade are internationalized, as migrants and tourists move across continents *en masse*, as a global consumerism grips populations from China to South Africa, but, above all, as identical media imagery takes hold, new identity needs have emerged. The more similar people become, the more they need to differentiate themselves from others. A nationalist identity rests on the imaginary need to be different when everybody is the same. Freud has called this seeming character trait of human nature the 'narcissism of the small difference'. Our status needs to distinguish ourselves from our neighbours would seem to be an even more powerful motivation than material competition. Symbolic interests to be recognized prove as powerful an emotion as material interests in order to get ahead and demonstrate your worth.

On this social-psychological level South Africans have defied world trends by not engaging in exclusivist nationalist mobilization. Why? Apartheid ideology had institutionalized group differences. They were imposed and therefore rejected. Hence, the ground was laid for democratic inclusivism rather than counter-racism. At the same time, the historical racial and ethnic perceptions of difference – partially invented, reinforced and entrenched by apartheid, but, above all, underscored by material inequality – did not psychologically homogenize the population, the ideology of colour-blind non-racialism notwithstanding. This legacy of apartheid lives on in everyday racial and ethnic consciousness. Even if the ethnic hierarchy has been modified by blacks as political rulers, racism as the everyday false consciousness of socially constructed difference, has not disappeared with the repeal of racial legislation.

However, most South African whites, with the exception of the right

wing, now deny that race exists as an issue any longer. They endorse ANC non-racialism as if the history of racial oppression has completely bypassed them. Thus, official non-racialism provides an escape for whites from admitting prejudice and historical benefits. It is evidenced in the popular rejection of affirmative action. Racially based attempts at redress are simply dismissed as reverse racial discrimination in contradiction to official non-racialism. How did this 'colour-blind' mentality come about?

An important difference exists between nationalist mobilization and racism in Europe and similar attitudes in the settler colonies of Africa. Although much of the European nineteenth-century racism was imported and used to justify colonial domination, it developed into a different brand in the colonies. The distinction could be labelled (1) *supremacist racism* versus (2) *colonial racism*. In the Europe of supremacist racism, members of outgroups were considered the embodiment of evil, obstacles to the fulfilment of the true nationalist aspirations of the ingroup. Anti-Semitic fascists, for example, portrayed Jews as subhuman parasites, a cancer in the national body that could only be healed by the total elimination of the enemy. Serbian nationalists see their dream of Greater Serbia thwarted as long as Kosovo Albanians occupy sacred historical territory.

In contrast, colonial racism views indigenous people in a paternalistic way. Blacks are seen as children in need of a stern master to educate and uplift 'raw natives'. The targets of such feudal condescension would nevertheless be able to ultimately reach 'civilized standards'. The 'white man's burden' consisted of patient assistance in order to fulfil this 'civilizing mission'. Although this attitude did not preclude genocidal policies in some colonial areas, in later years terror was usually directed only against 'agitators'. Dependent on natives for labour, the colonialists had increasingly to distinguish between good and bad blacks. The geographical interspersal together with economic interdependence fostered a view among European settlers, particularly Afrikaners, that they themselves had become indigenous with as many rights as natives. Since the ANC always accepted whites as Africans, accommodation was greatly facilitated, unlike other arenas of mutually exclusive nationalist claimants. In fact, many nationalist Afrikaners now share in the pride of running the country together with 'our' blacks. ANC leaders are shown off, as if the apartheid regime deserved gratitude for creating them. By endorsing ANC rule in a negotiated settlement, and in turn being praised for pragmatic foresight, Afrikaner nationalists wallow in a self-congratulatory mood of having achieved the ultimate triumph of survival as a recognized minority in a hostile environment. In their self-perception, Afrikaners have not handed over power, as it appears to the outside observer, but on the contrary

have secured a much more stable and amiable environment for future greatness.

For Afrikaners to be recognized as authentic Africans coincides with the ANC vision of a rainbow nation. The pride to have achieved accommodation 'the African way' has gripped both camps. When de Klerk dressed in traditional blankets or NP functionaries visited township sangomas who slaughtered a goat or chicken for the occasion, it amounted to slick electioneering on the one hand, but also to a new identification with the other. The Xhosa praise-singer who stole attention at the opening of Parliament was applauded by every side. The first democratic election provided a rare occasion for a divided state to reinvent itself as a nation in an idealized fashion.

A non-racial or a multiracial society?

The ANC as well as the NP and even Inkatha in rhetoric now promote an inclusive South Africanism, not an exclusive nationalism. Zulu-speakers, the largest ethnic group in the country (29 per cent of the population), are deeply split between a narrow ethnic nationalism of Zulu cultural revival, represented by the Inkatha Freedom Party [IFP] and a broader, inclusive South African civic nationalism represented by the ANC. The wavering Zulu king, Zwelithini, who shifted his loyalties from staunch support of the IFP to a more politically neutral and even ANC-oriented approach merely reflects the split among his Zulu constituency. The majority of Zulu-speakers countrywide did not vote for ethnic nationalism, although the IFP did receive an unexpected 50.3 per cent of the vote in its KwaZulu/Natal stronghold. Likewise, the majority of white Afrikaners (7.5 per cent of the population) did not support an Afrikaner ethnic party, as the separatist Freedom Front attracted only 2.2 per cent. Afrikaners overwhelmingly voted for other parties across the political spectrum, but particularly for the erstwhile ethnic but now non-racial NP. Slightly more non-whites (51 per cent) than whites supported de Klerk's party, that invented but finally turned against apartheid. This successful redefinition of an exclusively racial party into a non-racial one is mainly due to majority support among the 'coloured' (9 per cent of the population) and Indian (3 per cent) minorities for the NP. Only about 3-4 per cent of the African population voted for the NP or Democratic Party [DP] while, in turn, a similar low percentage of whites voted for the ANC, although 5-6 per cent of the white vote went to the Zulu-dominated IFP (Reynolds 1994, p. 194).

These voting patterns have been mostly interpreted as a 'racial census', that exposed the myth of non-racialism. Reynolds (1994, p. 201) states 'that this was predominantly a *racial* democratic election'. However, the voting behaviour also lends itself to an opposite interpre-

tation. Apart from the fact that all major parties frowned upon appeals to racial or ethnic identities and actively campaigned for voters across the racial spectrum, a racial explanation of the vote overlooks that considerable cross-racial voting did take place, at least among the three racial minorities. It is also problematic to assume that the majority of blacks who voted for the ANC or the majority of whites who voted for the NP did so mainly for racial reasons. Naturally, in a liberation election from long racial oppression, race remains an ever-present factor. However, far from racial electoral polarization, sentiments of racial reconciliation and cooperation predominated on all sides.

It has been argued that racial fears of African domination and loss of previous job preference motivated most coloureds to vote for their former oppressor (Finnegan 1994). Other analysts (Reynolds 1994, p. 193) stress 'the often-overlooked linguistic factor, white and coloured Afrikaners being brought together by their common mother-tongue'. Since a heavily discriminated Indian working class that does not speak Afrikaans, also voted overwhelmingly for the NP, there must be other or additional reasons than linguistic affinity. Clearly, apartheid indoctrinated racial suspicion of black administrative competence, loss of relative status in the racial hierarchy and, above all, competition for jobs and housing obviously made the lower ranks of the 'coloured' and Indian middle-groups reluctant to embrace what was perceived as an African-dominated party, despite Mandela's moderation and patriotic appeals. It is interesting to note that the ANC fared far better among the 'coloured' and Indian professionals, but also in the rural areas of the Cape. Unlike the metropolitan area of Cape Town that experienced a massive influx of black rural migrants with all the attendant social problems, the coloured farm labourers in the Northern Cape hardly experience African competition. They also still suffer from traditional *baaskap* attitudes of their employers. Among these largely illiterate but deeply religious voters, the personal antics of the then Cape ANC leader Alan Boesak or the South African Communist Party [SACP] influence in the ANC hardly played the role of distancing 'coloureds' from the ANC, as it did among the better-informed urban working class in Cape Town. In short, multifaceted reasons beyond racial prejudice combine to explain why the NP's total vote comprised 30 per cent 'coloureds', 14 per cent blacks and 7 per cent Indians (Reynolds 1994, p. 192) which translates into a win of 65 per cent of the total 'coloured' and Indian vote, but only about 3-4 per cent of the total black vote.

The results cast doubt about the commonly accepted notion of South Africa as a deeply divided society. How deep the ethnic divisions are, needs to be reassessed. Courtney Jung and Ian Shapiro (1994) seem to be on the right theoretical track when stating that the elections 'appear to undercut much of the received wisdom about consociational

arrangements arising as a result of preexisting sociocultural cleavages'. With relatively fluid party alignments, the consociational compromise in South Africa seems, indeed, more the outcome of negotiations, which took the existing economic and military power relations into account, than an accord between the leadership of frozen ethnic blocs. Nineteen of the twenty largest South African corporations which Mandela approached for a one-million Rand contribution to his party's election campaign readily complied – they would hardly have financed a racial or ethnic antagonist.

The threat of an anti-white, uncompromising counterracism clearly emerged in the Pan African Congress [PAC] and in the election boycotting Azanian Peoples Organisation [AZAPO]. The greatest surprise of the election was the sound defeat of the PAC which received less than 2 per cent of the popular vote. While the PAC suffered from poor leadership and lack of resources, the major reason for its rejection must be seen in the popular sentiment for racial reconciliation as opposed to the PAC's purist and racially militant confrontational stance, highlighted in the slogan 'One settler, one bullet'.

However, support for Mandela's non-racial reconciliation remains as soft as the electorate's rejection of the PAC could be temporary. As the ANC government is likely to disappoint some high expectations of its constituency and has itself joined the gravy train through extraordinary high salaries for the new officials on the public payroll, the temptation simmers to use populist racial rhetoric. Exhorting racial redistribution and racial vigilance serves to cover the privileges and mistakes of the new élite. Increasingly one can read that 'President Mandela's Government faces a daunting task in balancing the legitimate aspirations of the *black* majority against the demands of a (by implication illegitimate) *white* minority' (Kader Asmal/R. Roberts, 'Apartheid Lives On', *The New York Times*, 29 October 1994). In this racialized discourse, the SACP explicitly rejects the analysis of the ANC journal *Mayibuye* that liberation has arrived and blacks are 'free at last'. *The African Communist* (137, Second Quarter 1994) insists: 'A Luta Continua'. As long as government failure is 'shielded by President Mandela's charisma', as Johnson (1994b) explains the extraordinary goodwill among a majority of all population groups towards the new regime, racial antagonisms will be dampened by the desire to succeed economically.

However, while Mandela's statesmanship and reconciliation is praised by friend and foe alike, even by right-wingers, racial consciousness simmers everywhere. Some of Mandela's trusted lieutenants, such as the premier of the Gauteng province region, have already burst out against 'racist coloured disloyalty', when a coloured township demanded equal treatment in the forfeiting of arrears with its black counterparts. The emerging xenophobia towards an estimated two-

million illegal immigrants from other African countries hardly differs from the bigotry in California against Mexican migrant workers or the *Ausländer 'raus* demands of skinheads in Germany. With competition for scarce resources in an impoverished continent on the rise, South Africans would indeed display non-human saintliness if they did not also use racialized nationalism for selective exclusion, the past struggle against racialism notwithstanding. Yet, at the same time, the anti-apartheid history has put brakes on the use of race or ethnicity as claims for entitlement and exclusion, as the official ideology of non-racialism clearly testifies.

Non-racialism is the antithesis of communalism and nationalism. To be sure, non-racialism has not yet been tested and may well not last if it fails to be effective. While mere promises and policy statements should not be taken at face value, they should also not be cast aside as untenable propaganda, adopted under the pressure of external recognition. Non-racialism is not an 'unbreakable thread', as the author of an idealistically entitled collection implies (Frederikse 1991). It has to be constantly striven for against many odds. Nor does non-racialism imply colour-blindness, which would be a naive assumption after a long history of apartheid. Non-racialism merely holds out the promise that the state will not recognize or tolerate race as a public and legal criterion of exclusion, private racism notwithstanding. In practice, South Africa resembles a multiracial rather than a non-racial society. Its inclusive civic nationalism differs fundamentally from the exclusive ethnic nationalism that ravages former Yugoslavia.

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Note

1. Before further elaborating, a few brief definitions of central terms and South African particularities seem necessary. I follow Anthony Smith's (1986, p. 22) widely accepted use of *ethnicity* as designating a historical community of cultural similarities with a shared sense of solidarity and belonging, memories and symbols or myths of descent. When such distinct people aim at either greater political autonomy or their own state, they form a *nation*. *Nationalism* can be described as politicized ethnicity. Ethnic antagonisms and nationalist conflicts in the same state resemble each other in their intensity. *Racism* denotes the pseudo-scientific ideology of inferiority or superiority whether based on alleged biological or cultural stereotypes of group differences. *Racialism* is the practice of racism in discriminatory behaviour. There can be racism (attitudes) without racialism (behaviour) and vice versa. *Ethnoracialism* designates the overlap of ethnic and racial perceptions, although ethnic heritage maintenance can go together with anti-racism. *Ethnocentrism*, the glorification of one's own group and *xenophobia*, the fear of strangers, should be distinguished from racism. *Tribalism* is a pejorative term

usually reserved for Third World ethnic antagonisms. *Communalism* denotes situations where intra-group differences are minimal, *sectarianism* where group cohesion is based on strong religious identification and intolerance towards non-believers.

Ethnic and racial groups are, of course, always socially constructed and therefore contested and ever-changing in their boundaries and meanings. Individual South Africans, like people elsewhere, have often identified themselves in terms other than, or contrary to, state-imposed classifications. Nevertheless, given the history of South Africa, one cannot avoid using such problematic labels as 'coloureds' (9 per cent), 'Indians' or 'Asians' (3 per cent) and 'Africans' or 'blacks' for the Bantu-speaking majority (75 per cent blacks), itself split into different linguistic groups of which Zulu and Xhosa-speakers are numerically the strongest. The restrictive reference to ethnic Africans does not imply that other groups, including Afrikaners and English-speakers of European origin (13 per cent) have not also become Africans in the legal-political sense through longtime residence and subjective identification. It should also be stressed that apartheid ideology obviously underplayed the diversity within the white population between people of Dutch, English, German, Jewish, Portuguese or Greek descent while highlighting the linguistic or cultural differences between the 'non-white' segments.

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